

Burgh Mentalities: Thought-Worlds in Medieval Perth

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This paper looks at a range of artefacts from excavations in Perth to see what light they can shed on cultural practices.

At first glance, prehistoric lithics may seem too be irrelevant objects for the study of medieval Perth. But they are important clues to the way that the world was, in part, perceived. From an extensive range of prehistoric lithic material recovered from excavations in Perth, three pieces stand out. From the Perth High Street excavations, James Kenworthy has noted two EBA flint tools, a struck flake re-used as a strike-a-light and an arrowhead re-used as an amulet. The strike-a-light is perhaps the more straightforward of the pieces: it comes from a 13th century midden where it was lost or discarded after use as a strike-a-light. The second piece from the PHS and a similar piece from Meal Vennel are EBA barbed and tanged arrowheads, the former from a posthole of an early 12th century hall building and the latter from 15th century backlands slump-fill.

Both are likely to represent medieval amuletic or apotropaic use of what was seen as elf-shot, the harmful arrows of elves that transmitted disease and were often associated with thunder and lightning. The placing of the PHS piece in particular in the posthole of a building that was probably a substantial hall is suggestive of a desire to protect the building (and its occupiers) from the damaging effects of weather and disease. Such beliefs do not mark Perth out as a backwater of superstition but show that it is in tune with widespread European beliefs of pre-Christian origin and infused with Christianity. St Sebastian, for example, was martyred by being shot with arrows and so he was widely held to have a curative role in combating both elf-shot and human archery.

These are also not the beliefs of an ignorant social class. The PHS building implies some degree of status and one could also mention the Neolithic plano-convex knife recovered from a posthole at Hen Domen castle Montgomeryshire as a similar example. Similar attitudes coalesced around high-status illuminated manuscripts. The Murthly Hours, for example, is a Book of Hours, commissioned and illuminated in Paris in the late 13th century. By the early 15th century it had passed by marriage to the MacDougalls of Lorne and later the Stewarts of Grandtully and Perthshire. This luxurious manuscript of holy texts, with cultural connections across three countries in medieval Europe, also acquired an amuletic function. In the late 14th or early 15th century Gaelic texts were added to two of its blank leaves and 'the touch of the Murthly Hours, or the consumption of water blessed by a hand that had just touched the Book' along with reciting one of the charms, was used as a cure for the sick.

This union of pre-Christian and evolving magical beliefs with Christianity strongly influenced the development of the cult of saints, which centred on the efficacy of the body parts of saints and their related material culture. In turn, this was a key motivating factor in the undertaking of pilgrimage, to which we now turn.

In the medieval period pilgrimage operated on a vast scale, across all levels of society. The Church primarily encouraged pilgrimage as a way for the faithful to think about the final judgement and to facilitate the gaining of indulgences but it was clearly aware of the economic returns it could bring. But the majority of pilgrims equally undertook their journeys so that they could benefit from the power of the saints. This could be either directly - through miracles at a saint's shrine - or indirectly - through

the acquiring of souvenirs from the place of pilgrimage. The latter not only demonstrated that the journey had been undertaken but were also thought to bring good luck and avert evil from the wearer or owner and so they would have taken their place alongside other forms of amulet.

Excavations in Perth have unearthed a range of pilgrimage souvenirs including a badge of St Andrew (from St Andrews, Scotland), two ampullae of St Thomas Becket (from Canterbury, England), and two scallop shells of St James (from Santiago de Compostella, Spain). Perth has the highest concentration of pilgrimage souvenirs from any Scottish burgh. Also from Perth is a jet crucifix, which, like a possible jet rosary bead found at Elcho Nunnery (some 5 miles south-east of Perth) comes from Compostella, Spain. More recent finds include a copper alloy crucifix reliquary found in the river Tay downstream from Elcho and a badge of St John the Baptist, possibly found in Perth. St John the Baptist was (and remains) the patron saint of Perth: the parish Kirk is dedicated to him and during the later medieval period Perth was known as St Johstoun. From the early 13th century the shrine of St John the Baptist was at Amiens cathedral. The badge from Perth is identical to (and so cast from the same mould as) one from London.

Perth's pilgrims then were a well-travelled community but we should not forget that Perth itself was a centre for local pilgrimage for St Johns Kirk held a relic of St Eloi (though we do not know what form it took). The shrine or altar of St Eloi in St Johns was supported by the Hammermen Incorporation, whose patron saint he was through virtue of his skill as a metal worker.

Let us now look at some of the more secular elements of culture that we can see reflected in the archaeological record for Perth. In 1921 work in North St John's Place, Perth uncovered one half of a 13th century pewter mirror-case. It was found crumpled up suggesting deliberate disposal. Like the pewter pilgrim badges already referred to it is a cheap, mass-produced item requiring the use of simple stone mould technology. It could have been made in Perth or elsewhere, though its Anglo-Norman inscription implies an insular origin. The inscription is a garbled, illiterate prophylactic phrase wishing the bearer joy; a common type of medieval phrase intended to avert evil and to bring good luck. The inscription is allied to images taken from the legend of Tristram and Iseult, hugely popular in the Middle Ages. Tristram and Iseult were portrayed as ideal lovers and their tale was linked to the Arthurian Cycle. The popularity of their story ensured their depiction on a wide variety of artefacts, and two other mirror-cases are known depicting Tristram and Iseult, one found in London the other in Regensburg, Germany. Both are different from each other and from the Perth example. They demonstrate how widespread these popular renditions were and that they were produced in different centres, not to a standard design. They are material examples of vernacular culture, a culture influenced by the written word but which remained largely oral and celebrated and transcribed through drama, song, story-telling, puppetry etc. Often more courtly, literate and elite versions of legends and stories developed from these (but the process could work the other way as has been demonstrated for those noblemen outlaws Robin Hood and El Cid).

Through its material, iconography and illiterate inscriptions the Perth mirror-case demonstrates a link to the huge amount of mass-produced cheap jewellery of the 12th to 15th centuries. They show that the mass of "ordinary" folk using this jewellery were familiar with the themes depicted and demonstrate a key way in which knowledge was popularised.

The Perth High Street excavations of 1975-78 found a fabulous walrus-ivory knife

handle carved with a Maying figure, in a 14th century context interpreted as a metalworker's workshop. Its iconography is consistent with a variety of descriptions and depictions of medieval Maying, the seasonal celebration of the imminent arrival of summer, a key aspect of which was the gathering of seasonal greenery. The celebration of May was widespread throughout medieval Europe and to cite but one example we could point to French Maying as depicted in the *Très Riches Heures* of the Duc de Berry. Produced in the 14th century, this Book of Hours includes an illumination for May showing the nobility dressed in green and garlanded with flowers. In Perth, the knife handle is not an isolated example of May celebrations. Due east of Perth (across the river Tay), approximately 1 mile from St John's Kirk, in the south facing cliffs of Kinnoull Hill is a small cave known as the Dragon Hole. By the later medieval period it was a place of May-time pilgrimage though the evidence for this only becomes visible in the 16th century. After the Reformation processing out to the Dragon Hole is condemned by the Reformed Kirk Session. A feature of many May celebrations was the institution of a mock-king or queen to preside over the May Games. We mentioned earlier how Robin Hood's tales grew in the telling and he acquired a wider social celebration. During the 15th century this included becoming a feature of some May games. As an outlaw chief, Robin Hood made something of an ideal Lord of Misrule and he also had the appropriate green clothing and woodland association for a May figure. Thus he became a stock figure in the dramatic performances associated with May Games. In the Perth Guildry Book there are references to the Guild paying (throughout 1545) its member James Mackbrek his fee for playing 'Robyn Hwyd/Robyn Hwyd/Roberne Hwde.'

I want to now return to the more religious dimension of cultural life. In the collections of Perth Museum and Art Gallery are eight carved oak panels of openwork tracery. They have recently been the focus of a research project that encompassed their dendrochronological dating and their art-historical analysis. Six of them were sampled for dendrochronological dating giving them a tree-ring sequence spanning the years AD 1225-1490 and showing that they came from the same tree in the Eastern Baltic, felled between circa AD 1508-1550. If they did not reach Scotland as completed panels they probably did so as part of a batch of prepared planks or boards, ready to be worked. They represent liturgical furnishings of framed construction and with parallels in Scotland, England and Wales. By the end of the 15th century Perth had a number of monastic houses, hospitals and chapels. Perhaps more crucially it also boasted the major parish Kirk of St John's, that underwent a significant re-building campaign in the 15th century. By the eve of the Reformation it had some 40 altars which would have had associated screens, pictures and lights (the up-keep of which is often referred to in Perth's guild and rental records). Much of this was swept away in the first wave of the Reformation in 1559.

The panels appear to have been amongst the items saved from this destruction, either for secular, decorative use or for more private continued Catholic use. They came to light again in 1849, during the demolition of a plaster wall that was part of a building that must originally have faced on to Skinnergate. It was Skinnergate, as the name suggests, that was the focus of the leather-working trades in Perth, including the Glovers. The Perth Museum collections also include a wooden panel-painting, a portrait of the Glover's patron saint, Bartholomew. His martyrdom with a fleshing knife made him an ideal patron for leather-workers. Re-painted on more than one occasion, it retains a medieval core that verifies the date it bears of 1557. Painted then just before the Reformation, probably for the Glover's altar to St Bartholomew in St John's Kirk. Saved from destruction during the Reformation it continued in use for Glover ceremonies only being fully replaced in the mid-19th century when an entirely new portrait was commissioned in a more fashionable style (and still used by the

Glover Incorporation). Amongst the earliest records that survive of the Glover Incorporation are several deeds (the earliest dated to 1429) relating to a tenement known as St Bartholomew's Land, in the vicinity of Castlegable, which is at the bottom of Skinnergate. This is demonstration enough that the Glovers had the property in which liturgical furnishings could be relocated for their continued, more private use.

The Perth Guildry and Craft Incorporations were the leading patrons of the parish church and by the close of the 15th/start of the 16th century the 40 or so altars or chantries in St John's Kirk were supported by both the Incorporations and wealthy individuals. A key element of this was their support and organisation of the Corpus Christi Play. The feast of Corpus Christi was officially declared by the Pope in 1317. It soon became a central feast in the Christian calendar. It slotted into the ritual rhythm of the year as a powerful expression of Christian belief. The Feast inspired a dramatic celebration of varying size and frequency in a variety of communities. It was a diverse and changeable ritual event, built around a shared symbol but incorporating different local interests, lore, traditions and capabilities between the 14th and the 16th centuries. The surviving evidence for the Corpus Christi play and procession in Perth is slender but sufficient to indicate its continuity, its guild sponsorship, its diversity and local distinctiveness and its contested demise. The evidence principally comes from references to the performance and resourcing of the play that are scattered through various Incorporation records, principally the Guildry Book, the Hammermen Book and the records of the Wrights Incorporation; spanning the late 15th – 16th century.

The earliest references cover the years 1485-87 and relate to expenses being paid to named individuals, with the implication that the play and procession were well established. The more explicit references record the cast of characters: principally Adam and Eve, the Devil and his Chapman, Saint Eloy, the Marmadin and a mixture of supporting devils and angels along with a range of banner bearers, various prop holders and minstrels. The key character missing by 1553 was St Erasmus, along with the Corddrawer, the three Tormentors and the King. Their replacement is a character called Trinity and a degree of enforcement is also necessary: those who do not play their roles are to be fined half a stone of wax for the candle on St Eloy's altar in St John's. There are a number of slighter entries in both sets of records dealing with various expenses in connection with the play.

The most obvious local element to the play is the presence of the saints, Eloy and Erasmus. As the Hammermen's patron, Eloy's place was presumably assured in their contribution to the play. But why St Erasmus? He was greatly revered during the Middle Ages and it is noteworthy that his feast day, June 2, is well within the Corpus Christi season. He was also the patron saint of sailors, of which Perth must have had a reasonable throughput. The various props listed in the records include, 'cabers', 'gudstrings', 'bluid' and 'St Erasmus cord'. Adding these to the characters of St Erasmus, the Tormentors and the Corddrawer implies that one of the scenes presented was St Erasmus's martyrdom: tied to a windlass and disembowelled via a cord hooked into his stomach. He is shown being so martyred in a Salzburg woodcut of 1410-20, probably one of the earliest depictions of the windlass as torture instrument, and only adopted for St Erasmus in the 14th century. There is a certain amount of blood and gore implied in this reconstruction and if there is doubt that such was the practice one need only study *The Martyrdom of Apollonia* by Jean Fouquet (painted circa 1460). This shows (against a backdrop of some six scaffold stages showing their own plays) a main scene of Apollonia under torture including the pulling of her teeth by large tongs.

The involvement of the Guildry and the Hammermen Incorporations in the staging of

the Corpus Christi play suggests it was the major dramatic event of the calendar and in which all the Incorporations had their part to play their scenes to present and their banners to process. The Hammermen and Wrights records alike show that money was being collected – both about the town and through offerings left in a collecting box (*stok*) at their respective altars in the parish church. They took the credit for the plays and were clearly careful to defray what must have been a substantial financial outlay as widely as possible. The play continued to be performed beyond the Reformation with the Kirk Session still trying to ban it as late as 1577.

The Perth Corpus Christi play clearly involved both procession and performance. Presently it can only be speculation as to the route of the procession. It was clearly a lengthy affair as refreshments were called for. Perhaps it culminated in an open space where the various scenes of the play were then performed? One late, post-medieval entry from the Register of Acts of Council is of interest here. For 23 June 1603 it refers to a play being played on Tuesday in the playfield. This was apparently at the end of the High Street. We do not of course know whether the playfield existed before the 17th century or if it came into existence then as part of an upsurge in secular drama. It is perhaps worth giving consideration to some of these elements as future archaeological investigations in the town allow and as part of any research agenda drawn up to pursue the social topography of the town.

The above analysis has sought to develop an understanding of the changing cultural life of medieval Perth, defining it as a place not divorced from its surroundings and where economic sustenance was not the only agenda. By examining a range of culturally informative artefacts and institutions I have tried to demonstrate the diversity of cultural practice, crucial in trying to understand thought processes. I have tried to show both individuals and groups within society pursuing these cultural practices, often in contradiction of or contestation with authority.

Bibliographic note

Subsequent, more detailed versions of this paper are to be published with full references. The author is pleased to take any specific questions anyone reading this version may have. In the interim the key references are as follows:

Lithics and pilgrimage: The bulk of the pilgrimage souvenirs are from the PHS excavations which are still to be published, some are illustrated in P. Yeoman, **Pilgrimage in Medieval Scotland** (1999, Batsford). The EBA from Meal Vennel is illustrated in A. Cox (ed.) 'Backland Activities in Medieval Perth: Excavations in Meal Vennel and Scott Street', in **Proc Soc Antiq Scot 126 (1996)**, 790 & illus 29. For the Murthly Hours see J. Higgitt, **The Murthly Hours – Devotion, Literacy and Luxury in Paris, England and the Gaelic West** (2000, British Library)

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