

Trial excavations in two Angus burghs

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ABSTRACT

This account summarizes the results of trial excavation in Brechin (1981) and Montrose (1983); the full excavation archives and finds have been deposited in Montrose Museum.

INTRODUCTION

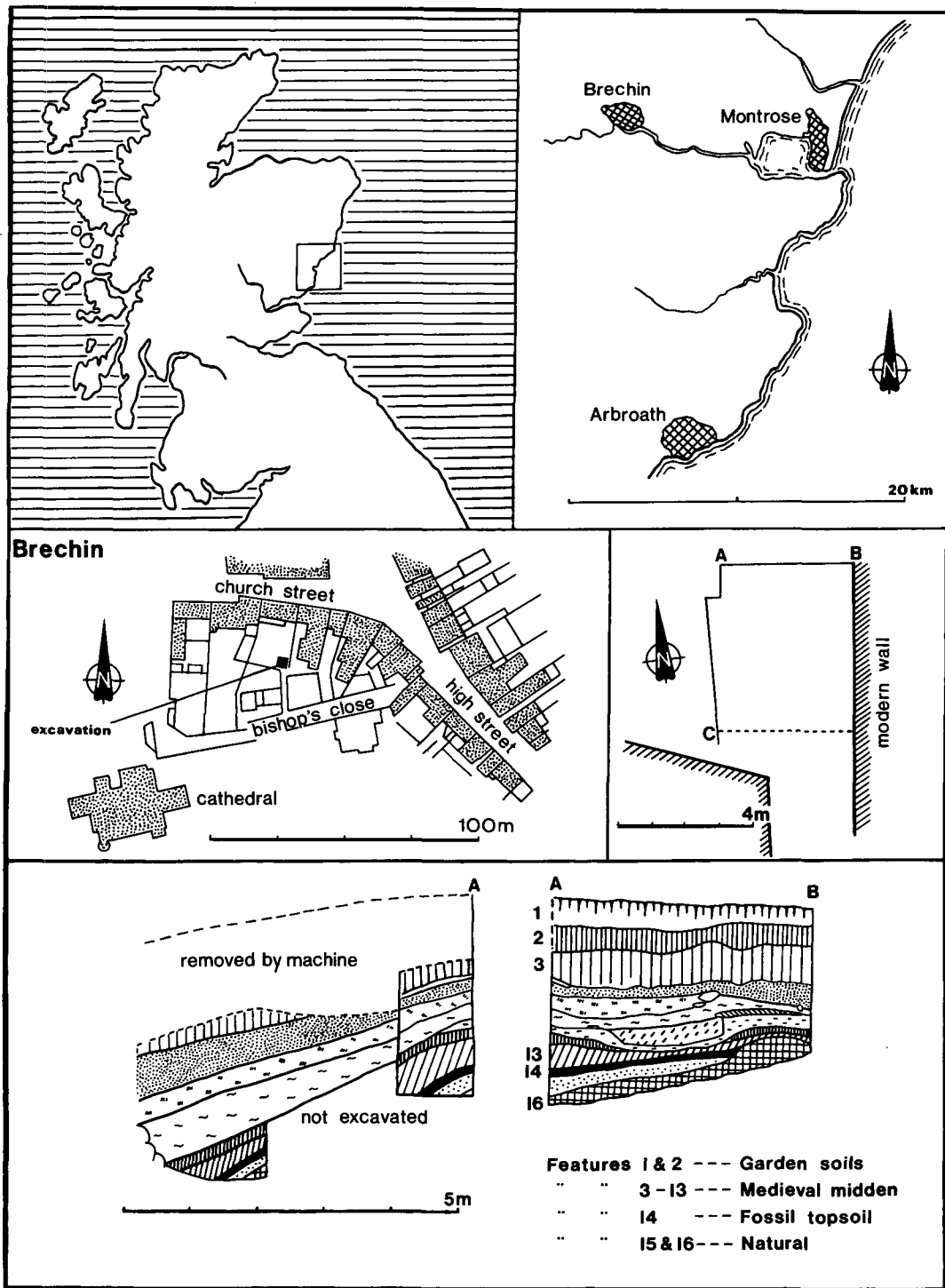
The excavations were not undertaken as part of a planned programme of research, but simply because the opportunities presented themselves and because no previous archaeological work had taken place in the respective towns. To date, the Church Street and Castle Street excavations remain the only investigations within the medieval hearts of Brechin and Montrose. Both excavations were successful in that the potential for recovery of a range of artefacts in surviving medieval deposits was demonstrated.

In 1981 a small-scale excavation was undertaken when development threatened to remove potentially important deposits from within the area of medieval Brechin. Excavation revealed garden soil overlying late 13th- to 14th-century midden deposits. Finds included bronze, iron and lead objects as well as 184 sherds of medieval pottery. In the spring of 1983 excavation was carried out at 32 Castle Street, Montrose. Extensive midden deposits of 13th- to 15th-century date produced over 700 sherds of pottery, comprising a wide range of British and foreign wares, objects of metal and stone, and a fine collection of molluscan remains.

BRECHIN

In May 1981, it was noticed that extraction of soil had taken place from the garden of no 5 Church Street, running from Church Street to Bishop's Close, a thoroughfare of medieval origin linking the Cathedral to the High Street (illus 1). The site of a new private garage was a simple cut into the slope measuring 8 m east/west by 4 m transversely. It was hoped that excavation of this site could provide evidence of the nature of the deposits likely to survive in the area of the medieval burgh. Most of the modern topsoil as well as the top of the medieval deposits had been removed by a mechanical excavator. Excavation of the site involved cleaning down the north and west sections, the east section having already been masked by a newly built wall: these showed little except modern refuse in the topsoil but the excavated floor of the site produced sherds of medieval pottery.

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ILLUS 1 Church Street, Brechin: location map, plan and sections. *Based upon the Ordnance Survey map © Crown copyright*

EXCAVATION

Excavation took place from 26 May to 24 June. Midden layers were recorded and one pit was found. A complete profile of the north section was obtained although, as a result of water seepage, the southern end of the site could not be fully examined. However, an idea of the nature of the surviving deposits was formed as well as of the type of artefacts likely to survive under those particular conditions.

Pottery was the most frequent find, 184 sherds being recovered. Most were plain body-sherds but handles, rims, bases and a few decorated sherds were present. A broken bronze needle, part of the rim of a bronze vessel, an iron nail, a piece of lead and two flint flakes were also recovered. A small amount of badly decayed bone was present and no traces of any buildings were found. The Bishop's Palace is known to have lain on the north side of the Bishop's Close but it almost certainly lay much nearer to the present line of the road. The midden deposit probably originated from the building fronting on to Church Street which, from the pottery evidence, was likely to have been first built around the last third of the 13th century. Midden material from the Bishop's Palace would probably have been deposited on the south side of the Close in the area known as the Bishop's Orchard.

THE FINDS

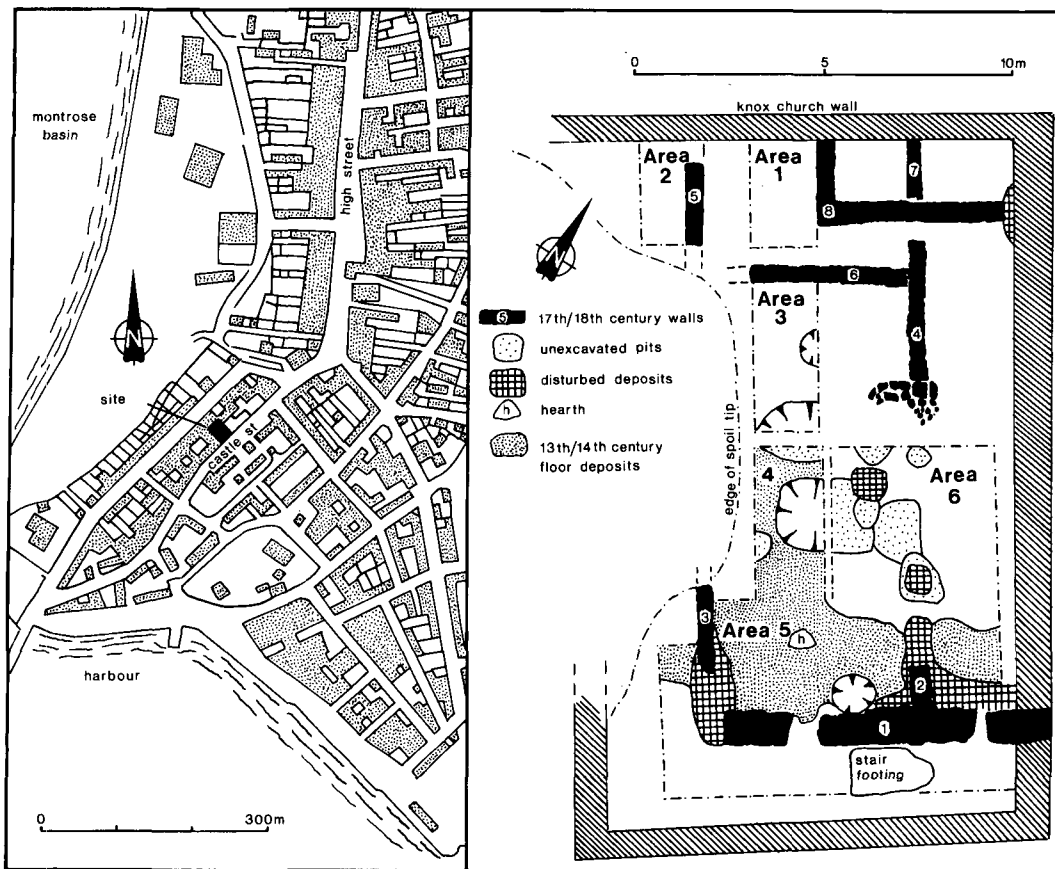
Pottery

The medieval pottery recovered represented at least four geographical areas of manufacture. There were several sherds of Scarborough ware, including one fragment of a mid-13th-century jug. The assemblage as a whole was dated to a period from the mid-13th to early 14th century and included several sherds of east coast gritty ware, Perth types and one or two fragments of possible Aberdeen types. Given the ubiquitous nature of Scarborough ware and the gritty ware, it was not surprising to find it in Brechin. The wares from Perth and Aberdeen were less expected but provide useful evidence of contact between the towns in the 13th and 14th centuries. The rest of the pottery, which is assumed to be local, consists mostly of fragments of jugs with only a few sherds of cooking-pot represented.

CONCLUSIONS

It is difficult to draw conclusions from such a small excavation but certain points should be noted. No midden deposits were laid down before the second half of the 13th century, before which time a thin humus overlay a sandy subsoil through which the bedrock sometimes protruded. The midden deposits could have originated only from buildings fronting on to Church Street which, it is suggested, was planned and laid out in the mid- to late 13th century around the time that the Norman church was enlarged into a cathedral and the Maisondieu Hospital was built outside the north side of the burgh (1260). Burgh expansion and improvement at this time would be expected, given the evidence from other Scottish burghs, though it will take further and larger excavations to provide reliable evidence from Brechin.

The recovery of bronze objects in excellent condition is encouraging, as is the finding of iron and lead, though their poorer preservation may have been a consequence of the localized problem of water seepage. This phenomenon caused all the bone on the site to be saturated, with the result



ILLUS 2 Castle Street, Montrose: location map and plan. Based upon the Ordnance Survey map © Crown copyright

(because of the trial nature of the excavation, practical problems of recovering it and potential problems with conservation), that none was collected.

No trace of any buildings was found and indeed none was expected on such a steep slope between two streets. No opportunity for excavating further down the slope towards the Bishop's Close presented itself but there are reasons for being optimistic about this particular area of Brechin. It is likely that the pre-13th-century settlement extended along the Bishop's Close and the Chanonry Wynd, an area which has seen very little development since the medieval period and is now largely given over to garden plots. Local conservation measures should ensure that little or no new building will take place, and therefore any future excavation will probably have to be of a research rather than rescue nature.

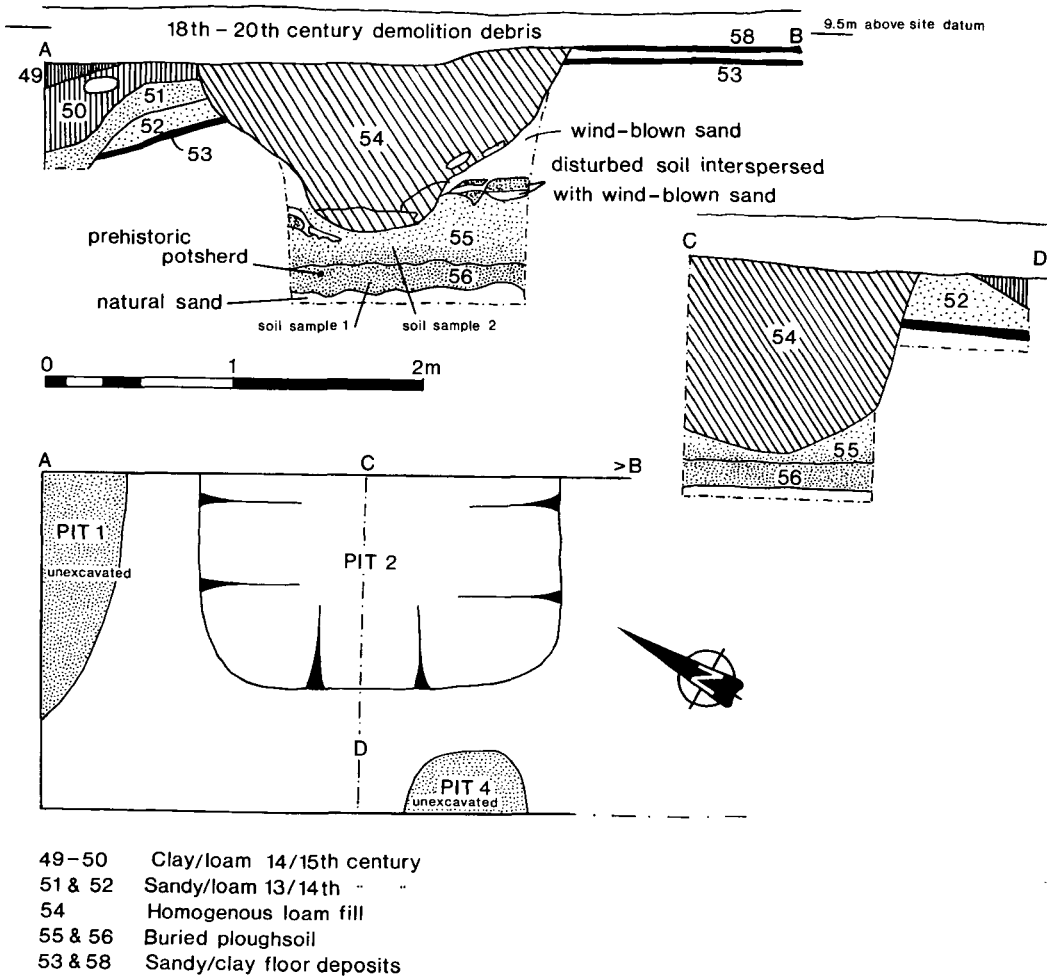
MONTROSE

Following the demolition of a 19th-century church at 32 Castle Street in 1983, trial excavation was undertaken before the construction of a doctor's surgery. As no previous

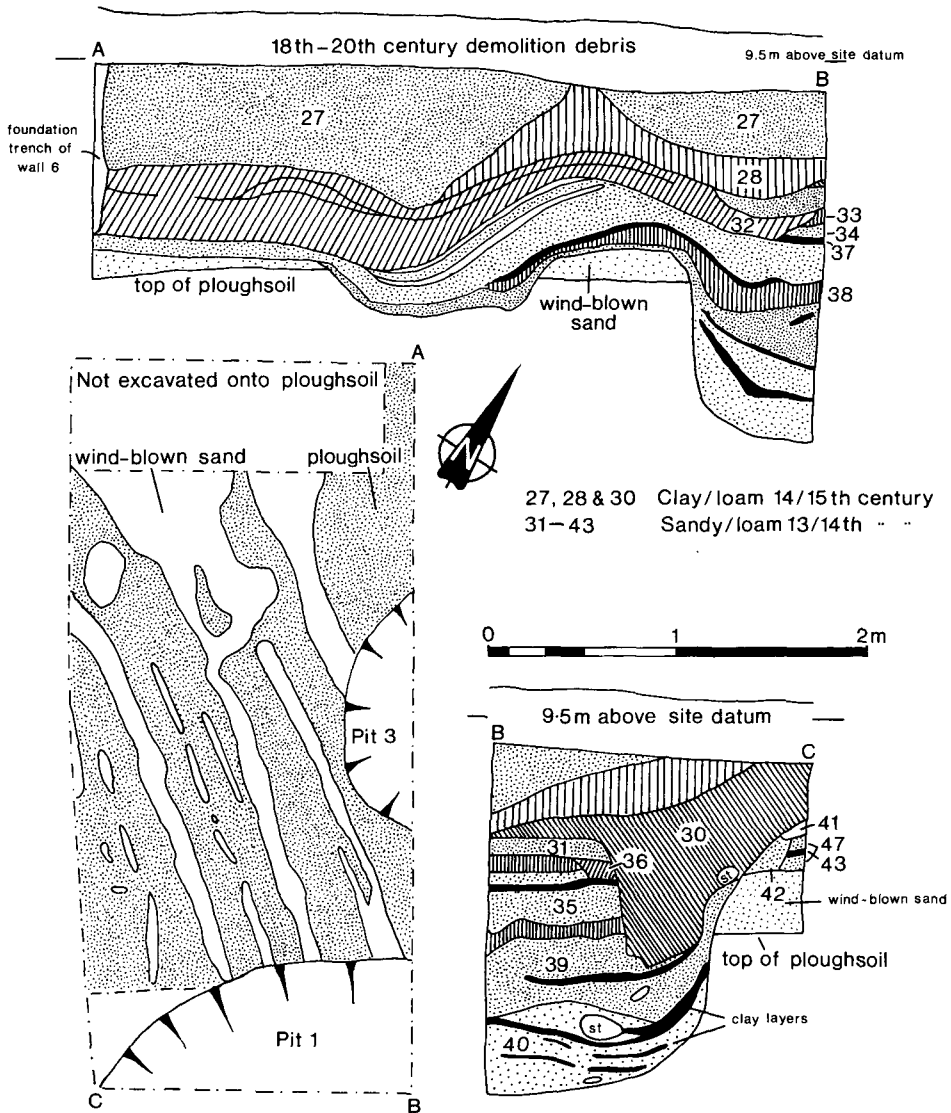
excavation had taken place in Montrose, a small exploratory excavation was undertaken to test the stratigraphy of the surviving deposits and the range of artefacts within them. It was also designed to establish the date for the initial use of the site which lay within an area of the town potentially early in date but lately suggested to be of late medieval origin (Gourlay & Turner 1978).

EXCAVATION

Based on the results of an auger survey, the front third of the site was excavated as an area, the remainder being sampled by trenches (illus 2). Surviving medieval deposits at the front of the site were very shallow and comprised two superimposed floor-levels of mid-13th/early 14th-century date, each equipped with a hearth. Lack of evidence of contemporary walling suggests that the floors belonged to outdoor yards, rather than a building or buildings, and were



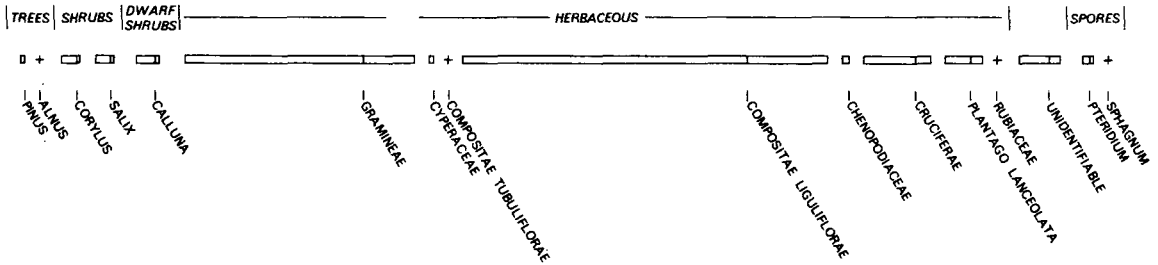
ILLUS 3 Castle Street, Montrose: plan and sections of area 4



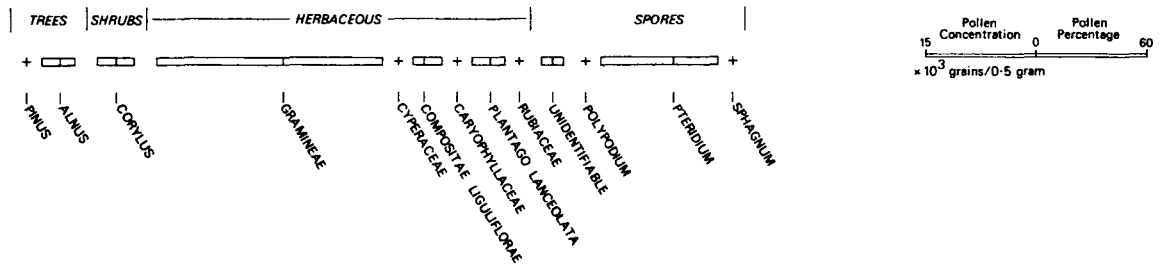
ILLUS 4 Castle Street, Montrose: plan and sections of area 3

contemporary with the earliest of the midden layers which stretched back beyond the rear edge of the site. The midden deposits lay on sterile wind-blown sand that overlay a ploughsoil of unknown date (features 55 & 56 on illus 3), the top of which exhibited ploughmarks (illus 4) but pollen sampling (illus 5) produced evidence only of meadowland vegetation. A sherd of undiagnostic prehistoric pottery from near its base, as well as the depth and richness of the soil, suggests that its formation may have been promoted by regular ploughing and manuring over a prolonged period. Evidence for well-turned sods at the top of the ploughsoil indicates probable use of a mould-board plough. Stratigraphically the soil could not have been covered by wind-blown sand any later than the mid-13th century but the absence of any medieval artefacts from

32 Castle St. Montrose:
Area 4. Buried soil, Dark brown



32 Castle St. Montrose:
Area 4. Buried soil, Light brown

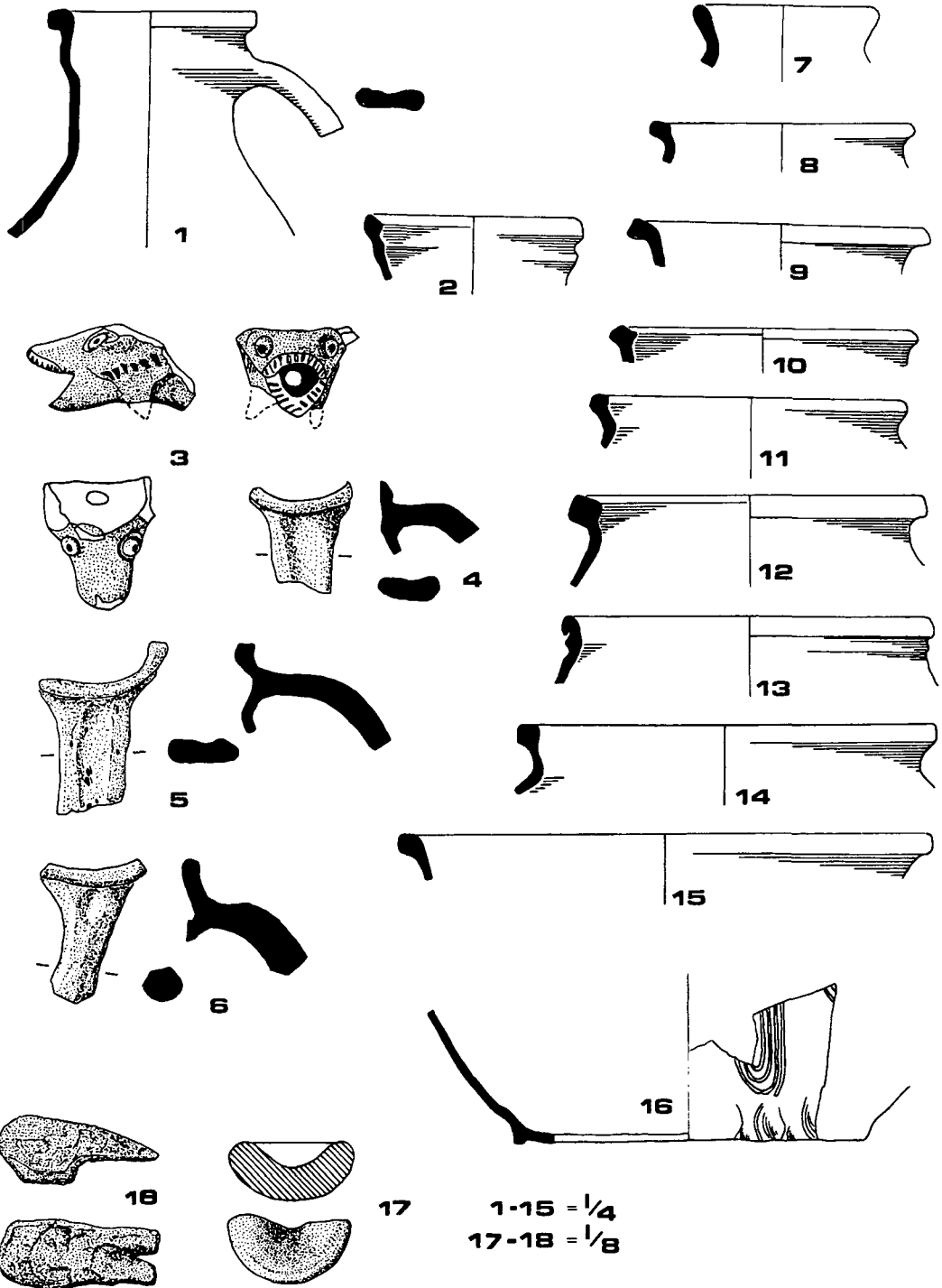


ILLUS 5 Castle Street, Montrose: pollen diagrams

the top of the soil suggests that it was covered before the 12th-century urbanization of the adjacent area to the north.

The midden layers were dated by the pottery they contained; over 700 sherds were recovered, representing most of the types to be expected from an east coast Scottish burgh. Gritty wares from a Scottish rather than English source were most plentiful in the form of glazed and unglazed domestic vessels such as cooking-pots, bowls and jugs. Perth and Aberdeen wares were represented in small numbers and the bulk of the unidentified pottery is likely to be of local origin. With regard to the local pottery, however, lack of excavation in towns between Perth and Aberdeen means that sources of local wares are as yet unidentified. Scarborough ware was the most abundant of the English pottery and included a fine zoomorphic jug spout of northern type (illus 6: 3). Several sherds of East Anglian 'grey ware' were identified and included a fragment of a type of jug previously found only in Norfolk. Continental wares from northern France (Rouen in particular) as well as from Langerwehe and Ardenburg demonstrate the active role played by Montrose from the 13th to 15th centuries in trading around the North Sea. That this activity was a continuation of a 12th-century pattern awaits confirmation from excavation in an earlier part of the town.

Metal finds were rare; only a few iron nails and an iron claw-headed hammer (illus 6: 18) in poor condition were found in medieval contexts. Stone, too, was rare but a broken perforated whetstone was recovered from one of the early floor levels. Animal bone was very poorly preserved and it was decided not to invest resources in recovering what would be an unrepresentative and statistically worthless collection of bone. Molluscan remains were plentiful;



ILLUS 6 Castle Street, Montrose: finds

oyster and cockle being common in the mid-13th/early 14th-century levels, and mussel and periwinkle in the later 14th/15th-century deposits. As a whole, the molluscan remains represent an exploitation of both the rocky-shore habitat to the south of the town and the shallow inshore and lagoon habitats to the east and west of the town respectively. There was no evidence as to the use of the site in the medieval period, an almost inevitable consequence of such a small-scale excavation.

DISCUSSION

Any assessment of the evidence from 32 Castle Street must be based on the nature of the excavation. From the outset it was nothing more than a trial excavation similar to those at St Ann's Lane in Perth in 1975 (Thoms 1982) and Forfar in 1979 (Spearman 1982). The single aim was to recover evidence of the character of the surviving archaeological deposits in an area of the town that might reveal its early development. The exercise proved that occupation of the northern end of the Castle Street commenced sometime in the 13th century. It is believed that Montrose received its royal charter from David I in the 12th century (Barrow 1960, 92–5) and the development of Castle Street may well be evidence of burghal expansion, a phenomenon repeated in other Scottish burghs at this time. Until the mid-13th century the area may have been regarded as waste ground, covered with wind-blown sand and of little practical use.

Although unspectacular, the finds have provided an indication of the likely preservation quality of objects found in both sand- and clay-based deposits within the town. The results of the excavation will form part of any future strategy for investigating the medieval burgh. Of particular importance is the presence in the Castle Street area of a buried ploughsoil, potentially of very early origin. A similar ploughsoil, also buried beneath wind-blown sand, has been recorded at Corbie, some 8 km south of Montrose (Pollock 1987, 389–93). There the top of the ploughsoil had been last disturbed by a mould-board plough and a medieval date for the final phase of cultivation was suggested. There is probably good reason to suppose that the Corbie and Castle Street ploughsoils went out of use at the same time: it cannot be often that major areas of landscape are covered by sand deposits up to 1 m thick. Future excavators in Montrose should be aware of its possible presence and the chances of locating well-preserved prehistoric or early medieval landscapes.

No further excavation has been carried out since 1983 but two watching briefs have been undertaken. On the west side of the High Street (*Discovery Excav Scot* 1986, 44) the presence of some 1700 sq m of midden deposits of 13th to 14th century date, 1 m deep and reflecting the pattern of deposition at 32 Castle Street, was noted before building development. Strict conditions for site-evaluation meant that only a very small, shallow excavation was undertaken; in addition, deposits revealed in the trenches for service-pipes and foundations were recorded. A second watching brief, on the east side of the High Street (*Discovery Excav Scot* 1989, 62), recorded no archaeological deposits.

The two main medieval thoroughfares of Montrose, High Street and Castle Street, lie along the crest of a narrow ridge now flattened by the dumping of medieval midden deposits on the west and east slopes. These contain a rich source of material which will illuminate not only the material culture of the medieval town but will also provide details of burgh morphology. The Castle Street excavation illustrated that surviving medieval deposits can exist on sites developed in the 18th and 19th centuries, and that information can be gleaned from street frontages as well as back-land middens.

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