

## **TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF PERTH'S ORIGIN: THE PICTISH & GAELIC BACKGROUND**

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This paper was not given at the conference because there was no time in the programme. It would have been part of the section that looked at the theme of origin influences, which on the day was only able to raise the question of Scandinavian influences. It is included here to try and round out the discussion of Perth's origins and hopefully promote further debate on how the early medieval 'town' evolved. It is clear from the Perth conference discussions of the Scandinavian evidence by both Barbara Crawford and Colleen Batey that the Scandinavians did not found a settlement at Perth. However there was something there that they – the Scandinavians – could contribute to and influence. It is the possible nature of that community which I wish to explore here.

My focus is less on the economic aspects of Perth's origins but I do recognise the importance of these, which have been ably summarised by both Spearman<sup>1</sup> and Duncan, who long recognised the importance of the landscape setting of a town before archaeological hinterland studies became fashionable: 'The town ...was a place for the making and marketing of the necessities of life...The weekly market threw the street open to the landward men and was designed to attract supplies of fuel and food to the town...' which turned 'raw materials into consumer goods'.<sup>2</sup>

The human, built environment, whatever its scale, is situated in the natural environment or countryside. Evolving medieval urbanism was often aware of its growth out of the countryside. The town of s'Hertogenbosch, in south Netherlands, was founded in 1185. Its name means 'The Dukes Forest' a reference to a favourite hunting ground of the Duke of Brabant. This image of the town as being in the Duke's forest persisted into the 16th century, when an ode was written contrasting its city and forest aspects: 'For so many rows of trees that once stood in the wildwood so many streets and inns can now be seen...Truly just as the dark forest is home to all creatures of different classes and trees of all types so is s'Hertogenbosch home to people of every description.'<sup>3</sup> There was an awareness of towns developing out of rural settings, just as there was an awareness that the countryside could be made inimical, in parts, for example by the brutal extension of forest laws in the post-Conquest England of Norman and Angevin monarchs.<sup>4</sup> So the separateness in the town and country equation is perhaps best seen in their purpose, a set of particular places for doing particular things but connected in a socio-cultural web. In her discussion of the depiction of towns by the 16th century Scottish map-maker Timothy Pont, Pat Dennison observed of Perth that the double-circuit Pont uses to indicate the walls of Perth is a clear indication of Perth being 'separated' from the countryside. But surely this is the impression, not the reality. It is an impression that does not accurately reflect the history of those walls as devised in the 13th/14th century to defend Perth from politico-military attacks during the Wars of Independence and their subsequent gradual decline and not to separate Perth from the countryside per se.<sup>5</sup>

The conventional view of Scottish medieval urbanism is that it is the story of burghs, principally royal burghs, founded from the 12th century onwards. This view would describe Perth as the royal burgh of King David I (1124-53). It was he who granted Perth its royal charter (later confirmed by his successor King William I, the Lion (1165-1214)).<sup>6</sup> This view is based on the primacy of the documentary record in its recording of events and strictly speaking is correct if we follow the legal definition of a

burgh. It is a distinction Duncan has been careful to remind us of: '...when we write of urban origins we should distinguish between the town which is a settlement and away of life on the one hand and the burgh which is an agglomeration of privileges designed to further the way of life on the other. It must surely be plain that David I did not choose the spots and create the communities ab initio like so many twentieth-century new towns.'<sup>7</sup> It is a theme subsequent writers have elaborated on from an archaeological perspective.<sup>8</sup> Ironically it is the documentary evidence that gave some of the first clues to a pre- burghal urban centre at Perth. Charter evidence demonstrates that in the reign of Alexander I (1107-24) he granted Scone abbey (2 miles north, upriver, of Perth and on the opposite bank of the Tay) the right to custom-free shipping via English merchants. In 1128, Perth's church is already in existence and is granted to Dunfermline Abbey.<sup>9</sup> An important geographic determinant in helping to explain Perth's position and development is that it lies at what was then the lowest bridging point across the Tay (and before that the lowest fordable point at low tide) and it is also the highest point upstream reachable by ship.

All this makes sound economic sense but there are further geographical considerations to take into account. If one climbs the tower of St John's Kirk today the view one is rewarded with demonstrates how carefully the site of Perth was chosen. On all but the north-west side it is surrounded by low hills: Moncrieffe Hill, Craigie Hill and Tulloch Hill to west and south (and themselves separated from the nearby Ochils by the river Earn) and Kinnoull Hill and the Sidlaws to the east and north-east. This creates, even today, a very enclosed spatial sense, with the two clear avenues of approach being along the Tay valley, which to the immediate north-west broadens out into Strathearn. The key drawback would seem to be the hazard of the flooding Tay. This has certainly become a greater hazard as the town has grown outwards into the flood plain. But as David Bowler has demonstrated the site was carefully chosen topographically, its historic core sitting on a low platform which, 'in extreme flood conditions ... could become almost an island in the middle of a natural basin. ... A low but dry platform on the riverbank, almost entirely surrounded by water-logged ground and pools of standing water, which would have had some limitations but would have been comparatively secure and defensible, a tolerable substitute for ... impregnable castle rocks, or the spectacular but inconvenient hillfort site of' (nearby) 'Moncrieffe Hill.'<sup>10</sup>

Moncrieffe Hill lies approximately 3 miles to the south of Perth, where it overlooks the Tay and, slightly further off, the lower reaches of the river Earn, which joins the Tay just below Abernethy. The hill is crowned by a fort of presumed Iron Age origin but which may have had early medieval re-occupation. In the year 728 it was the scene of a Pictish dynastic battle or skirmish. Watson interpreted its name as a Gaelicized version of a British/Pictish name meaning 'hill of (the) tree'. He took this as referring to a conspicuous tree, possibly a tribal tree that stood there.<sup>11</sup> Watson interprets Perth's name as a British/Pictish survival comparable to the Old Welsh *Pert*, 'brake, brush or copse'. He suggests a connection to *Perta*, 'wood, copse', in Gaul, where it is also the name of a grove goddess. We should also note the possible earlier presence of a Romano-Celtic shrine on what is now the North Inch, Perth, close to the river Tay and to the Roman fort at Bertha, as suggested by a second century AD Romano-Celtic head found there.<sup>12</sup> These tree placenames can be seen as indicative of a Pictish landscape marked out with significant tree or woody places, politically so and possibly with a religious element. A religious site, for example, would also make sense in conjunction with the fording of the river, to help ensure safe crossings (compare the later medieval chapel on the bridge in Perth).

The political landscape around what became Perth is a little more visible in the 9th-10th centuries. There are royal estates at Scone by the late 9th century (a place that boasts a royal thanage, an early church and a place of royal inauguration) and at Forteviot, some 5 miles to the north-west in Lower Strathearn from at least the 9th century. Opposite Scone across the Tay and immediately to the north of Perth is the remains of the Roman fort of Bertha, commanding the junction of the rivers Almond and Tay and the northern terminus of both the Roman road north and the earliest Roman frontier, the Gask Ridge. This fort is a candidate for early medieval re-occupation as the putative site of *Ràthinveramon*, to which there are a number of documentary references in the late 10th century.<sup>13</sup> Perth was ideally placed to serve this network of estates. Excavations on the Perth High Street in 1992 established the presence of a wattle-lined ditch presumed to define an enclosure or precinct around an early church (sited perhaps on the site of the 'tree-space' alluded to in the name *Pert?*). The construction of this ditch was radiocarbon dated to cal. AD 998-1039.<sup>14</sup> The excavators drew attention to the possible relationship of this early, if not the earliest, phase of St John's Kirk and Watergate, which is regarded as the oldest area of urban development in Perth. Supporting this early development of Perth are two artefacts of key importance in this context. The first is the hilt and blade fragment of an early medieval sword found in Watergate in 1848 and probably of 9-10th century in date. The second is a fragment of a 9-10th century Cross-slab found in a garden in Scone in 1978 but probably originally found in the vicinity of St John's Kirk during its renovation.<sup>15</sup>

To sum up, there now seems to be sufficient evidence to indicate with some solidity that an urban focus for Perth developed from the playing-out of economic, religious and territorial issues in the 9th-10th centuries. Perth secured its place and prospered to the extent that by the 12th century it was a ripe candidate for designation as a royal burgh, allowing the Crown to formalise its share in the wealth being generated by its subjects and possibly foreign merchant groups. It would also serve to bolster royal control of the landscape adjacent to its possessions in Scone and Forteviot which were coterminous with one of the principal and most powerful lordships of the realm, that of the earldom of Strathearn.<sup>16</sup>

#### NOTES

1. R. M. Spearman, 'Early Scottish Towns: their origin and economy', in S. T. Driscoll & M. R. Nieve (eds), *Power and Politics in Early Medieval Britain and Ireland* (Edinburgh, 1988), 96-110, esp. 96.
2. A. A. M. Duncan, *Scotland the Making of the Kingdom* (Edinburgh, 1975), 470-1.
3. A. M. Koldewey, P. Vandenbroeck & B. Vermet, *Hieronymous Bosch: The Complete Paintings and Drawings* (Rotterdam, 2001), 25.
4. S. Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London, 1995), 135-52.
5. E. P. Dennison, 'Timothy Pont's Portrayal of towns', in C. Cunningham (ed.) *The Nation Survey'd: Timothy Pont's Maps of Scotland* (East Linton, 2001), 125-38, esp. (for Perth) 130, 139. Of course, when the walls were newly up and maintained they may well have engendered a sense of separateness in the vicinity of Perth, as well as demonstrating determination and resistance.
6. G. Simpson (ed.) *Scotland's Medieval Burghs: An Archaeological Heritage in Danger* (Edinburgh, 1972), 8.
7. A. A. M. Duncan, 'Perth: the first century of the burgh', in *Transactions of the Perthshire Society of Natural Sciences, Special Issue* (1973), 30-50 (quote on 31).
8. On the general, pre-12th century situation in Scotland see Spearman, op. cit. in note 1 and E. P. Dennison, 'The Scottish Burgh Survey and the Centre for Scottish Urban History', in E. P. Dennison (ed.) *Conservation and Change in Historic Towns, Research Directions for the Future* (York, 1999), 77-89. Simpson, op. cit. in note 6, 8-10 had earlier sounded this note.
9. Duncan, op. cit. in note 7, 32.

10. D. Bowler, 'Time and Place: Development of the Historic Burgh of Perth', in M. Stavert (ed.) *Dirt, Dust and Development: 50 Years of Perthshire Archaeology* (Perth, 2000), 61-77 (quote on 62). See also his abstract for the Perth Conference. These are summaries of a fuller analysis to appear in D. Bowler (ed.) *The Perth Development Study* (forthcoming).
11. The place of battle is discussed in A. O. Anderson, *Early Sources of Scottish History AD 500-1286, Volume 1* (1922, reprinted Stamford, 1990), 223-4; and in W. J. Watson, *The Celtic Placenames of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1926), 400, Watson discusses the meaning of Moncrieffe, *ibid* at 401.
12. Watson, *ibid*, 356. For the head see A. Ross, 'A Celtic (?) stone head from Perthshire', in *Transactions and Proceedings of the Perthshire Society of Natural Science XI* (1966) (for 1963-65), 31-7. The head is in the collections of Perth Museum.
13. Anderson, *op. cit.* in note 11, 517-18 and A. MacDonald, 'Caiseal, Dun, Lios and Ràth in Scotland II', in the *Bulletin of the Ulster Placename Society*, Ser. 2, Vol.4 (1981-2), 32-57, esp. n.1 and 51-3. MacDonald reviews the literary and archaeological evidence of the identification of both Bertha (at the Tay-Almond river junction) and Crammond (at the Forth Almond river junction) as 'Ràthinveramon' and tends to favour Crammond as the most likely spot. For Scone, see The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, *South-East Perth: An Archaeological Landscape* (Edinburgh, 1994), 90 & 124-7; R. Fawcett, 'The Building of Scone Abbey', in the proceedings of the Stone of Destiny conference (forthcoming); and S. T. Driscoll, 'The Archaeological Context of Assembly in Early Medieval Scotland – Scone and its comparanda', in the proceedings of the Oxford Assembly conference (forthcoming). For Forteviot see L. Alcock & E. A. Alcock, 'Reconnaissance Excavations on Early Historic fortifications and other royal sites in Scotland 1974-84, 5: A, Excavations and other fieldwork at Forteviot, Perthshire...' in *Proc Soc Antiq Scot* 122 (1992), 215-87.
14. C. Moloney & R. Coleman, 'The development of a medieval street frontage: the evidence from excavations at 80-86 High street, Perth', in *Proc Soc Antiq Scot* 127 (1997), 707-82, esp.710-12.
15. Moloney & Coleman, *ibid*, 710. The sword fragments have been recently re-examined by C. Patterson for the catalogue in J. Graham-Campbell, *The Pagan Norse Graves of Scotland* (forthcoming). For the Scone cross-slab see Coleman & Moloney, *ibid*, 775 and D. M. Lye & I. Fisher, 'A Cross-slab from New Scone, Perthshire', in *Proc Soc Antiq Scot* 111 (1981), 521-3 & pl. 59. For the architect Lorimer's renovations of St John's see R. Fawcett, *A History of St John's Kirk, Perth* (Perth, 1987). Both the sword and the cross-slab are in the collections of Perth Museum.
16. For the nature of the earldom of Strathearn see F. Watson, 'Adapting Tradition? The Earldom of Strathearn 1114-1296'(forthcoming); A. Watson, 'Placenames', 169-74 in M. Hall et al 'Of Makings and Meanings: Towards a Cultural Biography of the Crieff Burgh Cross' in *Tayside & Fife Archaeol Jour* 6 (2000), 155-88; and C. Neville, *The Earls of Strathearn from the twelfth century to the mid-fourteenth century*, (2 vols, Aberdeen University unpub. thesis, 1983).