

7 Epilogue

David Bowler

When the excavations at 75–95 High Street were taking place in the 1970s, it was already apparent that they would be amongst the most productive and important urban excavations in Scotland. The strategic location of Perth, with its long, varied and well-documented history, the central location and wide extent of the site, and the extraordinary depth and quality of preservation all ensured that the excavation would uniquely illuminate our understanding of the Scottish medieval burgh.

Those expectations have been confirmed by subsequent analysis. The quantity, quality and range of preservation have enlarged our understanding of the economic life of the burgh, all the different means by which the population fed, clothed, sheltered and entertained themselves, and of the rural economy which supported them, often invisible in the archaeological record. In a pre-industrial society, much of the fabric of daily life was derived from plant and animal products, wood and leather, wool and linen. Such a world, made of sugar (cellulose) and protein, survives only in special circumstances, amongst which the waterlogged middens of Perth High Street are the most remarkable from medieval Scotland.

The 29 timber buildings of this site without doubt form the most remarkable sequence excavated in Scotland, ranging from the grand and substantial down to the most humble and informal constructions. ‘Timber’ may flatter some of these ‘sticks and mud’ structures, probably home-made, but these are the very buildings which could never have survived above ground, known to us only from excavation in the special conditions of this site and its neighbours.

It has long been the goal of urban archaeology to understand the settlement as a whole, not just individual objects and structures, but this aspiration is rarely so well-achieved as here, on a site spanning four rigs and reaching some 50m into the backlands. On such an extensive site, excavated over two seasons, it is possible to relate buildings to one and other in time and space, and to explore the network of paths and fences, pits and gullies, yards and middens that defined the burgh plots of the developing and sometimes struggling burgh.

Perth was unusual amongst Scottish towns in having defensive walls, playing a documented part in some of the dramatic scenes of the nation’s history, from the Wars of Independence down to the Jacobite Risings. The historic record of these walls is far from straightforward. The archaeological record is if anything still more puzzling, nowhere more so than on this site, with multiple alignments in unexpected places. The defences of Perth evidently developed in a complex interaction of natural topography, natural disaster, and changing economic and political fortunes and allegiances.

These excavations produced vast quantities of medieval pottery, including some of the earliest ever seen from a Scottish burgh. The study of Scottish medieval ceramics has advanced out of all recognition in the last 35 years and, combined with advances in radiocarbon dating and dendrochronology, has allowed the dating of this site to be revised with a precision and confidence that could not have been attempted in the 1970s. In particular the Sandy Shelly Wares from this site, like the structural remains from other sites, can now be seen as clear evidence of a pre-burghal settlement up to a century older than the formal foundation of the burgh.

If the results of these excavations had been published early in the 1980s, they would undoubtedly have become the standard reference for urban archaeology in Scotland and indeed more widely. As it was, they exerted a profound influence, but in a different way. Although unpublished, these excavations were well known to everyone working in the discipline in the late 20th and early 21st century, and shaped the strategies of urban excavation and interpretation in Perth and throughout Scotland. Conversely, the continuous stream of development-led excavation, post-excavation research and publication that has taken place in Scotland over the succeeding 35 years has fed back into the interpretation and publication of this site, building on the inspired intuitions of Nick Bogdan and the patient labours of his successors, illuminated by the skills and insights of a new generation of researchers, some unborn when these excavations ended.

The post-war reconstruction boom is long over, and the immediate economic prospects are very bleak. The process of urban redevelopment has already begun to cannibalise itself, demolishing and recycling some of the less successful developments of the 1950s and 1960s. It is doubtful that we will see another excavation on a well-preserved site the size of 75–95 High Street in Scotland, and inconceivable that it will be allowed to run for two years. Urban archaeology in Scotland will continue, ‘but not as we knew it’.

The long-awaited publication of this excavation report begins to close a large and very involved circle, bringing together the results of one of Scotland’s earliest and largest urban excavations with the insights gained in more than a generation of work undertaken since. This process will be completed as the various specialist reports come to publication over the next few years.

What mean ye by these stones?

Joshua, Chapter 4, verse 6

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