

'Flesche and Fische aneuch': the Role of Animals in the Scottish Medieval Economy

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'And Flesche and fische aneuch, baith fresche and salt'
Robert Henryson (floruit 1450-a1505) *'The Two Mice'*

The Burgh of Perth

Burghs in Scotland were originally set up by royal charter in the early medieval period and were in effect a legal entity, with the aim of safe-guarding trade in the interest of the Crown. Some burghs were new foundations, but some were obviously built upon pre-existing settlements, chosen for their geographical advantages. Because of its situation, on the tidal extent of the River Tay, Perth was ideally located for ship-bound trade with other ports on the north Sea, both in Scotland and abroad, but particularly with the Low Countries. Perth was one of the earliest of the Royal Burghs of Scotland and was given her first charter by King David I in the mid 12th century.

But how did the burghs operate, and what goods and services did they provide? There are two strands of evidence available. One is to examine the documentary sources, and the other is to examine the environmental evidence from excavations. Firstly, the historical background. Although documentary evidence for Scotland in the medieval period is patchy, we know that the burghs played an important part in the change from a self-supporting agricultural economy to an organised trading economy. During this period the agricultural products of: wool; woolfells (sheepskins bearing wool); skins and hides from both domestic (such as cattle) and wild animals (such as deerskins and fur pelts); as well as barrels of salmon, were exchanged for manufactured goods, for luxuries and for raw materials in which Scotland was deficient. Scotland was rich in primary products of the land, which you will note were almost all animal-based, if we exclude our other major exports at this time, coal and salt. We were, not however a major exporter of secondary manufactured products such as cloth.

The burghs enjoyed several different kinds of trading privileges which were enshrined in the charters granted to the burghs. There were two sorts of trading monopoly. Firstly, there was a monopoly of trade against the *agricultural hinterland* in which the burghs were set. All agricultural produce from the surrounding countryside was legally obliged to pass through the burghs in order that taxes could be raised on it. Each burgh was surrounded by a rural hinterland on which it depended for the production of agricultural raw materials which generated the wealth of the medieval economy. In its turn, the hinterland was dependent on the burgh because its goods must be sold there. Agricultural and craftsmen's produce from the countryside was only allowed to be sold at legal fairs and markets within the burghs. The exact extent of Perth's hinterland in the medieval period isn't known precisely, although its borders probably corresponded with those of the sheriffdom of Perth. This probably first came into existence in the 12th century (in the reign of David I(1124-53)). Perth's main competitor over both the hinterland and over control of shipping in the Tay would have been Dundee, some 35 km by land to the east. However, the borders of the hinterland would not have remained static throughout the entire medieval period, but would have been in a state of fluctuation as territory was continually disputed and perhaps reallocated. There is still to the present day a rivalry between Perth and Dundee, which although people are no longer aware of it, began some 800 years ago, over trade.

Second, there was a monopoly against foreign merchants concerned with exports and imports. Later, in the 14th century (in the reign of David II (1320-1371)) the privileges as regards foreign trade were summarised and were applied to all the burghs of Scotland. So most of the trade was in the hands of the burgesses of the new burghs which had been deliberately created by the king. The royal charters allowed the burghs (and really, the burgesses who controlled them) the power to control all exports and imports. The crux of the matter was that in return for the trading privileges enjoyed by the burgesses, the crown received useful revenue in hard cash, or tribute in kind, (known as cain).

There were two kinds of customs duties, the toll or *petty custom* paid by produce which was brought for sale at the burgh market either from the country or abroad and included harbour duties on ships arriving in port, and the *great customs* or export dues paid on wool, woollens, skins and hides that were traded overseas. The *petty custom* was levied by the provosts of the burghs whereas the *great custom* was collected for the king by special officials or *customars*. The accounts of the customars are recorded in the Exchequer Rolls (but only from 1327). These great customs formed a substantial part of royal revenue and so it was definitely in the interest of the crown to encourage export.

The Zooarchaeological Evidence

Medieval sites throughout Scotland have produced assemblages of animal bone, many of a substantial size. The largest medieval assemblage to date came from the Marks and Spencer's site on the High Street in Perth (PHSE), excavated from in the late 1970s. The original animal bone report for this site was written by the late Ian (George) Hodgson with whom I worked in the 1980s. Recently the environmental reports for this site have been expanded and updated, with the intention of publication with the aid of Historic Scotland. This revision has allowed us to compare more recently excavated sites in Perth such as those at Meal Vennel, King Edward Street, Mill Street and 80-86 High Street.

So, according to the documentary sources, there is little doubt that hides from cattle, wool from sheep and woollens were of paramount importance to the medieval Scottish economy. The animal bones from urban sites are directly linked with this trade. I would even argue that these products were a major part of the rationale behind pastoral farming in Scotland at this period: the meat the animals produced could be considered to be the by-product, while the animal skins were the reason they were reared, because of the taxes that could be raised on them. Certainly the meat must have been eaten, but it was however the inhabitants of the towns who had most access to the meat of cattle and sheep. The diet of the rural people was based on cereals such as oats, barley and rye, with the addition of dairy products from sheep, cows and goats.

Animal bone evidence from sites in Perth, Aberdeen, Elgin, St Andrews and Dundee shows that cattle and sheep are by far the most numerous species. In addition, cattle usually far outnumber sheep. This is based on fragment count. Occasionally when minimum numbers of animals are calculated using the most frequently occurring bones, there are some discrepancies, but I would argue that calculation of such minimum numbers is always more successful when dealing with complete skeletons (such as occur in human burials) rather than disjointed butchered animal carcasses, which have been cut up and dispersed around the town.

We can also deduce the ages of animals at death, from the dental evidence. This

reveals that most cattle were kept alive until over five years of age, at which point their hides would be at an optimum condition. More sheep were killed at a younger age than cattle, but the culling patterns for both Perth and Aberdeen show that a minority survived to the age of 8 to 10 years. These sheep would have produced a yearly crop of wool, and on their final demise, a woolfell or sheepskin.

Interestingly though, the age pattern of the sheep recovered from urban sites in Aberdeen contrasts with the ages found at a rural site excavated in Aberdeenshire: there is some evidence from the deserted medieval burgh of Rattray which indicates that here, many of the younger sheep were absent. Presumably they had been sent for sale to the burgh market at Aberdeen, while the older animals were kept in order to produce crops of wool and propagate the flock. The sole very elderly sheep found at one of the Aberdeen sites (16-18 Netherkirkgate) may have been a flock leader or 'lead wedder' which could have headed the flock on its final walk to market.

Eating mutton rather than what we would nowadays consider prime lamb was however probably no hardship; various travellers to Scotland in the 18th century described the meat of Scottish sheep (which had probably changed little since the medieval period) as 'exceedingly fine'. Eighteenth century household books, such as the *Ochertyre Book of Accomps, 1737-39* and *The Household Book of Lady Grisell Baillie, 1632-1733* show that while wedders, ewes and hogs (all adult sheep) were consumed often, lambs were much less so. Other useful, and edible, animals such as goats, pigs and horses are also found in urban assemblages, but these are numerically much scarcer, possibly swamped by the sheer volume of material from the economically important cattle and sheep.

Although there are well-known methodological problems in separating the sheep from the goats, there is definitely something going on in Perth, goat-wise. Goats were certainly kept throughout northern Scotland, but they have destructive eating habits and can play an important part in deforestation. This is because they have hard palates, and so can eat woody plants and small trees, which sheep cannot. Therefore, although they seem to have been kept in large numbers in the Highlands, they were probably reared for domestic consumption only. They were considered to be a sort of 'poor man's meat'. Only about 4% of the total bones from Perth are definitely from goats, but this may be an under-estimate. It seems that the horns may have been one of the most saleable parts, along with the skins.

As for pigs, it is known that they were kept within the burgh roods, but their importance was in the conversion of food scraps such as waste from milling into a source of meat for human consumption. They thus had little importance in terms of trade and raising revenue. They would have been kept on a small scale by the inhabitants of the burgh, as well as cottagers, and would have come to market in much smaller numbers than cattle and sheep. Their bones, like those of goats, are therefore swamped by the volume of remains from cattle and sheep found in urban assemblages. Recent studies have shown that the long-legged, speedy and bristle-backed type of pig found in the medieval period bore little resemblance to modern meat breeds. They were probably quite agile and had a bad reputation. There are many instances in the burgh records of depredations caused to crops and gardens by pigs running loose in the town. In Aberdeen they were banished from the Kirkyard for rooting around in the kirkyard 'cassin up great graves and incoverit deid corpses', and they were also banned from the burgh roods in Lanark for reputedly eating 'a barin in credill'.

There were also restrictions on the slaughter and sale of animals, which meant that,

as all animals had to be presented for sale along with their own hides, in effect all animals for sale at the burgh markets had to arrive on the hoof [APS, II, 543]. This was probably intended to discourage cattle reiving. However, we know that some sellers tried to dispose of carcasses along with hides which did not match. There was a fine for this offence, along with forfeit of the produce, as we know from surviving burgh records. Fleshers (butchers) were required to 'sell good meat openly and at the time of slaughter (*Leges Burgorum*). Not only that, animals were to be slaughtered during the hours of daylight, in full view of the public, not as a free sideshow, but to ensure fresh meat was being offered for sale. The meat was to be hung on 'treis' which can mean just that, a tree, or more likely, a post or pole. Making sure that the meat was being sold at an appropriate price were the *appreciatores carnibus* or appraisers of meat who feature in the burgh records of Aberdeen. Not that dirty tricks weren't practised. There are many references to the *blawin* or blowing of meat (particularly in the records of Dundee). This involved blowing air through the carcass, presumably using straws to make the flesh seem plumper and more attractive.

Animal bones also provide evidence of butchery practices, and of the types of tools used. Usually, fleshing was carried out using axes or cleavers. The butchers' axe is referred to in the early burgh records of Scotland (*Statuta Gilda*, APS, I, 436), under the term *securis* (simply, an axe). The axe, as a symbol of the trade, often appears on post-medieval gravestones and in heraldic devices such as the coat of arms of the Nine Incorporated Trades of Dundee, displayed in St Andrews Trades Kirk (built 1722). Here, the axe is shown with a curving handle and flat blade, curving at the leading edge. It is crossed in the coat of arms with a pole-axe, the implement used both to dispatch the animal and then dismember it.

Although axes were the preferred tools for fleshing and occasionally for roughing out pieces of worked bone, it is more usual to find that valuable pieces of the carcass, such as antlers or even horn cores, were removed carefully using saws. Knife cuts are mainly found on the bones of cattle, sheep, goats and pigs, evidence for meat removal. Occasionally knife marks are also found around the bases of horn cores. These cuts are associated with removal of the horny outer sheath, which is the useful part of the horn, the inner bony core being the waste material, which is discarded. Bones of other species can also show butchery marks: you may be surprised to learn that these are horses, dogs and cats. In some cases, these marks may have been associated with skinning out of the carcass, such as the knife cuts seen on horse toe bones (45-75 Gallowgate), but there was also evidence that some horse bones have been butchered in a way that which shows that meat was removed from them. Some horse long bones may be split in order to remove the marrow, in just the same way as for bones of cattle. At Castle Street, knife cuts on a horse pelvis were certainly associated with meat removal. The meat might have been intended as food for dogs, but could just as well have been eaten by humans.

Variations between sites in Perth

There are some variations between different sites in any given town: in some cases this may be explained by different conditions of preservation. In Perth, we are usually lucky enough to have waterlogged deposits, due to repeated flooding, but in some areas of the town, where drainage is perhaps better, bone survival can be less good. In general although we know which areas will preserve good black organic midden deposits there can be some variability in preservation across the town, so it pays to be cautious when making inter-site comparisons. Nevertheless, an occasional deposit can be very different from others in Perth. This is true of the Clydesdale Bank site in South Methven Street, a site which would have been on the very boundary of the medieval town, next to Perth's unique water feature, the Town Lade. The lade formed,

with the River Tay, a first line of defence against invaders, but also served as a water source and collector of pollution. At the Clydesdale Bank site, we have what appears to be an almost complete absence of sheep bones, which is extremely unusual in Perth. However, this is because almost all of the deposit consists of cattle horn cores, and the assemblage is obviously a very specialised one. Horn was an important raw material used in craft industries, and the cores were probably the discarded remains from a horners workshop.

We have recently identified another area in Perth, St John's Square, located near to the medieval heart of the burgh adjacent to the kirk of St John, as being home to a worker in antler and horn. The St John's Square faunal material has proved of great interest to the interpretation of craft industries in medieval Perth. Nowhere else in the burgh has such a concentration of antler offcuts been found, and it is apparent that a workshop, perhaps producing combs, must have been located there. The antler deposits of St John's Square are matched only by an assemblage recovered from Linlithgow High Street, incidentally a town famed for its leather work.

It seems also that skinning and leather work may have taken place at St John's Square. The craft workshops were probably located close together in the backlands, with the raw materials of the various trades readily available. Traditionally, similar trades were clustered together in the medieval burghs possibly because of the noxious smells which they engendered, as well as the risk of fire to wooden buildings from the likes of tallow boiling and fat rendering. For example, South Street continued to be home to many of Perth's cobblers until the early modern period, the street being known variously as 'Shoegate' or 'Shaegate' in the 18th century. As for the horner craft, there is a vennel named Horner's Lane running northwards from South Street to Canal Street. Horn was traditionally used to make spoons and drinking vessels and other small personal artefacts which today would be made from plastic.

The location of some cottage industries also becomes apparent when we compare sites in Perth: for instance a small-scale cat skinning industry seems to have located at the river end of the High Street. The excavation at the Marks and Spencer's site produced numerous cat bones and skulls with the typical pattern of skinning cuts (just above the orbits of the eyes). An adjacent site, 80-86 High Street, was also abundant in cut cat bones. This was probably a small-scale industry, but again it gives an indication of the clustering together of craftsmen with related trades. Skinning cuts have also been seen on a cat skull from 16-18 Netherkirkgate, Aberdeen. Dogs were also skinned for their fur: the Aberdeen dogs and cats were no safer than those in Perth. We've found cut dog bones in a post-medieval tan-pit at 45-75 Gallowgate and other cut dog bones, probably associated with skinning, were found at Castle Street. But a dog humerus from 16-18 Netherkirkgate with cuts at its distal articulations, similar to those commonly seen in sheep humeri, were more suggestive of meat removal.

Other small mammals must also have been killed for their fur: Scotland was reputedly famous for its 'fine small peltry', and although the Exchequer Rolls rarely give details of species which were exported, they probably included fox, badger and pine marten. Fox bones are commonly found on urban sites, and one badger bone, with a cut mark, came from Meal Vennel. Apparently, badger also makes a very fine preserved ham, so the carcase may have been eaten too.

Conclusion

We are just recently beginning to have the opportunity to examine animal assemblages from sites in burghs outwith the north-east of Scotland. In the last few

years, the site of the new Scottish Parliament building, now in Edinburgh, but formerly in the adjoining burgh of Canongate, has been excavated. Perhaps the most notable aspect of the Parliament faunal assemblage is the dominance of sheep/goats over cattle. Again this seems unusual in a medieval urban context since at most of the sites which have been studied, cattle have been the predominant species.

The best comparison with the Parliament site is probably the site of Briggait in Peebles, a site dug in the days of the Manpower Services Commission. Investigations in medieval Peebles have also recovered evidence of a primarily sheep-based economy, which continued into the post-medieval period. In the Borders, the influence of the great medieval religious houses of Melrose, Jedburgh and Kelso provided the impetus for sheep-rearing, and it may be that the abbey of Holyrood was similarly influential. As regards the West Coast of Scotland, animal bone assemblages are rare, but some do exist, from the MSC excavations carried out in the 1980s. These are available, but have not yet been fully investigated (mainly due to lack of funding). It would seem to be a very good idea to study this material in order that the pattern of animal use can be compared with that from the East Coast.

To conclude, it seems that as the opportunity arises, we should continue to investigate sites, both in burghs we have already studied as well as in geographically different locations, such as the West Coast. This will help address questions about the location of craft industries within the burghs, and about the relative importance of the burghs themselves.

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