What is the Declaration of Arbroath?

The Declaration of Arbroath is a letter, written in Latin, sent to Pope John XXII in 1320 by a number of Scots noblemen who identify themselves as supporters of King Robert I (the Bruce). The main purpose of the letter was to ask the pope to pressure the English to cease hostilities against Scotland. The term “Declaration”—a term first applied to the document in the 18th century—is actually a little misleading. The letter’s medieval audience (which was just Pope John and his curia, or court) would have considered it a letter of petition or request and not a statement or “declaration.”

Where does it come from?

We know of the document because of an existing copy, a large parchment page preserved in the Scottish Record Office. This is probably the home-department “file copy” of the original document, which was sent to the Pope’s court in Avignon, France. So far, no one has found the original. We know the pope got it, though, because he wrote a letter in response to it, which quotes parts of the Declaration directly.

Why was it written in Latin and not English, Gaelic, or Scots?

Latin, in the Middle Ages, was the universal language of the Roman Catholic Church. Since the letter was written to the Pope, and composed by members of the clergy, it was naturally written in Latin, since Latin was the language that all clergy could understand no matter where they came from. In fact, those who drafted it would have considered it a vulgar insult to the Pope to write it in any other language.

Who wrote it?

Scholars aren't one hundred percent sure who wrote the Declaration of Arbroath. The most likely candidate, however, is Abbot Bernard of Arbroath. Arbroath abbey, at the time the document was written, was the home of the king’s chancery. The chancery of a medieval king was like his main 'information office,’ which had a staff that drew up and archived royal documents. These were often associated with religious houses, because the clergy were the people who knew how to read and write well. At the time, Abbot Bernard was the king’s chancellor. So, either he drafted the document, or it was drafted by one of his top chancery clerks. What we know for sure is that whoever wrote it was a master of medieval Latin prose and rhetoric—exactly the kind that could impress the Pope and his court.

If it’s a letter to the Pope, who’s it from, exactly?

One of the conventions of medieval letter-writing was that every letter had to start by saying who the letter was to, followed by a list of who it was from. The Declaration of Arbroath lists 38 names that include many of the most important and powerful barons in Scotland. King Robert himself was not one of the signers, since the document was designed to be a show of support for him from the magnates of the realm. Robert sent his own letter to the pope, as well.

Why was it written in the first place?
The Declaration of Arbroath is a document that's very much tied up with the circumstances under which it was originally written. Those circumstances are related to two problems King Robert I and his supporters faced in 1319-20. Both problems threatened the stability of Bruce's kingship despite his influential victory at Bannockburn in 1314.

One was increased pressure from Pope John XXII to enforce both an excommunication of Bruce himself for Bruce's murder of a rival claimant to the Scottish throne, John Comyn, and an interdict of Scotland for Bruce's recent recapture of Berwick-on-Tweed (which had been part of Scotland until it was captured by the English at the beginning of the Wars of Independence) in violation of a papal truce. (John XXII was vitally interested in maintaining that truce, since he viewed the conflict as delaying English participation in his projected crusade). Beginning in November, 1319, Pope John had begun to send what historian Grant Simpson calls a “hailstorm of threatening papal letters,” geared toward enforcing Bruce's excommunication and Scotland's interdict. Bruce had ignored these demands for some time, refusing, for instance, to accept letters addressed to “Robert Bruce, governing in Scotland,” rather than to him as Rex Scottorum, “King of Scots.” But neither Bruce nor his nobles could go on playing games of deferral forever, and Pope John was increasing diplomatic pressure.

The other problem was that, even though Robert had come a long way since his 1306 coronation in gathering support for himself in both northern and southern Scotland, that support in 1319-20 was still far from unified. Not only was there support for Edward II of England (among the Scots nobles that had been, as Bruce himself once was, received into Edward's peace), but there was also support for Robert's predecessor, John Balliol, whose throne Bruce, at least from one political point of view, had usurped. Several signers of the Declaration were tried for conspiring to kill Robert I not long after the Declaration was sent to Avignon. Fiona Watson argues, too, that many Scots nobles in the early 1300's were likely to be more interested in the restoration of good government and a legitimate kingship than in the idea of a specifically Scottish kingship. Chris Brown, in discussing the origins of the second Scottish War of Independence, argues that in this period there were “real divisions of loyalty. Some Scots maintained their allegiance to the Balliols, some stood by the fealty that they had given to Edward I after John's deposition, while some no doubt refused allegiance to Robert because he was an excommunicate or because they were simply horrified by the murder of John Comyn.” That the 1332 campaign backed by Edward III to put Edward Balliol, King John's son, on the throne found significant support among Scots suggests that these internal divisions would have been current in 1320. Such divisions at home would certainly not have spoken well for Bruce’s cause.

Consequently, Bruce and his supporters needed a solution that would mollify Pope John and do so in a manner which occluded the divisions back home and created the illusion of a unified Scottish nobility with, of course, Bruce at its head. Part of that solution was the letter now known as the Declaration.

Is the Declaration of Arbroath evidence that the Scots invented modern democracy?

While scholars debate about the degree to which certain ideas in the Declaration can be considered politically innovative, none would say that the Scots actually invented modern democracy. In fact, the ideas of representative government and personal liberty, in the way we think about them as modern Americans, would have been alien to the Scottish aristocrats who sent the Declaration to Pope John. But that doesn't mean that the Declaration isn't important to the history of democracy. The idea of representative government actually has its roots in a debate that initially took place within the medieval church. The debate was essentially about what to do with a heretical pope. This was a big issue in the church, since the pope was supposed to be God's right-hand-man on earth. In the case of a pope who was speaking against the traditional doctrines of the church, the problem was, basically, “how does an employee fire the boss?” The ideas that grew around this question came to be known as the “Conciliar Theory,” and several prominent medieval philopshers and theologians began to develop the idea that while the pope was the head of the church, he could be overruled or deposed by his council. Why was the council more powerful than the pope? Because the council represented the whole community of the
faithful. Voila! Here's the idea of a body of representatives speaking for the people. These ideas were becoming most fully developed at the end of the thirteenth century and the beginning of the fourteenth. The line in the Declaration that talks about the right of the barons of the realm to depose a weak king is one of the earliest examples of an idea from the Conciliar Theory being adopted into secular politics. The Conciliar Theory, and such early uses of it in the political world, were some of the sources drawn upon by later thinkers such as George Buchanan and John Locke, who really were the ones who, in the seventeenth century, began to articulate the ideas that we think of as foundational to modern, populist, representative democracy.

Is there a relationship between the Declaration of Arbroath and the American Declaration of Independence?

It'd be cool if there was, wouldn't it? There is some suggestive, circumstantial evidence for a relationship. We know that the Declaration was available in print, in both Latin and in English translations, in Jefferson's time (although there's not a copy listed in the catalog of his personal library, which we still have). We also know that certain of his close associates probably would have been aware of the document, and possibly that a couple of them may actually have viewed the manuscript of the Declaration in Scotland. For the best explanation of this circumstantial evidence, see the book by Edward Cowan in the "further reading" section. What we don't have, unfortunately, is any direct evidence that they told Jefferson about it, or that he actually read it or drew upon it when he was drafting the American declaration. We also know that there were more local precedents that Jefferson most certainly drew upon, such as the 1689 British Declaration of Rights and the Mason draft of the Virginia Declaration of Rights of June, 1776.

There are some words and phrases in the two declarations that look similar—but it's important to be careful about making a comparison between the American Declaration, which was originally written in English, and an English translation of the Declaration of Arbroath, which was originally written in Latin, because that kind of comparison looks at the translator's words and not the writer's. Even similarities in the Latin and English words can be deceiving. For instance, the Declaration of Arbroath talks a great deal about libertas, which, in the English versions, is usually translated by the modern English word derived from it, liberty. However, the Latin word libertas had a different set of meanings in the fourteenth century than the English word liberty does in the twenty-first. When we read the word liberty as present-day Americans, we tend to automatically think about it in the terms we've always been taught, as in "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Liberty, for us, refers to the right to freedom of every individual, regardless of race, class, or gender. In the fourteenth century, though, the Latin word libertas was most often used to refer to the special privileges of the nobility. So, when the barons say they’ll fight to the death for their libertas, it’s possible that they’re talking about maintaining their aristocratic privileges rather than about individual human rights. It's also important to remember that fourteenth-century Scotland was a still a feudal society. To have freedom in that society, you needed a title of nobility, land, or (preferably) both. Historian Ranald Nicholson reminds us, however, that those who “lived and worked upon the land but enjoyed neither secure tenure nor complete personal freedom” greatly outnumbered those who “held their land by homage and fealty, quit of labour service or any other dishonorable ‘burden’” So, it’s important to remember that even though the American Declaration and the Declaration of Arbroath both appeal to something they call “liberty,” the writers of those documents may well have had very different ideas in mind.

What's the difference between this translation and others?

Most translations try to make an original document read as smoothly as possible in the target language. Other translators, such as Sir James Fergusson, have already done an amazing job of creating smooth translations of the Declaration that convey the linguistic beauty of the original. However, creating a really smooth, fluent English translation of a Latin text means making a lot of substantial changes, because the grammar of Latin is so different from the grammar of English. These changes can alter
some of the meanings of the original. In this translation, I've tried to supplement the others by staying as close to the original Latin grammar as possible, even where that meant making phrases and sentences that sound awkward in English. This should help English language readers to see a number of things about the original Latin text that are hard or impossible to see in the smoother translations. As such, it's intended to be a supplement to, not a replacement for, those translations.

This edition and translation are entirely my own. The edition was created using a combination of a high-quality facsimile of the Tyn copy along with several early engravings and transcripts thereof, with reference to other period sources of the text, such as the copy in Walter Bower's *Scotichronicon*.

**Where can I learn more (further reading)?**

Here are some of the best sources for information concerning the Declaration of Arbroath. Most of them are out of print, but should be available at a university library or large public library—or through smaller libraries via interlibrary loan. If you're unfamiliar with how to find scholarly books and articles, just ask your local librarian—it's not hard when someone shows you how.


James Goldstein, *The Matter of Scotland: Historical Narrative in Medieval Scotland*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993).  Goldstein talks about the ways literary rhetoric was used to promote pro-Bruce nationalism in medieval Scotland. There's a great section on the Declaration.


Edward J. Cowan, *For Freedom Alone: The Declaration of Arbroath, 1320*, East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2003).  A recent study of the Declaration, including one of the best (to date) studies of the evidence regarding the potential relationship between the Declaration of Arbroath and the American Declaration of Independence. Cowan is somewhat more optimistic than I am about the relationship.

A.A.M. Duncan, *The Nation of the Scots and the Declaration of Arbroath (1320)*. (London: The Historical Association, 1970).  Another important translation, not as pretty as Fergusson’s, but closer to the
The Declaration of Arbroath

Trans. by M. Bruce

Original Latin Text

Sanctissimo Patri in Christo ac Domino, domino Johanni, diuina prouidiencia Sacrosancte Romane et Vniuersalis Ecclesie Summo Pontifici, Filii Sui Humiles et deuoti [...] Ceterique Barones et Liberetenenetes ac tota Communitas Regni Scotie, omnimodam Reuerenciam filialem cum deuotis Pedum osculis beatorum.

English Translation

To the Most Holy Father and Lord In Christ, the Lord John, by divine providence supreme pontiff of the Holy Roman and Universal Church, his humble and devout sons [...], and other barons and freeholders and the whole community of the realm of Scotland, send all manner of filial reverence, with devout kisses of his blessed feet. ¹

¹ In the middle ages, letter-writing was governed by a strict set of conventions known as the ars dictaminis. This section is called the salutatio, or salutation, which not only lays out the to/from information but also marks the social relationship between the sender and receiver. This particular form of salutation is the one specified in period ars dictaminis manuals as the one for a ruler writing to the pope. This is possibly a significant move on the part of the writer, since the pope had not formally acknowledged the legitimacy of Bruce’s government!

² This is the beginning of the next formal section of the letter, called the narratio, or narrative, in which the writer is to explain the circumstances for the request that will come in the next section, the petitio, or petition. This first part lays out the mythological beginnings of the Scottish people. Traditionally, the Scots went to Ireland first, and then to Scotland, and the idea of them going straight from Scythia to Scotland appears for the first time here in the Declaration. This may be because
The merits and noble qualities of whom, did they not gleam from other things, shine forth clearly enough from this: that the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, Jesus Christ, after his Passion and Resurrection, called them together, settled at the ultimate ends of the earth, just as the first to his most holy faith. Nor did he wish them to be confirmed in word of faith by anyone but the first-called of his apostles, though second or third in degree, Saint Andrew the Most Mild, the Blessed Peter’s brother, who desired always to have charge over them as their patron.

Weighing all this, however, the Most Holy Fathers your predecessors, stirred in mind, supported that same realm and people with many favors and numerous perogatives, as the Blessed Peter’s Brother’s personal possession. So indeed our line lived, hitherto free and unmolested, under the protection of those same until that Mighty Prince of the English, Edward, father of the one who is now King, under the guise of a friend and ally, infested as an enemy our headless realm and people, who were then accustomed to neither malice nor treachery, wars nor insults, of whose massacres, violations, predations, burnings, incarcerations of prelates, torchings of monasteries, spoilings and killings of Religious, and all the other innumerable enormities which he exercised against the aforesaid people, sparing neither age nor sex, religion nor rank, no one could write or even fully comprehend save whom experience alone could inform.  

From which innumerable evils we have been set free, by the help of He who after injuries heals and restores, through that most vigorous Prince, our King and Lord, the Lord Robert, who for his people and lineage, for the purpose of liberating from the hands of Enemies just as another Macabee or Joshua, sustained labors and hardships, hungers and perils, with glad spirit, who also, by divine disposition and according to our laws and customs which we will sustain to the death, by right of succession and all our due consent, we have made our Prince and King; to him, just as to He through whom salvation has been established for our people, and for the purpose of maintaining our libertas, we cleave as 

Edward Bruce, King Robert’s brother, had recently been killed in his failed attempt to become the King of Ireland. The pope would have known about this, of course, which means that Ireland would have been a little embarrassing to mention. Notice all the phrases that begin with “having been” here—the grammar is designed to make it look like the Scots destroyed both the Picts and Britons, when in fact the Britons had been driven out long before the Scots got there. The “Pillars of Hercules” refer to the Straits of Gibraltar.

3 The list of all the terrible things the English had done to the Scots closely follows a similar phrase in an earlier letter sent to the pope by the English, in which they say exactly the same thing about the Scots. Certain aspects of politics haven’t changed since the fourteenth century!

4 In other words, Christ.
much by right as by merits, and to him in all things we will adhere.\textsuperscript{5}

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\textsuperscript{5} Judas Macabeus (the “Maccabee”) was a Jewish leader in the first century a.d. who led a Jewish rebellion against the occupying Romans in Israel; Joshua, in the old testament, is the successor of Moses, who led the Hebrew people into the promised land.}

7
Quem si ab inceptis desisteret, regi Anglorum aut Anglicis nos aut Regnum nostrum volens subicere, tanquam inimicum nostrum et sui nostrique Juris subuersorem statim expellere niteremur et alium Regem nostrum qui ad defensionem nostram sufficeret faceremus. Quia quamdiu Centum ex nobis viui remanserint, nuncquam Anglorum dominio aliquatenus volumus subiugari. Non enim propter gloriem, diuicias aut honores pugnamus set propter libertatem solummodo quam Nemo bonus nisi simul cum vita amittit.

Hinc est, Reuerende Pater et Domine, quod sanctitatem vestram omni precum instancia genuflexis cordibus exoramus quatinus sincero corde et Menteque pia recensentes quod apud eum cuius vices in terris geritis cum non sit Pondus nec distinctio Judei et greci, Scoti aut Anglici, tribulaciones et angustias nobis et Ecclesie dei illatas ab Anglicis paternis occulis intuentes, Regem Anglorum, cui sufficere debet quod possidet cum olim Anglia septem aut pluribus solebat sufficere Regibus, Monere et exhortari dignemini vt nos scotos, in exili degentes Scotiae utraque quam habitacia non est nichilque nisi nostrum Cupientes, in pace dimittat. Cui pro nostra procuranda quiete quicquid possamus, ad statum nostrum Respectu habito, facere volumus cum effectu.

Whom, if he should desist from that which has been begun, wishing to subject our Realm to the King of the English or to England, we could be compelled to drive out forthwith as our enemy and as a subverter of his rights and ours, and we could make another our King who could suffice for our defense. For as long as a hundred of us remain alive, we will never under any circumstances be reduced to submission to the lordship of the English. Truly, we fight not for glory, riches, or honors, but for libertas alone, which no bonus gives up save along with his life.

Hence it is, Reverend Father and Lord, that we exhort your Holiness with bended knees and every impendence of prayers, inasmuch as, considering with sincere heart and devout mind that for Him whose vice-gerent you are on earth there should be no weighing nor distinction between Jew or Greek, Scot or Englishman, seeing with the eyes of a father the tribulations and straits brought by the English to us and to the Church of God, that you should deem fit to warn and to have exhorted the King of the English, for whom what he already holds ought to suffice since it was once wont to sustain seven kings or more, that he should leave we Scots, abiding in poor Scotland outside of which there is no habitation and desiring nothing but out own, in peace. For him we in fact desire to do anything we are able, with respect to our own tradition, for ourselves to gain peace.

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6 I have left the words “libertas” and “bonus” in Latin in order to preserve the idea that their Latin meanings are different from those of their English cognates. In medieval Latin, libertas can refer not only to the ideas of individual and state freedom, but also the the special privileges and prerogatives of the nobility. The word bonus is often translated as “good man” or “honest man,” but it doesn’t just mean “any decent person.” It’s a specialized term that refers to those who have the status to be able to participate in government, which, in the middle ages, means the landed freeholders and nobility. It’s related to the term bon homme in French, also a term designating a landed gentleman. This passage, which asserts the right of the barons to depose a weak king, is the idea imported from the Conciliar Theory mentioned in the introduction.

7 This is the beginning of the next formal section of the letter, the petitio, in which the senders, having set up the circumstances, make their actual request.

8 The part of the British isles now known as England was, in the early Middle Ages, broken up in to seven different kingdoms, each with its own king. The writer is saying that the English shouldn’t want any more territory since the territory they have now used to be enough for seven different kings.
Vestra enim interest, sancte Pater, hoc facere qui paganorum feritatem, Christianorum culpis exigentibus, in Christianos sequientem aspicientes et Christianorum terminos arcari indies, quantamque vestre sanctitatis memoria derogat si (quod absit) Ecclesia in aliqua sui parte vestris temporibus patiatur eclipsim aut Scandalum, vos videritis. Excitent igitur Christianos Principes qui non causam ut causam ponentes se fingant in subsidium terre sancte propter guerras quas habent cum proximis ire non posse. Cuius impedimenti Causa est verior quod in Minoribus proximis debellandis utilitas propriar et resistencia debilior estimantur. Set quam leto corde dictus dominus Rex noster et Nos si Rex Anglorum nos is pace dimitteret illus iremus qui nihil ignorant satis novit. Quod Christi vicario totique Christianitati ostendimus et testamur.

It is truly in the interest of yours⁹ to act on this, Holy Father, who sees the ferocity of heathens raging against the sins of the Christians, and the boundaries of Christendom curbing inward every day, and you must see how much your holy memory would suffer if (God forbid) the Church in any part should suffer eclipse or scandal in your time. Arouse therefore the Christian Princes who, putting forward a false cause as a real one, feign not to be able to go to the aid of the Holy Land¹⁰ because of the wars which they have with their neighbors, the truer reason of whose impediment is that in their lesser neighbors they find their own advantage in fighting and weaker resistance. But with what glad hearts would we and our aforesaid Lord King go there if the King of the English left us in peace, He from whom nothing is hidden well knows, which we profess and declare to the Vicar of Christ and all Christendom.

But if your Holiness will not apply very much credit or sincere faith to the tales of the English or refrain to favor them to our prejudice, the ruin of bodies, the destruction of souls, and other things which trouble will follow, which will be done by them to us and by us to them we believe ought to be imputed to you by the Most High.¹¹

From which, we are and will be ready to fulfill your will in all things to you His vicar, as obedient sons—insofar as we are bound—and to Him as the High King and Judge we commit the maintenance of our cause, casting our thoughts on Him and hoping firmly that he will instill virtue in us and bring our enemies to naught.

May the Most High preserve your holiness and health to His Holy Church for the length of your days.

Datum apud Monasterium de Abirbrothoc in Scocis Sexto die mensis Aprilis Anno gracie Millesimo Trecentesimo vicesimo Anno vero Regni Regis nostri superdici Quinto decimo.

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⁹ The Latin only uses a pronoun here, “yours” with an implied referent (i.e. “your [things]”), a construction that works the same way as the phrase “you and yours” does in English. Since the pope, as the head of the Roman church, technically has the whole body of the faithful and all the possessions of the church under his care, “yours” means a bit more for him than it would for anyone else.

¹⁰ Pope John XXII, to whom this letter is addressed, was, at the time, trying to get together a new crusade to the holy land. He thought the Anglo-Scottish conflict was delaying the participation of both countries in his plan, which is why he had declared a truce between England and Scotland earlier. The Scots’ recent recapture of Berwick broke the truce, and the Pope responded by placing Scotland under interdict. The Declaration is, in part, the Scottish response to this situation. Here, the writer picks up on the idea to insinuate that English aggression, not Scottish, was responsible for the violation.

¹¹ This passage always strikes me as a little dangerous—the idea is basically, “if the killing continues, Your Holiness, it’s all your fault!”