

Conclusions

The shoes, straps, sheaths, waste material and miscellanea discussed above comprise an important assemblage of worked leather, most of it closely dated to a period of little more than 250 years, c1100–1350. Shoes form the most impressive category, with details of manufacture and variations in style well represented. The sheaths comprise a smaller but still significant group, with their shape and decoration paralleled at various sites in England, Ireland and Scandinavia. The straps are more mundane but nevertheless important, while the sheer quantities of waste material (see Offcuts and Scraps) provide valuable evidence about leather-working in medieval Scotland, and Perth in particular.

When considering any explanation for the occurrence of this assemblage, it is important to remember that in a Scottish medieval burgh, firstly, rich and poor lived close together, thus producing a mixture of domestic refuse from different economic groups, and secondly, local industries often existed behind the frontages of burghal tofts, thus occasioning a further mixture of domestic and commercial waste. It is also significant that on other sites deposits of leather had been brought from elsewhere for infill. Thus excavations in Bristol have shown that an assemblage of leather had been used to backfill two doorways (Thomas forthcoming a and b). Of further relevance is Perth's record of flooding. Leather which was being worked on, or which was being stored for future reuse, might have been ruined by events similar to those of January 1993, and which are well recorded, for instance, for 1209, when ships sailed through the streets of Perth (Duncan 1974, 39–40). After such a flood, a great deal of leather might have been discarded in pits and middens.

Domestic repairs might account for some of the repaired shoes but not the large concentrations in pits and middens of cut fragments and offcuts. The presence of thick unworn offcuts and of primary offcuts suggest that shoe making and repairing were carried out on a commercial basis, perhaps as several small concerns since the material was recovered from a number of adjoining properties. The argument in favour of commercial shoe making is supported by the evidence from the animal bones (see Fascicule 4, The environmental remains) which were found in such quantities as to imply large-scale butchery as well as the existence of an extensive horn-working industry.

Thus, there appear to have been several adjacent industries: butchery, preparation of hides (both for local use and for export), horn-working and leather working, as well as other related activities. On the other hand, it is important to remember the ubiquity of leather in the medieval period, serving as it did a multitude of purposes: straps and fastenings of many kinds, including harnesses, belts, attachments for

weapons; clothing, footwear and armour; saddles; containers, such as purses, bags, satchels and saddle bags, for 'dry' goods, and bottles and costrels for 'wet' goods. It is only the offcuts, scraps and cut-up objects that should be regarded as evidence for leatherworking and repairing on the High Street site itself.

In the South Sector of the High Street excavation the numbers of leather fragments increase from 294 (5%) in Period I (the first half of the 12th century) to 643 (10%) in Period II (the second half of the 12th century), dipping to 220 (4%) in Period III (the first half of the 13th century), but then increasing to 2441 (39%) in Period IV (the second half of the 13th century) and 2147 (35%) in Period V (the first half of the 14th century). Only 178 (3%) items, most of which were recovered from unstratified deposits, came from Period VI (1350–1975) contexts. In addition 248 (4%) pieces were detected in Area 5/Trench A (North Sector) or became detached from their context labels during conservation. These may have come from either the North or South Sectors of the excavation. These overall figures, particularly when viewed with those for waste material (see above, Waste material: offcuts and scraps), indicate that leatherworking expanded in each period (except Period III—the first half of the 13th century), culminating in Periods IV and V, 1250–1350>.

The evidence for two-part soles, seats cut across the waist, clumps, waste material and clothing fragments points to a flourishing trade in cobbling and shoe repairing by Period IV (the second half of the 13th century). The evidence for the increase in leatherworking is supported further by a study of the distribution of the leather over the High Street site. In Period I the leather only appears in small groups, the largest consisting of 57 fragments from M14b(b) (including Pit 3625), a Rig VI midden that had been laid down slightly before 1150. More substantial clusters appear during Period II (the second half of the 12th century), notably 65 items from M1.3 (a late 12th-century Rig VI backland midden), 93 from M1.2 (a stratigraphically slightly earlier division of what was essentially the same Rig VI backland midden, which included Pit 2648) and 163 from M10 (another late 12th-century backland midden, in this case from Rig V. It included Pits 2330, 4552 and 4554). The Period III assemblages, however, are no bigger, if not smaller, as, for example, 43 from B26 (a series of layers to the south of B3), 75 from an associated midden M6b (both Rig V context groups) and 106 from MC130 (a mid 13th-century Rig VII context group). During Period IV (the second half of the 13th century), on the other hand, numbers increase significantly, with 220 from M1.4f, 169 from B18 (Phase 2a), 163 from MC155 (including Pit 2691) and 544 from MC126 (including Pit 7402).

Seven groups of between 73 and 107 fragments were also recorded from this period: MC143, B18 (Phase 2b), M1.4d, P8.3, M9a, M9b and M1.4e. By Period V (1300–1350+) the concentrations have risen markedly with 535 from M1.5a and 406 from M8a, as well as 187 from P8.4 (including Pit 7216), 157 from M1.5b, 134 from B34–Courtyard, 121 from M3c and 103 from P1a.

The size of the various assemblages can also be used as an indication of the nature of their production. Thus, the very small clusters from Period I can most probably be equated with domestic refuse, or possibly with very small-scale leatherworking. Similarly, the larger groups from Period II reflect either the beginnings of commercial leather-working or an increase in production, while the enormous quantities from Periods IV and V represent either a large scale enterprise or, more probably, many separate craftsmen working closely together. Perhaps significantly an adjoining street is still called the Skinnergate or Skinners' Street (Duncan 1974, 36–37; Stavert 1991, 18; Fascicule 1, Historical introduction).

A study of the composition of the main deposits of leather also reveals the increasing importance of leatherworking. In Period I, footwear made up 74% of the largest group, waste material only accounting for 12%. By Period II, however, waste material predominated (61.4%), with footwear playing a much smaller role (33%). This trend continues in Periods III, IV and V, with assemblages chiefly composed of waste material (87.5%, 79.3% and 75.5%), with much smaller quantities of footwear (8.5%, 17.5% and 22.4%). Moreover, the footwear consists mainly of cut-up fragments, with fewer identifiable sole and upper types.

The presence of cut-up footwear suggests that shoes were being repaired; however, the large number of offcuts from new leather, from the same assemblages, also implies that new shoes were being made as well, presumably by the same craftsmen. Thus, these craftsmen would appear to have been cordwainers. Documentary evidence from England, particularly from London, demonstrates restrictions that prevented shoemakers, or cordwainers, from repairing shoes and cobblers from making new shoes; however, these regulations date from 1409. Such restrictions are a feature of later medieval crafts, as different groups tried to protect their own interests (Salzmann 1923, 254–255; Tatton-Brown 1975, 166). It should also be remembered that the existence of this type of regulation implies that what was being forbidden did in fact happen. Such distinctions prevailed in late 18th-century Perth, as shown by the records of a trial of cobblers in 1771–2 (see Appendix 5, below). However, it should not automatically be assumed that they were observed in Perth between AD 1100 and 1350. Conversely, the evidence from the High Street strongly suggests that the same craftsmen were both making new shoes and repairing old ones.

As well as providing evidence for leather working in Perth, the leather reflects certain aspects of the lives of the medieval population of Perth. As discussed

under shoes and sheaths, the leather assemblage gives a few limited indicators of the wealth and status of the medieval population of Perth, at least between 1100 and 1350. Shoes were being made in large numbers, and thus worn by at least some, if not, most of the population, including very small children, one of whom wore decorated shoes. The presence of silk demonstrates wealth and trade links abroad. Further evidence for wealth is provided by the uppers with vamp stripes and linings, and by the decorated sheaths and the rosette strap.

The parallels with leather from elsewhere in Scotland, England, Ireland and Scandinavia are striking. The similarities, for instance, in shoe design, could be explained by imitation or by movement of craftsmen or by separate development of what was the most convenient form. Thus, the Type H boot could be seen as an extension of a Type A one, or more probably, given the parallels in Scandinavia and Eastern Europe, either an imitation, or else of foreign manufacture, discarded by a trader or merchant. The decorated sheaths suggest both imitation and the spread of stamps with conventional motifs.

This assemblage also to a certain extent provides evidence for the local economy. Firstly, the hides were from beasts raised in the agricultural hinterland, which, because of the privileges given to Scottish burghs, could only be sold in the burgh (Duncan 1974, 44). The revenues from exported hides went to the Crown, while the income from shoe manufacture stayed locally. The evidence from the High Street shows that from the first half of the 12th century the population of Perth, or at least some of it, was well-shod, even enjoying luxuries such as silk stitching on their shoes. From the mid-12th century onwards there was a growing shoemaking and repairing trade. This trade may have experienced a recession in the first half of the 13th century, but thereafter it flourished, although the emphasis may have been on shoe-repair and reuse, rather than on the manufacture of new shoes. There is no obvious sign of recession caused by the wars and sieges of the late 13th and early 14th centuries, unless these events might explain the possible preponderance of repair and reuse rather than manufacture of new shoes.

Without doubt even now more than 30 years after it was excavated, the leather work from the High Street remains the most comprehensive collection to have been dug up in Scotland, and a major collection even by European standards. Although no longer the largest medieval leather assemblage from Scotland, it still includes a much greater range of shoe styles, sheaths, straps and miscellanea than has subsequently been found on other Scottish sites, such as, for instance, Aberdeen and Whithorn. (Stones 1982; Thomas 2001a; Thomas forthcoming d; Nicholson 1997, 499–509). Indeed, there are few English sites with as many upper styles, apart from some, such as Baynard's Castle, in the City of London (Grew and de Neergaard 1988). Perhaps the best parallel assemblages for the High Street material, which it should be remembered comes

from just one site, are those from Coppergate, York and from the Schild site in Schleswig, with its essentially contemporary range of sole and upper types (Mould et al 2003; Schnack 1992b). The High Street assemblage is of major importance, providing closely dated examples of soles, uppers, straps and sheaths covering a period

of little more than 250 years, from c1100 to c1350. As such it will probably be seen, together with Coppergate, York, to provide a link between earlier Anglo-Scandinavian sites in York and Dublin and the predominantly later sites which have been excavated in towns such as London and Newcastle Upon Tyne.

