
13 Discussion by Mark Collard and John A Lawson

Despite the clear accounts of the removal during the renovations of Chambers and Hay in the 1870s of large amount of human bones and burials from areas within the church, particularly on its south side and within the Choir, the results of the excavations in the South Choir Aisle in 1981 demonstrated that the majority of the deposits and burials in this area had remained intact. Limited disturbance to the upper levels of archaeological deposits and a general reduction of the surface of the later medieval phases had clearly occurred in Period 4, but the lower, medieval, levels remained *in situ*, disturbed only the excavation of localized, discrete intrusions.

Absolute dating for the great majority of deposits and structural remains encountered during the 1981 and other investigations was unfortunately lacking but it is possible to use the remains uncovered to present a clear and sustainable framework of the sequence of development in this area, linked to the historical and chronological framework of the rest of the building of St Giles'.

The earliest event recorded on site – the two mortared stone slabs observed at the base of the underpinning trench – remains tantalising and currently inexplicable in date and function. The location of the slabs does provide clear evidence for what must have been a very steep drop in slope to the south from the ridge where the High Street now runs, with a fall of almost 6m in 20m horizontally, based on the observation of the level of bedrock within the North Transept and the recorded depth of the stone slabs beneath the east wall.

The massive clay platform recorded across all the investigations in the southern and central parts of the church is clear evidence of action taken on a large scale to counteract the difficulties of construction on this steep slope. Clearly manmade, from the evidence of both the Choir Aisle and the organ foundation trenches within the South Transept, it is presumed, though not proved, that the clay observed within the centre of the Choir also formed part of the same deposit.

The most likely date for the creation of this terrace would seem to lie in the period around the creation of the burgh of Edinburgh by David I in 1124x1127, and it was probably created to accommodate the new 12th-century burgh church of St Giles'. It is clear that the upper surface of the clay was not at a uniform height, lying at approximately 89.05m in the Choir, 88.40m in the South Choir Aisle, 87.35m in the South Transept and 86.70m in the Choir Vestry, where its upper surface was observed sloping down towards the south (all heights AOD). This suggests that the area of the original Romanesque church may have formed a higher plateau above the rest

of the terrace; if so, this may have been a deliberate manipulation of the landscape to enhance the architectural setting of the new church as well as the creation of a more gentle gradient allowing access to the south.

It seems clear that the excavation of the large ditch (C250) also belongs in this phase of activity. The physical placing of the ditch within the burgh is striking. It lies exactly midway between the top of Castlehill to the west and the Netherbow Port to the east, the two points which marked the legal limits of the medieval burgh of Edinburgh along the High Street ridge. On this basis the ditch could be interpreted as part of the planned set-out of the early Norman burgh, with the new burgh parish kirk of St Giles' placed at the heart of the new town. The alignment of the ditch suggests it was set out at right angles to the High Street; the later medieval kirk, which does not share this alignment, is distinctly skew to the street; the reasons for this are unclear. The evidence of the alignment of some of the burials in Period 2 suggest that this skewed alignment may have been a feature of the 12th- and 13th-century church building also.

The function of the ditch cannot be determined with any certainty, but the clear absence of any bank or structures on its western side and the use soon after of this area to the west for burial, and the unlikelihood that any bank or bank would be placed on the downhill side, suggest that it was not defensive in character. It seems more likely that it simply, but emphatically, defined the precinct within which the Norman church of St Giles' stood. The line of the eastern kirkyard boundary to the south, and the adjacent close (Kirkheugh Close) follow the projected line of the ditch down to the Cowgate (maps of Gordon of Rothiemay and William Edgar, [illus 5](#) and [illus 6](#), respectively) and can be seen as forming the southern part of the same early boundary. In this context it may be that the mortared slabs, which were seen below the clay in this area along the eastern boundary, were simply part of the initial setting out of the town plan prior to the construction of the clay terrace.

Excavations in Perth identified a ditch which was interpreted as forming part of a precinct circuit around St John's Kirk, although there it was dated to the 10th/11th centuries by radiocarbon dating ([Moloney & Coleman 1997](#), 710). It does not seem likely on the balance of the archaeological and historical evidence from St Giles' that a similar date is likely.

The extension of the eastern end of the church in the late 14th/early 15th century went as far as the line of the ditch/close but no further, perhaps

further suggesting that this marked the boundary to the land of St Giles'. The close is clearly depicted by Gordon of Rothiemay in 1647 as having to dog-leg around this eastern end of the late medieval church to allow access to the High Street.

To the west of the ditch, and outside the 12th-century church, the clay terrace was used almost immediately as a cemetery. Graves from this period were recorded in the South Choir Aisle (BP1), South Transept and the Choir Vestry, cut directly into the surface of the clay, prior to any deposition or formation of soil deposits its surface. The graves which were observed cut into the clay within the Choir may also belong to this period; they certainly pre-dated at least the mid-15th-century extension of the east end. It is unclear how far the original Choir of the Norman church extended but if these burials can indeed be identified as external, this would indicate that the east end of the original church of David I may have lain further to the west. In this context the clear preference within all three phases of the Period 2 burials in the South Choir Aisle for alignment on the boundary ditch rather than the church building suggests that the ditch was a dominant local topographic feature and that the east end of the church building was not in the immediate vicinity to provide an alignment for the graves.

The area to the south of the early medieval church continued in use as a cemetery external to the church, with deposition of imported make-up containing midden material in all three of the areas investigated. The earliest dating material recovered was the pottery evidence from the deposits of BP2 (P2a). The date suggested for this, of no later than the 13th century, provides a useful *terminus ante quem* for the burials of BP1 and there seems little doubt that the burials of this earlier phase belong in the 12th century.

While it is certain that the external cemetery was for the general burgh population of Edinburgh, the detailed analysis of the skeletal material from the South Choir Aisle has shown distinct and apparently significant variations in the population interred during this period (see [Section 8 – The Human Remains](#)), although the small size of the samples must be remembered. Of particular note is the preponderance of males within Period 2a, and children in Period 2b, the latter representing half the interred population in that period. Among the former group, the males in Period 2a also contained a notable number (seven of 23, 30%) who had either leprosy or an injury that may have caused restricted movement. In this context, the recorded existence of the hospital in St Giles' in the area (see [Section 3.2 – The Parish Cemetery](#)) to the south of the church may be significant. St Giles' was particularly associated as patron with the crippled and the lame, beggars and lepers ([Butler 1987](#), 199–200), and the grouping of these skeletons may point to an early foundation date for the hospital, for which at present there is no evidence earlier than the 16th century.

The burgh kirk of St Giles' underwent considerable construction and extension work during the 14th century, and at some stage during this period, perhaps in the later decades of the century or early in the 15th century, the Choir was extended to the east, and at the same time the South Choir Aisle was also extended. The most important contribution made by the 1981 excavations to the elucidation of the structural history of St Giles' was the identification of the structural remains associated with this extension. Prior to 1981 it was assumed that the extended Choir and Choir Aisles were of only four bays and that the demonstrably stylistically later easternmost bays of the presbytery and associated clerestory were the result of further extension in the 1450s. However, the unequivocal evidence of the excavation – in the form of the massive wall footing (C246) – was that in fact the Choir was extended to almost its current length in a single phase before the mid-15th-century remodelling of the east end, and that the south wall of the aisle was built at the same time to the same length. The evidence of wall ESG91 (C5) in the South Transept suggests that the Transept may have been extended to the south around the same time to maintain the balance of the southern side of the kirk.

The excavations show clearly that this original east wall was demolished and systematically robbed to the base of its foundations and the new east wall constructed just to the east. The recovery of the penny of James I or II from the backfill of this robber/construction trench provides a firm mid-15th-century *terminus post quem* for the work, and fits well with the date of *c* 1453 derived from the heraldry on the capitals of the new columns of the extension.

While the impetus for enhancement of the church at its east end was probably linked to the acquisition by Sir William Preston of the relic of the arm bone of St Giles', as well as an attempt to give greater emphasis to the presbytery, and certainly dates to the early 1450s, the reason for the slight shift in the wall line to the east, and the consequent respacing of the piers and bay widths may have been prosaically structural in nature rather than a deliberate aesthetic decision. The original east wall (C246) had been built in and over the large infilled boundary ditch (C249). Although much of the extent and depth of this ditch had been removed by the excavation of the foundation trench for the wall, the remaining, truncated ditch had been backfilled with clay, and the wall footings built clay-bonded rather than mortared, all measures presumably to assist in providing a stable footing. It may well be that these measures were simply not sufficient to carry the weight of this east wall. The evidence of the subsidence and the subsequent underpinning of the contemporary south wall of the Choir Aisle and the insertion of buttressing sleeper walls, identified by the excavator as being occasioned by the alterations for the construction of the Preston Aisle in 1454–55, suggest that there may in fact rather have been a

general structural failure of the elements built in the 14th-century enlargement of the church, and the works of the 1450s in the Choir and the creation of the Preston Aisle took advantage of the opportunity presented by the need for repair and reconstruction in this area.

The extension of the church saw a change in the character of the burials made in the area of the South Choir Aisle (Period 3, BP4 and BP5). There was organization in the disposition of the burials within the church, with a series of clearly defined rows of graves, and little intercutting of graves within these rows; the existence of grave markers at ground level may be inferred from this and from the reference to the removal of decorated slabs in the 19th-century renovations. Parallels for this later medieval formalization of burial lairs, marked by inscribed grave slabs, can be found at Glasgow Cathedral where three clearly defined burial vaults or lairs were recorded (Driscoll 2002, 45), though at Glasgow these took the form of deep burial plots rather than individual lairs. The use of coffins for a significant number of the burials and the evidence of the decay and wear of the teeth from the skeletons are physical indicators of a change in social status from those buried outside the church in earlier phases, though the type of timber used and the manner of construction of the coffins may imply that it was the covering of the coffins during the funerary ceremonies that displayed the status of the deceased rather than the coffin.

Evidence recovered from the investigations for the internal arrangement of the church in this period was limited. Hay suggested 'a provisional plan of at least reasonable plausibility' for the positions of altars within the late medieval church (Hay 1975–6, 254–5), although detailed evidence for the position and character of these altars, and the associated liturgical arrangements of the church of this period, is lacking. However, as is the case within the nave of Glasgow Cathedral (Driscoll 2002, 158–60), the arrangement of the graves within the South Choir Aisle may be indicative of the physical position of altars here. Discrete rectangular areas at the east end of both the original and the extended aisle in Periods 3a and 3b, centrally placed against the face of the successive walls, had no burials within them, suggesting that an altar within the Lady Aisle lay here, and its position was simply shifted at the same time as the reconstruction of the east end in the mid-15th century. Hay identifies this area as the location of the altar of St Anne, the mother of Mary, whose altar was assigned to the confraternity of tailors (Driscoll 2002). Among her roles as patron saint, she was identified with women in labour, childless women and seamstresses, the latter perhaps most relevant to the association with the tailors of Edinburgh.

Unsurprisingly, dedications to St Anne are often associated with those to her daughter, and the main dedication of the South Choir Aisle was to Our Lady. Her altar would be expected to lie directly south of the high altar, at the junction of the first and second bays (Driscoll 2002). Within the excavated area, a clear area noticeably without burials can be identified in this location (illus 17; illus 21; illus 22), and this was generally maintained throughout the more than 150 years that this area was receiving burials. On the western side of the excavated area, a very distinct group of six burials (illus 17, SK8, SK10, SK13, SK16, SK21 & SK27) are all arranged in a line, with a clear rectangular space to the east which corresponds in position to the presumed position of the original high altar prior to the extension of the Choir to the east. All six were female, and indeed a statistically significant majority of the burials within the Lady Aisle in Period 3 were female, evidence for a clear and direct link between the patron saints, their religious attributes and the demography of the burials. The area without burials also extended further to the east and may indicate a shift in the position of the altar at the time of the mid-15th-century re-ordering of the east end, similar to that identified for the altar at the east end of the aisle.

The investigations in the Choir in 1993 provide possible evidence for the position of the reredos of the high altar, dedicated to St Giles', but the lack of any surviving above-ground structure, and the absence of detail in the limited accounts relating to the high altar (Hay 1975–6, 256–7), preclude further speculation.

The 1981 excavations produced a surprisingly small amount of material relating to the medieval decoration and ornamentation of the church, with only a limited quantity of small sherds of window glass and a few fragments of architectural stone, the only readily identifiable piece of which was the beaked corbel from the 12th-century Romanesque church. The architectural stone includes fragments of possible grave slabs, reference to carved memorials in the historical account.

The more plentiful assemblages of artefacts and animal bone derived from material which was generally introduced from outside the site as make-up and levelling. A rare glimpse of the domestic assemblages of the medieval Old Town of Edinburgh over several centuries is offered by the diverse character of the material recovered: the presence of higher status items such as the pruned glass vessel, imported pottery vessels and cuts of meat represented by their bones; the evidence for craft activities such as boneworking and the manufacture of decorative copper alloy objects; and the clearly random, though incomplete, sample which the assemblages represent.