
7 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE EXCAVATIONS

The approximate length of the Medieval burghage plots at Calton Road and Holyrood Road sites would have been roughly 160m and 120m respectively. At both sites archaeological survival is limited to the extremities of the backlands, the final 25m or so, well removed from the commercial and domestic focus of the Canongate frontage. The Holyrood Road excavation, despite suffering considerable truncation, provided the greater range of features, probably by virtue of its specific location, immediately adjacent to the 'back dyke', and its greater size.

Much of the artefactual data was recovered from general soil layers, especially at the Calton Road site. Although this evidence might otherwise be compromised by the question of its origin – whether natural formation, the dumping of soils or the continual building and collapse/erosion of turf-built structures (see Clark 1997, 142; Carter 2001, 87–92) – there seems no reason to suggest that any soil imports, if they occurred, were from outwith the direct locality or that artefact inclusion occurred after any importation.

Key amongst the discoveries was the sequence of burgh boundary features, including an early ditch. As in England, prior to the 13th century Scottish Medieval town defences generally consisted of a ditch and bank, occasionally topped by a palisade (Barley 1975, 60), with gateways for the control of people and goods into the burgh. Indeed, some towns never progressed beyond earthwork boundaries, as at Dunfermline, Old Aberdeen and Inverness (Brann et al 1995, 928). Historical references, morphology and/or the large size of some of these features – for example, the 14th-century ditch found at South Methven Street, Perth – clearly indicate a military rationale (Spearman 1987a, 58). The putative 12th-century ditch found at Mill Street, Perth (Sermon & Cox 1996, 739) as well as burgh ditches recently investigated elsewhere in Scotland, at Inverness (Ellis 2002) and at Annan (Toolis & Cavanagh 2002) illustrate the variation in size, date and form of these features. The early ditch identified at the Holyrood Road site was on a different alignment from a north-east/south-west-aligned ditch feature of similar scale identified, to the east, at the Parliament excavation (HAPT 2008, 18–19). The feature at the Parliament site has been interpreted by Stronach as being associated with the Holyrood Abbey precinct, enclosing an area of cultivation. This view is supported by a paucity of related features and artefactual remains, in contrast to the Holyrood Road ditch. Stronach postulates that the Parliament ditch returned northwards towards the Canongate somewhere in the vicinity of Reid's Close, and therefore it would not be linked to the ditch identified at the Holyrood

Road site (HAPT 2008, 52–53). The identified sequence of boundaries at Holyrood Road saw the Canongate ditch superseded by a 13th/14th-century palisade and then in turn by an early 16th-century wall. Most Scottish burghs were never enclosed by a purpose-built defensive wall, instead relying on the typical later Medieval 'back dyke' (Hall et al 1998, 818) to define and control economic and legal access to a burgh as at Culross, Linlithgow, St Andrews, Glasgow and Elgin (Mair 1988, 31). The wall's remains point to such a role, with its construction reflecting the increased importance of the Canongate with the presence of the royal palace at Holyrood. Given that late 17th-century cultivation slots overlay this wall, the remains of further burgh walls (e.g. the wall shown on Gordon's 1647 map) may lie to the south below the Holyrood Road pavement, as indeed may further, earlier phases of Medieval boundaries.

Pre-14th-century pottery types were found to be lacking from the Calton Road site, as were the more complex Medieval domestic features found during the Holyrood Road excavation. This could indicate that the burgh, as always assumed, originated adjacent to the Abbey with Medieval activity, perhaps of lesser intensity, occurring later at the Calton Road site than at Holyrood Road as settlement gradually expanded westwards towards Edinburgh. Domestic features and artefacts encountered at both sites are typical of those found on similar Medieval/Post-Medieval sites elsewhere in Scotland. The key linkage between Medieval urban and agricultural life (Moloney & Coleman 1997, 779) is exemplified by the discovery of a corn-drying kiln.

The sparse evidence for Medieval backland division at Holyrood Road is perplexing. Either truncation has destroyed these features and/or they were ephemeral in character, perhaps simple wattle fences, with no trace surviving. Alternatively, some variation in burgh planning, derived from the higher social status of the burghage plot owner or the wider usage of the backland, dictated a larger size. Coleman (2004, 288) cites the bias in land allocation (as seen in burghage plot width) in favour of the canons of Glasgow Cathedral in Glasgow and the wide industrial zones in Perth and Rattray, Aberdeenshire. In this regard the tentative proposal by Heald and Campbell (6.6 above) of possible specialist bloomworking, perhaps requiring additional space in the locality, may be relevant. The Parliament excavation has demonstrated that plot divisions in the adjacent area were marked by ditches and were relatively wide, at a minimum of *c* 13m, though the possibility of other boundary features such as hedgelines has been put forward (HAPT 2008, 20–

21). The Parliament excavation also demonstrated a relatively low level of activity in the Medieval backlands in this area, though with some suggestion of variation in use between plots, for processes such as tanning. Stronach suggests that the lack of development of these backlands may be a sign of high-status occupancy (HAPT 2008, 54–55).

Conversely, at Calton Road, from Phase 2 to the Post-Medieval phases, there is an approximate recurrence of a north–south subdivision through the central part of the trench. The 6m to 7m distance between the Phase 2 (15th/16th-century) path [240] and small ditch [233] perhaps indicate a typical width for the Canongate burgage plots at this time.

This corresponds well with the plot widths generally found elsewhere in Scottish towns (see Coleman 2004, 284–288).

The presence of 17th-century ceramic imports supports cartographic and historical sources as to the prosperous nature of early to mid 17th-century Canongate. However, by the latter part of the century, the rich garden soils of once elegant formal gardens were turned over to more mundane crop cultivation, as seen at the Holyrood Road site, with the Canongate now in social decline. This social decline, some 300 years later, has been firmly arrested by the location of the new Scottish Parliament.