

5. DISCUSSION

The evaluation, though covering only a very small part of the ground between St Giles' Church and the Cowgate, has provided important evidence for the main burial ground of central Edinburgh in the late medieval period and of the use of this area from the early burghal period to the setting up of the Meal Market.

5.1 The early burgh and St Giles' Chapter

The evaluation demonstrated that this part of Edinburgh was relatively undeveloped in the medieval period, with no significant medieval structural remains being identified. The area apparently formed a backland to St Giles' Church, with buildings such as manses, offices and stables associated with the clergy. Much of this land was probably open, steeply sloping ground.

The earliest (Phase 1) archaeological deposits, visible in test pits and through auger surveys, contained sherds of Scottish White Gritty Ware and imported pottery, including German Stoneware (Appendix 3). These late medieval deposits appeared relatively homogeneous and were clearly heavily waterlogged; they are likely to have derived from waste deposition from properties on the High Street, behind St Giles' and on the lanes running downhill towards the Cowgate. Rainwater from the High Street would have run off the surfaces of the High Street and the adjacent lanes towards the Cowgate, and probably collected there, carrying sediments downhill. At a nearby site on the Cowgate less than 100m to the south-east of the Parliament House site (Dalland 2017: 9) the earliest midden deposits contained evidence for both a well-drained environment and wet, highly reducing conditions. Waterlogged plant remains from these deposits suggested the presence of nitrogen-rich ground, interpreted by Dalland as possibly an area adjacent to a stream where cattle were present.

The cobble surfaces that overlay the earliest deposits at Parliament House may represent a lane or vennel running parallel to the Cowgate, or possibly a courtyard surface associated with the various buildings known to have been utilised by the ecclesiastical community, such as the houses of St Giles' Chapter, a stable, offices and a school (*Edin*

Chrs no. 57; *St Giles Reg* no. 111). The resurfacing of this floor or yard indicates a prolonged period of use. Artefacts recovered from between the cobble surfaces, including a seal matrix (Illus 30) (Appendix 4), indicate its late medieval date.

The evaluation identified no evidence of the remains of any of the various phases of the burgh wall. It is possible that the downward-sloping deposits with apparent tip lines that lay over the Phase 1 cobble surface were part of the fill of an associated ditch. At the nearby site of 144–166 Cowgate (Dalland 2017: 10) deposits excavated to the north of the putative King's Wall appeared as widespread layers, suggesting gradual deposition, while to the south of the wall a rapid build-up of dumped material was apparent. The latter has been interpreted by Dalland as possibly a ditch, up to 4m wide, on the south side of the wall. At East Market Street a recently excavated massive ditch, 5m deep and up to 13m wide, has been interpreted as evidence for an early (late 12th- or early 13th-century) defensive boundary between Edinburgh and Canongate, recut in the 14th century (Lowther 2018: 2, 10–11). However, at Parliament House, such a defensive feature would probably have truncated the earlier cobble surfaces; it is therefore more likely that these deposits represented dumped midden material in urban backlands. The presence of apparent tip lines suggests that the process was relatively rapid, perhaps intentional deposition to build up the ground level in advance of the use of the area as a burial ground.

Radiocarbon samples derived from the deposits overlying the cobble surfaces provided a broad range of calibrated dates, from the early 11th century to the early 17th century, indicative of the presence of residual material. It is possible that the deposits overlying the surfaces were mixed due to processes of intentional deposition, midden accumulation from the High Street above, hillwash action and disturbance caused by the burial ground.

Given the low-lying location of the Cowgate, the potential of the lower slopes beneath the High Street for survival of organic remains is clear – waterlogged fragments of leather and textile were recovered from the deposits and surfaces underlying the burial ground. The presence of leather at Parliament House may evidence the activity of cordiners at a relatively early date, though the likely 16th-century

date of much of this material suggests that it derived from disturbance of the burial ground (Appendix 9). The wood and copper alloy seal matrix (SF244) recovered from the road or yard surface provides evidence for late medieval trading activity in the area, whether on the High Street above, or perhaps within the ecclesiastical precincts, a public open space where trading could take place. The simple design of the seal suggests that relatively humble material was being traded.

Waterlogged plant remains provided further evidence for the economy of the area. In particular, the recovery of weld and madder (Appendix 12) as well as dyed wool (Appendix 8) may indicate the dyeing of textiles in close proximity to the site. To this day there is a 'Dyers Close' near the site, on the opposite side of the Cowgate. There was also a Dyesters' Close off the Cowgate, which was removed during the construction of the George IV Bridge (Boog Watson 1923: 137).

5.2 The graveyard

The burial ground revealed in the Southern Courtyard of Parliament House clearly represented the southward expansion of the cemetery of St Giles' Church. Artefactual evidence from the graveyard soils generally dated from the late medieval to early post-medieval periods, according with the documented date of the extension (late 15th to mid-to-late 16th century). This material included a James II–III copper 'Crux Pellit' coin (SF140) from the second half of the 15th century (Illus 29). A lead token (SF114) was similar in form to those in use in England in the late 16th and 17th century, while two buckles (SF345 and SF347) were of late medieval or early post-medieval date (Appendix 4). A ceramic roof tile fragment from the burial soil was likely to have been manufactured between the 12th and 15th century (Appendix 5). The textiles recovered were typical of fabrics from urban sites in England and Scotland of the 14th to 17th centuries (Appendix 8). Radiocarbon dating of the skeletal remains (which individually appeared to range from the 15th century onwards) also broadly corresponded with the documented use of the burial ground extension from the charter of 1477–8 that allowed for burial of Edinburgh's population on Provost Forbes' land (*Edin Chrs* no. 50) until the cessation of burials at

St Giles' around 1566 (Richardson 1910: 213–14) following the gifting by Queen Mary of Greyfriars, the yard of the Franciscan friary, as a burial ground in 1562 (RSS V, no. 3334; *Edin Recs* III: 132, 145–8; Lynch 1981: 34). However, Bayesian analysis of the radiocarbon dates indicates that burial is likely to have commenced earlier in the 15th century, prior to the documented expansion onto Forbes' land; it is possible that the donation formalised the extension of burial activity south of the church that had already commenced.

A depth of up to six inhumations was found on the same spot, indicating a great intensity of use but not unusual for an urban medieval cemetery. Brown & Roberts (2000: 76) note that a series of five intercutting burials were present in the medieval St Mary's cemetery in Dundee. At Whithorn a similarly intensely utilised and complex cemetery could be divided into 12 stages and five separate phases based on changes in orientation and relative stratigraphy (Hill 1997: 253). However, no such clear changes in orientation were apparent at Parliament House.

The scale of the extended burial ground was evidenced by the presence of inhumations throughout the evaluation area and also to the west of the Solicitors' Building where the separate watching brief of late 2007 and early 2008 was undertaken (Engl 2008). In the 18th century the construction of William Forbes' and James Hunter's bank to the north also led to the discovery of human remains (Richardson 1910: 220).

It is likely that the original Parliament House was erected over the site of three ministers' houses that stood in the churchyard, demolished to make way for it (Maitland 1753: 185; Cullen 1992: 2). Part of one of the ministers' houses may survive in the north wall of the Laigh Hall (Cullen 1992: 39). It is possible that this surviving wall lies roughly on the east/west-aligned boundary between the original churchyard and the gardens gifted by Provost Forbes for its extension. In any case, the greatest extent of the St Giles' churchyard has been estimated at almost 0.5ha (Collard et al 2006: 5). The evaluation (37.9m²) therefore covered approximately 0.76% of the entire churchyard and furthermore the full depth of the burial ground deposits could not be excavated during the evaluation. The true number of articulated skeletons present in the evaluation

area was therefore probably somewhat larger than the 95 recovered. The relatively small sample size of the excavated inhumations (in comparison with the total area of the extended burial ground) means that little can be confidently inferred regarding the demography of the population. For example, the greater proportion of male to female adults (1.7:1) in the assemblage is possibly due to bias in a small sample.

Analysis of the human skeletal remains (Appendix 1) identified an apparent slight tendency for adult males to outlive adult females, a phenomenon also noted at cemetery sites in Dundee and St Helen-on-the-Walls. The Parliament House excavation also produced a relatively large proportion of sub-adults compared with other Scottish and north English medieval cemeteries (Goeder 2004: 392). The adult female population was, in general, of shorter stature than females from contemporary sites (adult males were not especially short), and in general the population was comparable in stature with the skeletons recovered from within St Giles' itself.

Isotopic analysis was undertaken of skeletons' teeth (Appendix 2) from both the Parliament House and St Giles' site. Skeleton 71 of the Parliament House assemblage, an adult male, exhibited an elevated $^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$ ratio, reflecting a possible childhood in Perthshire or Aberdeenshire. Other than this individual, the strontium and oxygen isotopes in Parliament House skeletons reflected the local environment. The St Giles' skeletons, conversely, although having strontium isotope ratios normal for a local population, had elevated strontium isotope concentrations more consistent with the Outer Hebrides than local populations, and oxygen isotopes consistent with drinking water from warmer climates. This may reflect the way in which drinking water was obtained by this likely relatively high-status group.

Two adults, Skeletons 42 and 54, possessed deformities possibly attributable to tuberculosis, while possible cribra orbitalia was present in Skeletons 4 (a juvenile) and 57 (an adult male). However, the range of traumas and diseases present was not unusual for an assemblage of this date, and the general health and dental hygiene of the Parliament House population was generally better than that of populations from comparable cemeteries.

5.2.1 Burial practice

The dominant burial practice evident was for bodies to be laid flat in a supine position, with arms slightly flexed and hands over the upper torso or pelvis. This is not an unusual position, and was common, for example, at the late medieval cemetery at Whithorn (Cardy 1997: 551). Several had the arms laid straight at the side of the body while two adult women (Skeletons 16 and 32) had fully crossed arms over the torso. It is difficult to discern significance in such burial patterns in medieval cemeteries. The three positions described above are the most common in cemeteries across medieval England (Daniell 1997: 118).

There was no clearly significant spatial patterning of the skeletal remains according to the sex and age of the individuals, although there were signs of different degrees of disturbance. In Trench 2, 19 of the 46 skeletons were adults that could be associated with a probable sex. In Trench 1, only 11 of 49 skeletons recovered were adults of an identifiable sex. This suggests that the bodies in Trench 2 were in a better general state of preservation. The proportion of sub-adults identified in each trench did not vary greatly between Trench 1 and 2 (18 of 46 and 22 of 49, respectively).

All the identifiable female adults were located in either Box 1B or Box 2E, though the lack of such bodies in the intervening Box 1C suggests that this was not a significant spatial pattern. Adult males and infants were present throughout the evaluation area.

A relatively small number of nails were recovered from burial contexts, dispersed across these deposits (Appendix 4). It is possible that wooden pins that have not survived might have been used in lieu of iron nails (Daniell 1997: 162). Two burials had more concrete signs of the presence of coffins. Skeleton 5, an infant, was associated with a metal plate (SF30), possibly part of a corner bracket for a coffin, while the fill beside Skeleton 60, a mature adult female, contained an iron nail shank with mineralised wood. Both of these skeletons were located in Trench Box 1B near the base of the burial ground. Skeleton 60 was dated by radiocarbon techniques to the 15th century (calibrated date) and is therefore likely to have been a relatively early burial.

The paucity of artefactual evidence for coffins and the generally constricted positions of the skeletons,

with arms tight against the body, suggested that bodies were often interred in shrouds or winding cloths, or in the case of men, hair shirts woven from coarse yarn (Schofield & Vince 2003: 187). There was relatively little evidence for shroud pins, possibly due to poor preservation. Two pin shanks were recovered from the burial soils in Boxes 1B and 1C, and fine iron wire, possibly elements of shroud pins, were found with four sub-adults – Skeletons 26, 38, 83 and 85. A wire eyelet (SF400) was also found in the fill associated with Skeleton 30, a mature adult, though this body appeared to have been dumped. Evidence for burial in shrouds was therefore more commonly associated with burials of the young rather than full adults. Bain noted that the lack of shroud pins at the Holyrood cemetery might be due to the closing of shrouds with stitching (Bain 1998: 1054).

The lack of evidence for coffins contrasted with burials inside St Giles' (Collard et al 2006: 20), where the proportion of high-status burials was probably greater. Oak coffins were also observed to the south of St Giles' during construction of court buildings in 1844–5 (Grant 1882: 245). A small proportion of coffin burial was also identified at the Holyrood cemetery, which was perhaps a closer analogue to the present site, as it was the parish cemetery of the burgh of Canongate, rather than a place of elite burial (Bain 1998: 1054).

At Parliament House, the bodies lay with heads to the west and feet to the east, indicative of normal medieval Christian practice. Two individuals (Skeletons 28 and 30) lay on an opposing alignment. It was normal for this alignment of the body to be used in the burial of priests, so that on the Day of Judgement they would arise to face their congregation (Gooder 2004: 381; John Lawson, pers comm). Near Edinburgh, several such burials were identified at Newbattle Abbey (Gooder 2004: 381). The Parliament House inhumations with this alignment were recorded, however, within a mass grave, and it is likely that their unusual burial was due to the hasty disposal of these bodies; Skeleton 28 was also prone.

Skeleton 59, an adult, may have been a pilgrim. The fill associated with this burial contained a scallop, symbolic of the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela (Appendix 11). While unusual, this would not be unique within a Scottish late medieval context. Excavations at the Cluniac priory church on the Isle of

May recorded an intentionally deposited scallop shell placed in the mouth of an adult male inhumation, perhaps a returned pilgrim (James & Yeoman 2008: 58, illus 5.23 and 5.24). Within St Giles' two burials were associated with the remains of a pilgrim's wood and iron baton (Collard et al 2006: 19). Burials in pilgrimage clothes have been identified at Worcester Cathedral, with both scallop shells and pilgrim's staffs (Daniell 1997: 167).

The presence of an intermixed, apparently dumped, group of skeletons within a mass grave may suggest the rapid disposal of bodies of socially abnormal individuals, perhaps criminals or those infected with contagious disease, such as plague. All six individuals were identified as adults, but the small size of this group precludes further meaningful comparison with the rest of the inhumations. Skeleton 28, which lay prone, had a hand located under a shoulder and flexing of the arms, reminiscent of a female skeleton recorded at the cemetery of Perth Blackfriars (Bowler et al 1995: 944), which was interpreted as a possible live inhumation, with the individual struggling against burial. An alternative explanation for a similar burial at the Carmelite Friary in Linlithgow was that distortion of the body had been caused by muscular contractions due to injuries caused by fire (Cross & Bruce 1989: 141), though the skeletal remains from the Parliament House site showed no evidence for charring, and Skeleton 28 showed no signs of particular contortion in the hands or lower limbs, suggesting that this is not an appropriate explanation for the awkward burial of this individual. Edinburgh during the late medieval and early post-medieval period suffered from numerous visitations of the plague. In the period of use of the St Giles' churchyard extension, plague was present in Edinburgh at least twice: firstly a prolonged period from 1498 to 1514 and then a shorter outbreak in 1530 (MacLennan 2001: 256–7).

Three pairs of apparently linked inhumations, in each case an adult in close proximity to a child, suggest burial in family groups. Although no skeletal traits were found to confirm the relationships of these individuals, it would be unsurprising if related individuals were buried together. Study of wills in medieval England and Wales indicates that burial with members of the nuclear family (husband, wife, child, brother or sister) was a common request (Daniell 1997: 101). It is possible

that these individuals died at the same time, due to the same cause, perhaps disease, though the lack of clear grave cuts means that it was not possible to securely ascertain whether the paired individuals had been buried at the same time or were buried in the same plot at separate times. Another, probable family, burial was evident at the nearby 14th-/15th-century cemetery site at Holyrood Abbey (Bain 1998: 1075). The three Parliament House pairs may also represent the organisation of the burial ground into discrete plots. Clusters of intercutting graves have been interpreted in this way at the 12th- to 14th-century cemetery of St Thomas' Kirk, Hall of Rendall, Orkney (Toolis 2008: 260). Inside Glasgow Cathedral, there were repeated burials in the same locations, described as 'burial shafts' during the late medieval period. These may have related to family or guild plots (Driscoll 1993: 71).

5.3 The Meal Market and Parliament House

The evaluation identified patches of a cobble surface directly overlying the burial ground,

probably associated with the Meal Market of the 17th to 19th centuries. The location of the Meal Market was moved from the High Street to the lower churchyard of St Giles' at the beginning of the 17th century (Wood & Hannay 1927: 276). No structural remains that could be associated with any of the incarnations of the Meal Market were present within the evaluated area (with the exception of a single post hole), and it is likely that the cobbles represented floors or yard surfaces. It is possible that the setting out of the Meal Market in the early 17th century or of the rebuilt structures following fires in 1676 and 1700 involved terracing of the ground that naturally rose steeply from the Cowgate, thereby truncating the graveyard and removing upper cemetery deposits. There was no evidence for the utilisation of the area between the ending of burial and the erection of the Meal Market, a time when shoemakers are said to have plied their trade in the area (Maitland 1753: 185). Such evidence might also have been lost due to levelling or terracing activity.