

3 Historical Background

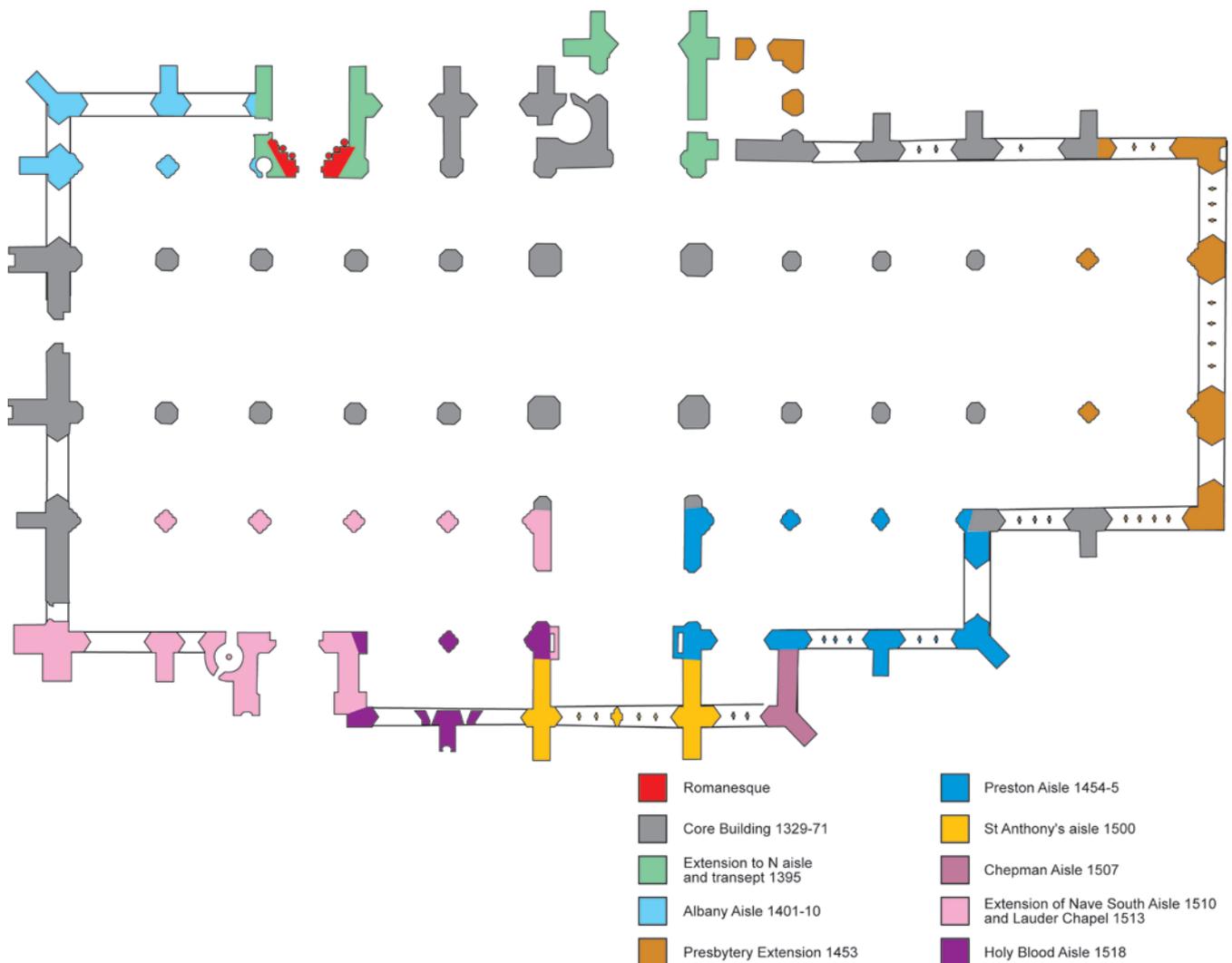
(derived from Gifford *et al.* 1984, 102–18; Addyman & Kay 2001, 8; Brown 2001, 11–15, figs 6–18)

3.1 The church

It is generally accepted that St Giles' was the parish church of the royal burgh of Edinburgh from the 12th century, that it was founded during the reign of Alexander I (1107–24) or David I (1124–53) and that it was newly built on its site. No trace now remains of the form of the Romanesque church which was probably begun soon after the founding of the burgh around 1130, and certainly before 1178, the earliest documentary reference. It has been suggested that this early church occupied the area now covered by the western part of the current building, with a simple aisleless nave terminating in an apsidal east end on the site of the

later crossing, or alternatively it was a two-cell structure with an apsidal east end to the chancel extending further to the east.

The church was burned during the English attack on Edinburgh in 1385 and the contract for the addition of new chapels in 1387, the earliest documentary source for building work at the church, reveals that the nave had then, as now, five bays and was aisled; it stood to the west of a central tower with north and south transepts which did not project beyond the aisles of the nave or the Choir. The Choir itself is likely to have been completed by 1419, when the Town Council made a first, unsuccessful, application for the church to be granted collegiate status. In 1467 a second



Illus 4 Schematic phased plan of the development of the medieval church (after Addyman & Kay 2001)

such petition was successful, and it is known that by then the Choir had been remodelled. Heraldic evidence suggests that this took place from c 1453. It was formerly believed that the remodeling at this time took the form of the addition of a complete extra (fifth) bay at the east end, as well as of a clerestory over the central aisle, but the excavation in 1981 revealed the former not to be the case (see below).

At various times over the late 14th, 15th and early 16th centuries, chapels and aisles were added around the basic form core on both north and south sides (the ‘complete’ medieval church is shown in [illus 4](#) as a phased plan of development). After the Reformation, the church was stripped of its internal screens and furnishings, and may have become a single open space, with the exception of the westernmost three bays of the nave, which provided accommodation for the Town Council, supplementary to the Tolbooth. The church was subsequently sub-divided in different forms over the 16th and 17th centuries, before all partitions were finally swept away in 1879. The area of the Choir itself was relatively unaffected by the erection and removal of various partitions within the church in the 16th and 17th centuries, but it did not escape some effects of the two 19th-century ‘restoration’ campaigns, by William Burn in 1829–33 and by Hay and Henderson from 1871 to 1883.

The church now in existence is of late Gothic form; the core is a crossing with a bell tower above, an aisled nave of five bays, transepts of one bay and a presbytery of five bays.

3.2 The parish cemetery

For more than 450 years, St Giles’ served as the parish burial ground for the whole of the burgh, with burials inside the kirk for the wealthy and privileged, and outside for the greater part of the population. Now completely hemmed in to the south by the later buildings of the Law Courts and Parliament House, it is difficult to visualize the scale of the medieval kirkyard which, at its greatest extent, covered almost 0.5ha. The church originally stood at the top of a substantial open plot stretching down to the Cowgate valley, containing the house and garden of the Vicar (later the Provost) in the lower part and the parish cemetery immediately to the south of the kirk. The part of this site used for burial was extended twice in the late 15th century by the Provost of St Giles’. In 1477, because ‘my parishioners . . . when they die have no place of burial within or without the Church in my parish’, he granted ‘part of his garden lying contiguous to his manse . . . extending to the southern street commonly called the Cowgate’ ([BOEC, 208](#)). In 1496, he again felt obliged to convey land to the church, this time the northern part of his manse and land ([BOEC,](#)

[208](#)). The depiction of the kirkyard on Gordon of Rothiemay’s view of 1647 ([illus 5](#)) clearly shows the extent of the site (even after construction of Parliament House in the 1630s; also see [illus 6](#), William Edgar’s *Map of Edinburgh 1742*).

Later building works have uncovered burials, some in coffins, across the full extent of the cemetery. During the construction of the Thistle Chapel in 1910, a wall, 3ft (0.90m) thick was uncovered, running north–south towards the southern side of the church; this was interpreted as the original east wall of the kirkyard. Uncoffined burials were also excavated, c 1.25m below the level of Parliament Square ([Inglis 1909, 227, fig 1](#)).

In 1562, Queen Mary conveyed the lands of the Greyfriars to the Town Council to be used as a public cemetery, and burial at St Giles’ seems to have gradually declined, until the construction of Parliament House and the levelling of Parliament Square in July 1639 brought an end to use of the burial ground.

Within the church itself evidence for pre-Reformation burial is well-documented by accounts of the discovery and removal of skeletons from the church. The density of use is confirmed by a report in *The Scotsman* from Friday 28 June 1872 which reports an early example of archaeological research and observation as part of the restoration programme then in progress:

During yesterday workmen were engaged in making a series of openings in the floor of the High Church, with a view if possible, to determine whether or not any crypt or vault exists under the building.

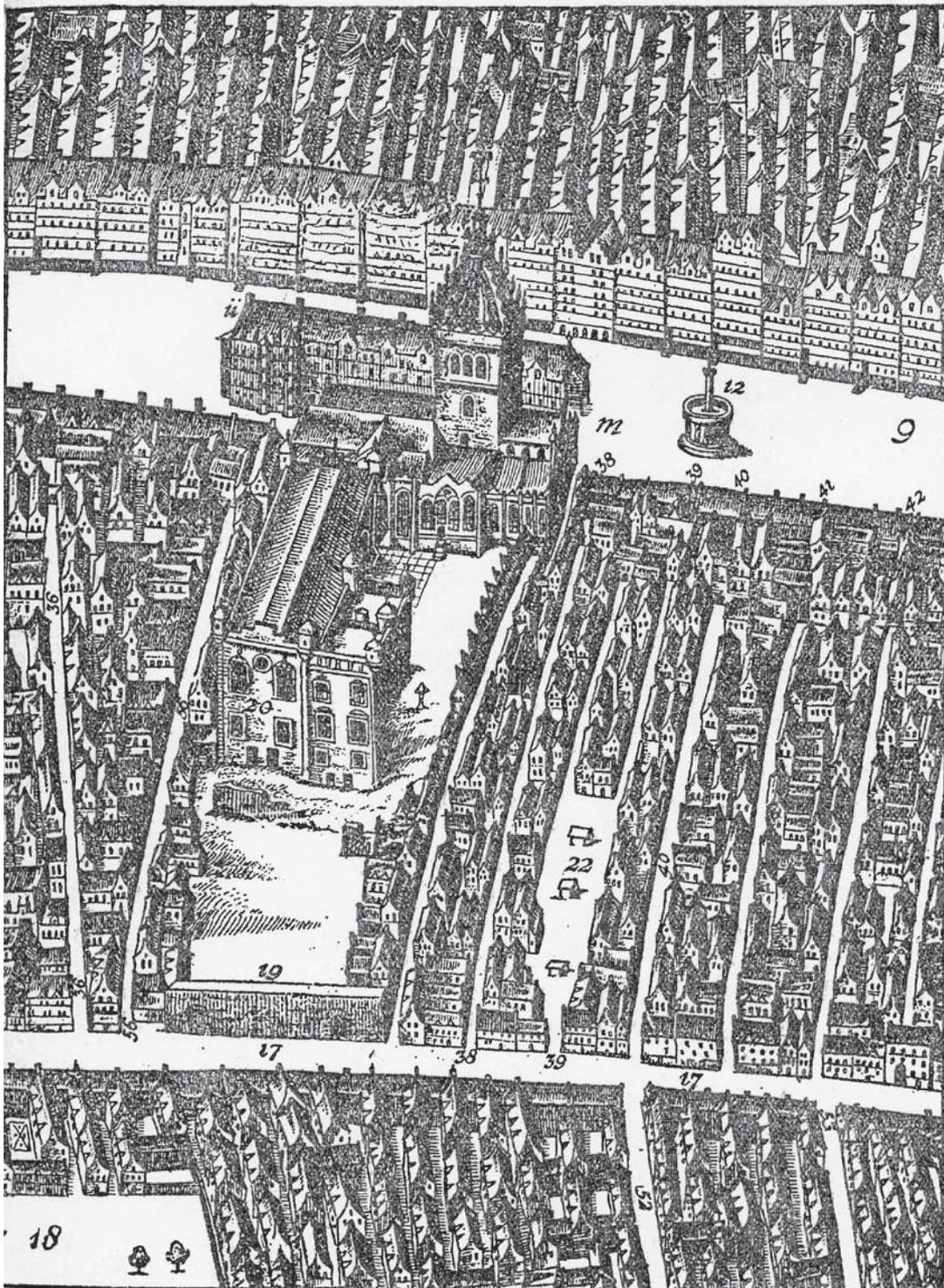
In the course of yesterday’s digging, a large quantity of human remains was turned up. Indeed it was made manifest that the whole area of the church is charnel house crowded with the relics of humanity.

For the most part the remains appear to be at a depth of two or three feet and those found in the upper stratum had all the appearance of having been disturbed at some distant date . . . In two or three places fragments of coffins were discovered but these were mostly at a greater depth than the loose bones, and, as far as we observed, confined to the east end of the church.

In only one case were the bones of a skeleton found in such a position that they had never been disturbed. This was at the bottom of a pit fully four feet deep, sunk near the north-eastern corner of the area. In close proximity to the bones were traces of a coffin, and it seemed as if the body in question had been the lowest of several which had been buried one over the other.

From the half dozen or so of pits opened yesterday there were taken about a couple of cart-loads of skulls and miscellaneous bones.

During the course of the restoration works by Chambers and Hay, there are several reports of such discoveries. In the Choir in 1873:



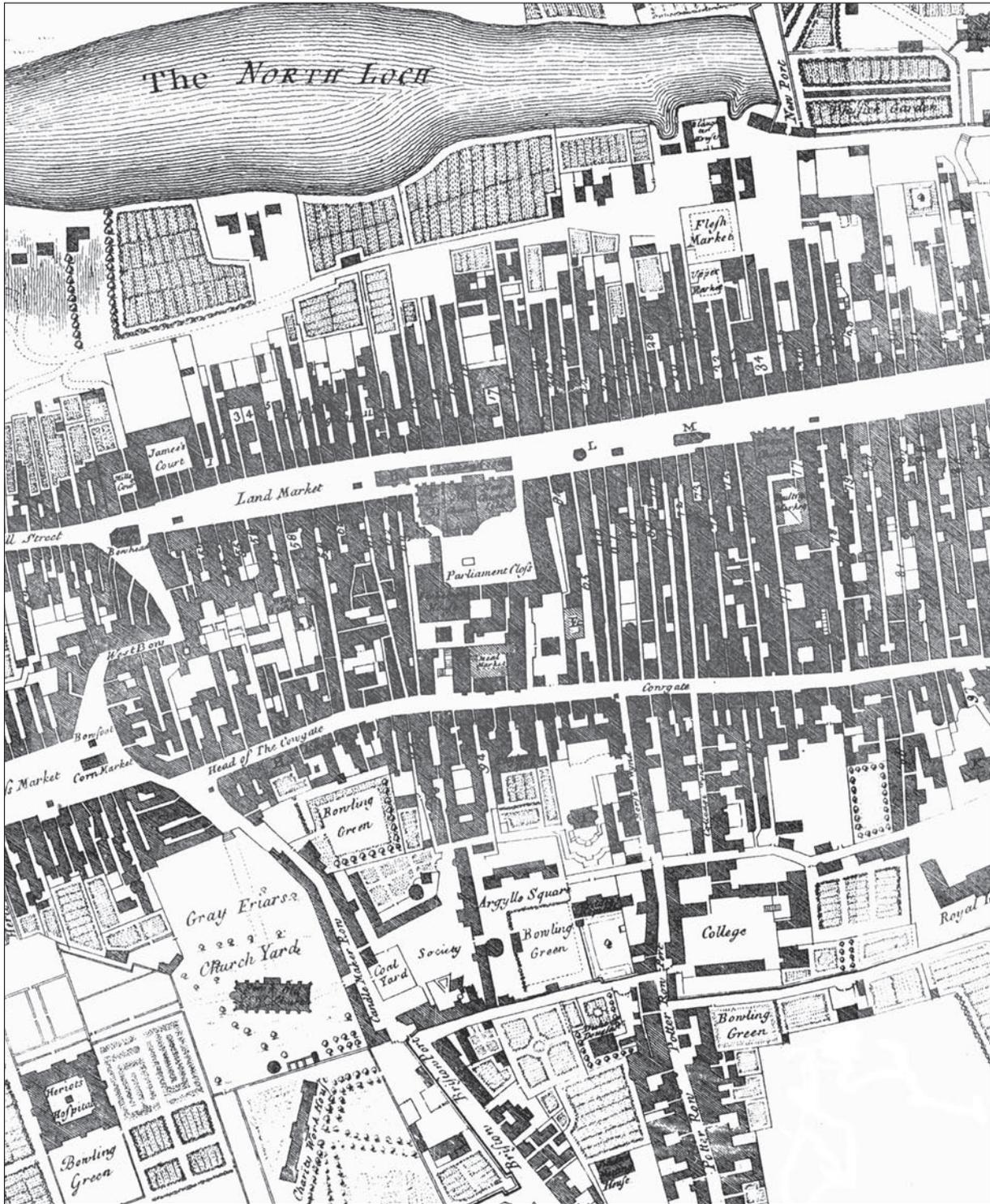
Illus 5 St Giles' Cathedral, Edinburgh as depicted on Gordon of Rothiemay's Bird's Eye View of Edinburgh, 1647

... the floor was trenched to a depth of several feet. No vaults were discovered but there was an immense quantity of human remains ... A large number of large grave-stones which had served as pavement, on which the professional devices of craftsmen were rudely carved (Chambers 1888).

In the Preston Aisle, in 1879, 'By the lifting of the floor a hideous scene of decaying mortal remains

was disclosed ... (Chambers 1888)' and, in 1880, in the South Transept and the adjoining aisles to the west:

... the trenchings and excavations that took place over the floor of the southern aisles need not be particularly described. The quantity of bones dug up was immense, the whole probably amounting to five tons in weight (Chambers 1888).



Illus 6 St Giles' Cathedral, Edinburgh as depicted on William Edgar's Map of Edinburgh, 1742

3.3 The hospital of St Giles'

There are references to a hospital within the cemetery of St Giles' during the 16th century. It was first mentioned in 1541, then in 1544x1547 when it was burned by the English and again in 1566 when a charter describes it as being ruinous and in need of repair. It has been suggested that this foundation was only a residence for the provost and curate of St Giles';

however, this view is considered inaccurate by some (Cowan & Easson 1976, 176). The hospital is believed to have lain in the area between the south side of the church and the current buildings of the High Court to the south, although no physical evidence has been recovered and the type of institution it served is unknown (though see Discussion below).