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## 7 DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

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The interventions around the three known sites have been discussed in the preceding section. This section addresses the general archaeological landscape of medieval and later Musselburgh, as reflected by the results of the watching brief, and contrasts these results with those from similar exercises in other Scottish burghs.

### 7.1 *The archaeology of Musselburgh*

#### 7.1.1 Distribution of deposits

In situ archaeological deposits appear to survive well in the core of the historic burgh, and in the vicinity of the *vicus*. Additionally, deposits probably related to the smaller satellite settlements such as Newbigging and the burgage plots on Market Street appear to survive, although dating evidence was not recovered. Culverts and other early drainage structures were generally well preserved, and in places old property boundaries may survive.

#### 7.1.2 Medieval Musselburgh

The monitoring exercise provided a partial transect through the core of medieval Musselburgh. The fill of a cut feature to the east of the mercat cross in this area (*illus 5*: T010/027) contained early medieval pottery, and a layer of midden material to the east of this contained both late medieval pottery and post-medieval roof tile. Combined with the cartographic evidence discussed above, there is as much evidence for the location of the burgh nucleus being along the current course of the High Street, as there is for a location in the vicinity of the Old Bridge. However, the occurrence of cut features in the areas monitored along the High Street suggests that the precise development of this area remains to be fully understood. It is difficult to establish what the original focus for settlement would have been – the Old Bridge origin was suggested partly because of the potential for economic exploitation of the river crossing (*Dennison & Coleman 1996*, 18) – but the laying-out of formal burgage plots was probably a reorganisation of existing settlement in an area with a long tradition of habitation. On its current alignment, the eastern end of the High Street is far more suited for the positioning of burgage plots than the west, as in this direction the available land behind the northern street frontage becomes progressively shortened by the course of the Esk.

Musselburgh was quite clearly being bypassed to the south by the main road running from the Old Bridge by the 17th century. The bypassing may be original to the layout of the burgh, but could also be related to the post-medieval economic decline of the burgh, when it was no longer worthwhile for travellers on the road to or from Edinburgh to pass through the town.

#### 7.1.3 Fisherrow

The date of settlement in Fisherrow has up until now been unclear. It has been suggested that the harbour at Fisherrow began to replace a harbourage on the Esk in the medieval period, although historical sources only begin to refer to it by name in the 16th century. To date archaeological discoveries have indicated only post-medieval activity in this area (*ibid*, 70). The evidence gathered by the monitoring in Fisherrow – where archaeological sampling was far more comprehensive than in Musselburgh – largely confirms the post-medieval date of significant settlement west of the Esk. Activity along the core North High Street dates only to the 16th century or later, while the middens located on Bridge Street and Eskside West are of 17th- or 18th-century date. The occupation deposits located on Market Street – which correspond to the location of burgage plots on Adair's map of 1682 – may be of similar post-medieval date. It is possible that these plots were only laid out west of the Esk after development along the High Street in Musselburgh proper had run up against the river bank. The expansion of organised settlement west of the Esk probably reflects the growing importance of the Fisherrow harbour to the townsfolk in this period. The occurrence of imported pottery in this area probably reflects a degree of international traffic into Fisherrow harbour, despite the dominance of nearby Leith.

### 7.2 *Pipeline transects in historic burghs*

The archaeological deposits located within the core of Musselburgh are noticeably different in character from those found on similar monitoring exercises in Crail, North Berwick and Perth (*Lowe 2001, Dingwall forthcoming, Glendinning 2002*) particularly in the absence of stratified deposits. The occupation deposits located within Musselburgh and Fisherrow generally consisted of a single occupation horizon of mixed date, with occasional more secure pockets of material, such as shell midden filling pits.

In contrast, the monitoring of water mains renewal in North Berwick located successive medieval and post-medieval surfaces, interspersed with deep layers of wind-blown sand, and rarely encountered underlying natural deposits. In Crail, monitoring of the installation of a new sewage network again located in places successive medieval and later road surfaces.

### 7.2.1 Reasons for variation – population and development

There are several probable factors lying behind the differences between the results of the three different monitoring exercises. The first, as has been stressed before, is methodological. It is entirely possible that the most well-preserved and well-stratified medieval deposits within Musselburgh are located in that part of the High Street west of the mercat cross, where no open-cut trenching was monitored. However, the monitoring exercise was comprehensive throughout Fisherrow, where a deposit sequence from at least as early as the 16th century could reasonably have been expected, yet present was the same kind of single-horizon deposits as those encountered on the other bank of the Esk.

Variation could also be attributed to the contrasting histories of the three burghs. The most obvious difference between Musselburgh, Crail and North Berwick is that of scale. Crail and, to a lesser extent, North Berwick were both important trading and economic centres in the medieval period, whilst the economy of Musselburgh seems to have suffered through the burgh's proximity to Edinburgh. However, over time this situation seems to have reversed. The economic fortunes of the three burghs diverged markedly following the medieval period, with Musselburgh generally gaining prosperity and becoming industrialised, while Crail and North Berwick were reduced to relatively minor backwaters. In the 20th century Musselburgh has far outstripped Crail and North Berwick in population. The 2001 census gives the adult population in Musselburgh as 17,476, as opposed to 4,938 in North Berwick and 1,383 in Crail. The relative sizes in the three populations can obviously have correlations to the degree of modern disturbance of archaeological remains, particularly as the historic cores of these burghs remain their centres of social and economic activity. In Musselburgh, this disturbance not only includes the construction of the modern shopping buildings at the west end of the High Street, but also extends to infrastructure development, such as the laying of services and improvements of the roadway. Modern development in Musselburgh may have truncated or obliterated archaeological horizons

around more significant developments. However, Perth is obviously a far larger town than Musselburgh, and archaeological preservation within Perth town centre is excellent.

The data from Musselburgh indicate that at either end of the High Street the archaeological deposits were relatively intact and had been sealed by redeposited beach gravels. Along North High Street, where modern development has generally been less intense, the archaeological horizon appeared in places to have been truncated by the modern road surface, but again the finds assemblage indicates that the surviving horizon is representative of the whole period between the 16th and 19th centuries.

### 7.2.2 Reasons for variation – geography

It therefore seems likely that while the methodology of the watching brief and modern development have had an impact on the survival of archaeological deposits in Musselburgh, additional factors are involved in generating the single mixed-date horizon that characterises the data from the watching brief. The most striking difference with the results from North Berwick is the lack of deep wind-blown sand. It has been suggested that inundation by wind-blown sand was a seasonal problem in North Berwick, and that many of the deposits seen beneath the roads represent attempts to reconsolidate the surface and create metalled surfaces out of midden material ([Dingwall forthcoming](#)). Conditions in Perth, where deep stratified midden deposits also survive beneath the road surface, could also be contrasted with Musselburgh – in this case anaerobic preservation appears to have prevented the breakdown and reworking of archaeological deposits ([Glendinning 2002, 96](#)).

The geographic situation of Musselburgh is quite different from that of Perth and North Berwick. It is further from the coast than North Berwick, and the seaward land is generally consolidated as links, rather than open beach as at North Berwick. This may be why sedimentation in the roadways seems to have been far less active, while unlike in Perth, the waterlogging of archaeological deposits is probably far more periodic in Musselburgh. The combination of soil conditions and a lack of active natural sedimentation in Musselburgh and the absence of built road surfaces probably allowed for frequent disturbance and mixing of material deposited in the streets, forming the homogenous sediments observed during the monitoring. Processes such as street cleaning or road resurfacing may also have contributed to the truncation of the resulting mixed-date archaeological horizon, possibly accounting for its shallow depth in most central areas of the burgh.