

# Cultural Interaction in the Medieval Burgh of Perth, Scotland 1200–1600

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*Drama; games; magic; pilgrimage; ritual*

*Great Tay through Perth,  
through town, through countries flies,  
Perth the whole kingdom with her  
wealth supplies.*

Alexander Neckham, circa 1215  
(quoted in Penny 1836, 306)

## Introduction

I offer this paper as an exploration of social life, primarily within the medieval town of Perth. It is very much a synthetic work that recognises that in trying to recover as holistic a picture as possible of the medieval past no one source of evidence is sufficient. My main focus though will be the archaeological evidence and in particular that aspect of archaeology that encompasses artefact studies and how such can address questions of social experience in the medieval burgh of Perth. I do not propose to do this in the isolation of materiality, for things, like ideas, actions and words are children of the same parent: the human mind. This is perhaps doubly so for things because they can be the physical expression of deeds, ideas and words. Be they things, objects or artefacts they are still a reification of thought processes and this links them to cognitive archaeology: 'The study of past ways of thought as inferred from material remains.' (Renfrew 1994, 3–12; 1997, 1–6). Objects then are pivotal to human affairs in both symbolic and practical ways. They are bound up with the development of society and how the world can be perceived. Social life is heavily influenced by objects and the values that they embody and by their exchange as commodities (Appadurai 1986, 3–63). In the case studies that follow I wish to explore what cultural fac-

tors were at work in the minds of the inhabitants of Perth and thus in the changing nature of Perth.

## Magic and Miracles: the Power of Belief

*Elfshot and sympathetic magic*

Amongst the now extensive assemblage of prehistoric lithics material excavated in Perth there are two pieces of particular note for medieval cultural life. Both are Early Bronze Age arrowheads of the barbed and tanged variety. One was found in a 12th century building posthole on the Perth High Street (Kenworthy forthcoming) and the other was found in 15th century slump-fill during the Meal Vennel excavations (Harden in Cox (ed.) 1996, 790; illus. 29). It is the admittedly much tighter context of the first that gives the clue to the reuse of these arrowheads as apotropaic talismans. As Kenworthy has observed the PHS example seems to have been deliberately placed in the posthole as a foundation deposit to protect the building (and by extension those who lived there) from lightning, thunder and elfshot disease (Kenworthy, forthcoming, for the building context see Murray, forthcoming). In the context of this identification it seems valid to see the Meal Vennel arrowhead as a more personal amulet, carried about the person until lost. The apotropaic (re-)use or appropriation of flint tools has been recognised in the archaeological literature since at least the mid 19th century. In Scotland it has been tentatively recognised in other burghs, notably Aberdeen (Kenworthy 1982). Beyond Scotland, we could

note the plano-convex knife recovered from a post-hole of the timber castle at Hen Domen, Montgomery, Wales and, from Novgorod, Russia, the Neolithic flint spearhead (or “thunderbolt”) mounted in a bronze frame depicting a cross (Higham/Barker 2001, 109–110; Yanin 1992, 67–106). It was commonly held in medieval Europe that the air carried disease and that this was often associated with thunder and so-called “elfshot”, supposedly harmful arrows fired by elves. Such beliefs were not eradicated by conversion to Christianity often being so deep-rooted they were carried through into the new set of beliefs, which at a popular level was certainly to Christianity’s advantage. Thus magic and especially sympathetic magic effectively found its place within the responses of the converted and succeeding generations of Christians. St Sebastian, martyred by being shot with arrows was widely thought of as having a curative role in combating elfshot and archery generally (Flint 1993, 165). From the Perth High Street site Kenworthy also identified a Bronze Age struck flint-flake re-used as a medieval strike-a-light. This is certainly a case of the efficient, task-oriented application of resources but it may also be suspected that the flint flake in question may have seemed doubly appropriate in the context of a belief in elf-shot. This union of pre-Christian and evolving magical beliefs and Christianity strongly influenced the development of the cult of saints, which centred on the efficacy of the body parts of saints and their related material culture. In turn, this was a key motivating factor in the undertaking of pilgrimage, to which we now turn.

### *Pilgrimage*

In the medieval period pilgrimage operated on a vast scale, across all levels of society. The Church encouraged pilgrimage as a way for the faithful to think about the final judgement and to facilitate the gaining of indulgences to set against that fearful day and was clearly aware of the economic returns it could bring. But the majority of pilgrims equally undertook their journeys so that they could benefit from the efficacy of the power of the saints. This could be either directly – through miracles at a saint’s shrine – or indirectly – through the acquiring of souvenirs from the place of pilgrimage. The latter not only demonstrated that the

journey had been undertaken but were also thought to bring good luck and avert evil from the wearer or owner and so they would have taken their place alongside other forms of amulet (for examples see Lowenthal 1978, 3–12; Black 1894, 433–526).

The Perth High Street excavation of 1975–1978 produced a range of pilgrimage souvenirs from the shrines of St Andrew, St Thomas Becket, Our Lady of Walsingham, and St James of Santiago (Bogdan forthcoming; Yeoman 1999, illus. 39a, 89, 90, 91e). Perth has the highest concentration of pilgrimage souvenirs from any Scottish burgh. It can be amplified by a jet crucifix (also from the Perth High Street) (Bogdan forthcoming) and a possible jet rosary bead found at Elcho Nunnery some 5 miles south-east of Perth (Reid/Lye 1988, 80) (both recently sourced to Compostella). More recent finds include a copper alloy crucifix reliquary found in the river Tay downstream from Elcho (Yeoman 1999, illus. 90f) and a badge of St John the Baptist (from his shrine in Amiens Cathedral), possibly found in Perth (Yeoman 1999, illus. 90c; Spencer 1999, 219 – and note Spencer’s description of the saint depicted with large protruding eyes, believed to give the wearer better protection by repelling evil spirits). St John the Baptist was (and remains) the patron saint of Perth: the parish Kirk is dedicated to him and during the later medieval period Perth was unofficially known as St Johnstoun.

Perth’s pilgrims then were a well-travelled community but we should not forget that Perth itself was a centre for local pilgrimage because St John’s Kirk held a relic of St Eloi (though we do not know what form it took). No doubt a visit to St John’s could be combined with a visit to nearby Scone Abbey to see its relic of St Fergus (McNeill/MacQueen (eds.) 1996, 377–378). The shrine or altar of St Eloi in St John’s Kirk was supported by the Hammermen Incorporation, whose patron saint he was through virtue of his skill as a metal worker.

There is one other way in which the inhabitants, or rather one inhabitant, of Perth left his mark on the pilgrimage landscape, namely, the achieving of sainthood. The story goes that a certain William, a baker, set out in 1201 on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Heading for Canterbury (and the shrine of St Thomas, probably his original destination before the tale grew in the telling) he reached Rochester, where he

was murdered a short distance from the town. He soon became, by popular acclaim, a saint and was buried in Rochester Cathedral where a cult soon flourished. Pilgrims to his shrine (including, in 1299 King Edward I) provided sufficient income from offerings for the rebuilding of part of the cathedral and his cult appears to have been quite extensive in the Rochester area (Richardson 1907, 122–126; Yates 1996, 38–40; Duncan 1975, 306–307). The full vita of St William appears not to have been written down until the 16th century, when it appears in the *Nova Legenda* of 1516. However, the William connection seems sound enough given that it is briefly mentioned in the chronicle *Flores Historiarum* (Richardson 1907, 121,123 n.1; St John Hope 1898, 232–233).

The saintly efficacy of William does not appear to have impressed Perth or indeed Scotland, for there are no dedications to him. He does though stand as testimony to the power of pilgrimage, to its widespread practice, to its dangers and to its economic potential. It also helps us to see individuals drawn out of the town and into the wider world. It may of course be that William did not exist. If so his invention allowed Rochester Cathedral to exploit a niche probably focussing on Scottish pilgrims making their way to St Thomas Becket's shrine in Canterbury (the successful flourishing of which the clergy of Rochester would have been well aware). St Thomas was extremely popular in Scotland, where King William I, the Lion, founded Arbroath Abbey in his honour and contested with King Henry II for his saintly support. Rochester Cathedral was dedicated to St Andrew, Scotland's patron saint and the shrine of St William included such benefactors as King Edward I.

#### *Church and Guildry: The Glovers and St Bartholomew*

Eight carved oak panels in Perth Museum have recently been the subjects of dendrochronological dating and art-historical analysis. (Crone/Fawcett/Hall 2000, 189–201). Six of them were sampled for dendrochronological dating, producing a tree-ring sequence spanning the years AD 1225–1490, with a very close match to chronologies from the Eastern Baltic and pointing to their shared origin from the same tree in the Eastern Baltic felled between

circa AD 1508–1550. If they did not reach Scotland as completed panels they probably did so as part of a batch of prepared planks or boards, ready to be worked. They are liturgical furnishings of framed construction and with parallels in Scotland, England and Wales. By the end of the 15th century Perth had monastic houses of the Carthusian (the only one in Scotland), Dominican, Observant-Franciscan, Carmelite and Augustinian orders on its perimeters along with at least five hospitals and five chapels, and with other monastic establishments close-by. It also boasted the major parish Kirk of St John's, that underwent a significant re-building campaign in the 15th century (Fawcett 1987). By the eve of the Reformation it had some 40 altars which would have had associated screens and pictures and lights (the up-keep of which is often referred to in Perth's guild and rental records). Much of this was swept away in the first wave of the Reformation following John Knox's sermonising in Perth in 1559.

The panels may have been amongst the items saved from this destruction, either for secular, decorative use or for more private continued Catholic use. They came to light again in 1849, during the demolition of a plaster wall that was part of a building that must originally have faced on to Skinnergate. It was Skinnergate, as the name suggests, that was the focus of the leather-working trades in Perth, including the Glovers. The Perth Museum collections also include a wooden panel-painting (formerly the property of the Glover Incorporation), a portrait of the Glover's patron saint, Bartholomew. His martyrdom with a fleshing knife made him an ideal patron for leather-workers. The analysis of the painting by MacRoberts (1959, 281–286) shows that although it was re-painted on more than one occasion, it does have a medieval core that verifies the date it bears of 1557. Painted then just before the Reformation, it presumably graced the Glover's altar to St Bartholomew in St John's Kirk. Saved from destruction during the Reformation it continued in use for Glover ceremonies only being fully replaced in the mid-19th century when an entirely new portrait was commissioned in a more fashionable style (and retained by the Glover Incorporation). Amongst the earliest records that survive of the Glover Incorporation are several deeds (the earliest dated to 1429) relating to a tenement known as St Bartholo-

mew's Land, in the vicinity of Castlegable, which is at the bottom of Skinnergate. This is demonstration enough that the Glovers had the property in which altar furnishings could be re-located for their continued, more private use.

#### *A Marian Miracle*

The strength of Marian devotion in Perth is suggested by the pilgrimage ampulla from the shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham, Norfolk, England, recovered from the PHS excavations of 1975–1978. In addition, in St John's Kirk there were altars dedicated to Our Lady of Consolation and to the Presentation of the Virgin. Within the town were three chapels dedicated to Our Lady of Loretto, St Anne and Our Lady (Milne 1891, 455–456; 464; 494; 495–496). The Chapel of Our Lady stood on the bottom of the High Street on the bridge over the river Tay. Mary's protection of the bridge and its users was perhaps particularly looked for in a town subject to the tremendous flooding force of the river Tay. Beside the chapel stood a statue of the Virgin that is mentioned in a brief poem, probably written around 1453, anonymously, into the Perth Guildry Book. It offers a rare insight into a creative, literate culture in Perth. The poem was the medium by which its author and Guild member chose to express his thoughts, his account of the washing away of the town's bridge during flooding. Within it he records, in the knowledge that some may be sceptical of what he says, a miracle which left the statue of the Virgin unscathed: 'Nor do I pass over in silence when the Tay flooded in revenge ... and breached the timberwork of the bridge ... The wall next to the chapel was broken down, but an image of the Virgin stood unmoved and still stands, as can be seen, fixed to its base by no nail and by no hand. Anyone can make what he wishes of this; I am amazed and include it among miracles by the merits of the wondrous maker ...' (The full text of the poem can be found in Stavert (ed.) 1993, 493).

## Leisure, Pleasure and Performance

#### *Romance and Ritual*

In 1921 "rescue" excavations in North St John's Place, Perth revealed evidence of medieval

structures and artefacts. Arguably the most significant find was one half, a single valve, of a 13th century pewter mirror-case (Hall/Owen 1998, 150–165). The preceding discussion on pilgrim badges made no reference to their wider contextual study alongside secular badges. Perth has yet to yield any secular badges but the iconography of the mirror-case places it firmly in the same domain.

The find-spot of the mirror case was adjacent to the more recently excavated sites of 80–86 High Street (Moloney/Coleman 1997) and Kirk close (to the rear of 86–100 High Street, Holdsworth (ed.) 1987). Taken together they suggest a general redevelopment of the area from the mid-12th century: a possible church boundary ditch is filled in, substantial timber buildings are erected, accompanied by relatively small scale craft working and some less-well built structures. We appear to be dealing with substantial burgage plots accompanied by industrial backlands-activity in the heart of the medieval burgh. The mirror-case was found crumpled up and this would imply its deliberate disposal (most likely after breakage, whether accidental, or deliberate) and that it was not seen as feasible or worth repairing. Like the pewter pilgrim badges already referred to it is a cheap, mass-produced item requiring the use of simple stone mould technology. It could have been made in Perth or elsewhere, though the presence of a (garbled) Anglo-Norman inscription certainly implies an insular origin. The inscription is a garbled, illiterate prophylactic phrase wishing the bearer joy; a common type of medieval phrase intended to avert evil and to bring good luck. The inscription is allied to images taken from the legend of Tristram and Iseult, hugely popular in the Middle Ages. Tristram and Iseult seem to be seen as the ideal lovers and their tale was linked to the Arthurian Cycle, with the earliest written verses of the tale or romance circulating in England and France in the mid 12th century, but with much older origins in Celtic/Pictish folk tales.

The popularity of their story ensured their depiction on a wide variety of artefacts, including bone and ivory caskets and mirror-cases, misericords, leather shoes, embroideries, tiles, wall-hangings, manuscripts and metalwork. Two further mirror-cases are known depicting Tristram and Iseult, one found in London the other in Regensburg, Germany (Spencer 1999,

327, illus. 325 f.; Kreuger 1995, 231). Both are different from each other and from the Perth example and demonstrate how widespread these popular renditions were and that they were produced in different centres, not to a standard design. They are material examples of vernacular culture, a culture influenced by the written word but which remained largely oral and celebrated and transcribed through drama, song, story-telling, puppetry etc. Often more courtly, literate and elite versions of legends and stories developed from these (but the process could work the other way as has been convincingly demonstrated for the Robin Hood tales, see Holt 1989, 109–186).

Through its material, iconography and illiterate inscriptions the Perth mirror-case demonstrates a link to the huge amount of mass-produced cheap jewellery of the 12th to 15th centuries. They show that the mass of “ordinary” folk using this jewellery were familiar with the themes depicted. Such material culture demonstrates a vital way in which knowledge was popularised whilst at the same time allowing competing social groups to portray ‘themselves as part of wider European culture.’ (Deevy 1997, 73).

Moving into the fourteenth century we can glimpse another aspect of Perth’s (thriving) cultural life, in the shape of a walrus-ivory knife handle carved with a Maying figure (Hall 2001, 169–188). It was recovered during the Perth High Street excavations of 1975–1978, from a 14th century context interpreted as a metalworker’s workshop. A lively and full-somely carved piece, it shows a hooded male face with intricate leaves shown either side of the head. Its iconography is consistent with a variety of descriptions and depictions of medieval Maying, the seasonal celebration of the imminent arrival of summer, a key aspect of which was the gathering of seasonal greenery (Hall 2001, 181–187).

The celebration of May was widespread throughout medieval Europe and to cite but one example we could point to French Maying as depicted in the *Très Riches Heures* of the Duc de Berry. Produced in the 14th century, this Book of Hours includes an illumination for May where-in the nobility depicted are dressed in green and garlanded with flowers (Longnan/Cazelle 1969, 176 & pl. 6). In Perth, the knife handle is not an isolated example of May celebrations. Due east of Perth (across the

river Tay), approximately 1 mile from St John’s Kirk, in the south facing cliffs of Kinnoull Hill is a small cave known as the Dragon Hole. Its name derives from its folklore provenance as the place where St Serf slew a dragon in the sixth century AD. In the later medieval period it became a place of May-time pilgrimage (where townsfolk and so the town are taken out into the countryside), though the evidence for this only becomes visible in the 16th century. Following the Reformation processing out to the Dragon Hole is an activity condemned by the Reformed Kirk Session of Perth. The town’s annual procession there is seen by the Session as a licentious act and in 1580 they specifically ban it.

A feature of many May celebrations was the institution of a mock-king or queen to preside over the May Games. Some Scottish burghs had equivalent Abbot figures (Hall 2001, 182–183) We discussed earlier how Robin Hood’s tales grew in the telling and he acquired a wider social celebration. During the 15th century this included becoming a feature of some May games. As an outlaw chief, Robin Hood made something of an ideal Lord of Misrule and he also had the appropriate green clothing and woodland association for a May figure. Thus he became a stock figure in the dramatic performances associated with May Games (Holt 1989, 159–162; Hutton 1996, 262–276). In the Perth Guildry Book there are references to the Guild paying (throughout 1545) its member James Mackbrek his fee for playing ‘Robyn Hwyd/Robyn Hwyd/Roberne Hwde’ (Stavert (ed.) 1993, nos. 358–360).

The knife handle around which this discussion has pivoted is part of a broad group of bone and ivory anthropomorphic knife handles, spanning the 13th–14th centuries and currently totalling 32 (Hall 2001, 176). Twenty-five of these were studied by Bencard (1975, 35–61) who classified the nobles they invariably depict as ideal aristocrats. Generally both male and female figures are shown holding a hawk. This iconographic theme seems to echo other depictions in other media, including Books of Hours (Jones 2001, 220–221) and architectural Labours of the Month and Zodiac cycles. (Fowler 1873), where hawking is an image associated with May-time. Another example in another media has also been found in excavations in Perth, on the King Edward Street site (Bowler et al. 1995, 931–952; 957 no.161). It

is a jug-*sherd* with a trace of decoration surviving: the arm of a figure holding a hawk; formerly this was identified as Ardenburg ware but now (pers. comm. Frans Verhaeghe) said to be produced in the Haarlem area, north east of Amsterdam. Similar sherds have also been found in Aberdeen, again from a 14th century context (Murray (ed.) 1982, 125). Murray's discussion cites the most complete known example of such jugs, from Peterskirke, Tønsburg, Norway (Molaug 1979). This bears an upper and lower register of figurative decoration. The upper shows musicians (two) within arcades and the lower shows two identical noblemen, each holding a hawk. In the context of Maying the combination of musicians and hawking is significant. The case has already been made for Perth for the association of minstrels with Maying and other dramatic culture (Hall 2001, 182–183). It is tempting to see the Perth knife handle as the possession of a well-to-do townsman/woman. Perhaps it shared the same, wealthy table as the complete jug (a tableware probably for pouring wine – compare Verhaeghe 1984, 26) from which the single Perth *sherd* survives, though we should remember Verhaeghe's (ibid.) caution in noting that, "... the appreciation of wine was not restricted to rich nobles and traders alone." That there was a solid Maying tradition in Perth and its vicinity seems clear enough. Like the consumption of romance and legendary tales discussed above, participation was socially diverse and it was contested. The knife handle that has focussed this discussion was found in what is interpreted as a workshop. Whether it was part of the prized knife of a well-to-do craftsman or the possession of a burgess or member of the nobility and in for repair, it encapsulates the broad social enjoyment of the May festivities.

### *Corpus Christi*

The guild structure of Perth had two main strands: the Guildry Incorporation, probably in existence by 1209 (Stavert ed. 1993, III-IV) and the individual Incorporations of the key crafts in the town (the Hammermen, the Baxters, the Fleschers, the Glovers, the Shoemakers, the Weavers, the Wrights, the Tailors and the Fullers) all in existence by the end of the 15th century. Each of these bodies has left written records with the most substantial for

the medieval period being those of the Guildry and the Hammermen Incorporations. The main function of these bodies was in the protection of their members and of Perth generally as a centre of trade and economic activity. But they also had a strong religious and charitable role in the life of the town. Indeed they were the leading patrons of the parish church. By the close of the 15th/start of the 16th century there were approximately 40 altars or chantries in St John's Kirk, supported by both the Incorporations and wealthy individuals.

The other major way that the Incorporations demonstrated their involvement in and patronage of the Kirk was through the support and organization of the Corpus Christi Play. The feast of Corpus Christi was officially declared by the papal curia in 1317 (Rubin 1991, 164–212). Within decades it was a central feast in the Christian calendar, with a moveable date fixed to that of Pentecost, which was itself linked to the moveable date of Easter. It slotted into the ritual rhythm of the year as a powerful expression of Christian belief, celebrating the Eucharist miracle of transubstantiation, a transforming act of renewal and redemption. The Feast inspired a dramatic celebration of varying size and frequency in a variety of communities. In the early decades of the 14th century, throughout Europe, the procession had developed as the main form of celebration of the new feast, with increasing civic involvement through dramatic performance. The name "The Play of Corpus Christi" has been loosely used to describe a variety of dramatic performances in the vernacular, which took place in the summer around the feast of Corpus Christi. That some towns developed full Biblical cycles and whilst others had only one or two plays was determined by local variants of community structure, financial resources and access to dramatic material. Corpus Christi was a diverse ritual event, built around a shared symbol but incorporating different local interests, lore, traditions and capabilities between the 14th and the 16th centuries. It was changeable over time (and sometimes from year to year) and varied in its many manifestations. It was 'a living and contingent enterprise.' (Rubin 1991, 273). The surviving evidence for the Corpus Christi play and procession in Perth is slender but sufficiently detailed to indicate its continuity, its guild sponsorship, its diversity and local distinctiveness

and its contested demise. The evidence principally comes from references to the performance and resourcing of the play that are scattered through various guild records, principally the Guildry Book, the Hammermen Book and the surviving records of the Wrights Incorporation (Stavert (ed.) 1993; Hunt (ed.) 1889; Mill 1927, esp. 274).

The earliest Perth Corpus Christi references cover the years 1485–1487 and relate to expenses for the play being paid to named individuals, with the implication that the Play and Procession are well established. In 1546 there is a more general reference to plays being provided, for one John Walker is given membership of the Guildry in recognition of his work in helping to provide the plays. The more explicit references to the Play come in the Hammermen Book. Entries for the years 1518 and 1553 record the cast of characters (with the names of the players added for the 1553 entry). The consistent characters in the drama are Adam and Eve, the Devil and his Chapman (or pedlar), Saint Eloy, the Marmadin (a mermaid, or possibly a monster or prostitute, see Aitken 1937, 110) and a mixture of supporting devils and angels along with a range of banner bearers, various prop holders and minstrels. The key character in 1518, missing by 1553, was St Erasmus, along with the Corddrawer, the three Tormentors and the King. By 1553, the main addition is a character called Trinity and a degree of enforcement is also necessary for the minute records that those who do not play their roles will be fined half a stone of wax for the candle on St Eloy's altar in St John's. In the intervening years there are a number of slighter entries dealing with various expenses in connection with the Play, including the paying of banner bearers, for costumes and props, refreshments for the players and for general expenses.

The most obvious local element to the Play is the presence of the saints, Eloy and Erasmus. As the patron saint of the Hammermen we can imagine that Eloy's place was always assured in their contribution to the Play. There is though no obvious reason why St Erasmus should be included. He was greatly revered during the Middle Ages and it is noteworthy that his feast day, June 2, is well within the Corpus Christi season. He was also the patron saint of sailors, of which Perth must have had a reasonable throughput. Amongst the various props listed

there are 'cabers', 'gudstrings', 'bluid' and 'St Erasmus cord', the latest date for their listing being 1534 (for the cabers and gudstrings). Added to the characters of St Erasmus, the Tormentors and the Corddrawer implies that one of the scenes presented was the martyrdom of St Erasmus (though we cannot also discount that some of these props would also have enabled a Crucifixion scene). This involved St Erasmus being tied to a windlass and disembowelled via a cord hooked into his stomach. He is shown being so martyred in a Salzburg woodcut of 1410–1420, probably one of the earliest depictions of the windlass as torture instrument, and only adopted for St Erasmus in the 14th century (Körner 1979, 107–108). There is a certain amount of blood and gore implied in this reconstruction and if there is doubt that such was the practice the reader need only study *The Martyrdom of Apollonia* by Jean Fouquet (c.1460). Shown against a backdrop of some six scaffold stages showing their own plays this depicts a main scene of Apollonia under torture including the pulling of her teeth by large tongs (Bartlett 2001, 229, illus. 2).

The involvement of the Guildry and the Hammermen Incorporations in the staging of the Corpus Christi Play suggests it was the major dramatic event of the calendar and in which all the Incorporations had their part to play their scenes to present and their banners to process. The surviving records of the Wrights Incorporation further corroborate this. Their records include four sets of entries, for circa 1530, detailing sundry expenses involved with Corpus Christi, including repairing costumes, banner-bearing, minstrels, bread and ale and repairs to the castle (one of their props?). The Hammermen and Wrights records alike show that money was being collected – both about the town and through offerings left in a collecting box (*stok*) at their respective altars in the parish church. They took the credit for the plays and were clearly careful to defray what must have been a substantial financial outlay as widely as possible.

The performing of the Corpus Christi Play continued beyond the Reformation and the drive to eradicate it is preserved in the Kirk Session Register of the Reformed Kirk of Perth. In 1577 one Thomas Thorskaills was allowed to have his baby baptised on condition that he took no further part (he had been a banner bearer) in the Play. In the same year nine others went

through the same process. On the 1st of July 1577 a sermon was preached against the observance of the Corpus Christi Play, which had been held on the 6th of June, against a previous prohibition. It is from the same records that we gain a glimpse of the practice of guild-led religious drama being spread throughout the year. The Baxters (or Bakers) Incorporation has left no known surviving medieval records but we know from the Kirk Session Register that they performed their own play because the Kirk Session sought to suppress it. The Baxters patron saint was St Obert (probably derived from St Aubert), whose feast day in Perth was celebrated on December 10 (the eve of the actual feast day). It was then that the Incorporation processed through the town performing its play. In 1577, 1578, 1581 and 1587 for example the Kirk Session register records the various fines and punishments meted out to those who persisted in performing the play (Lawson 1847, 124; 129; 141; MacKinlay 1914, 345–346).

There is sufficient evidence in all these accounts to indicate that the Perth Corpus Christi Play involved both procession and performance. Procession was clearly a common social act. It is further indicated by May-time festivities and also by Midsummer celebrations. The latter is suggested by the minutes of the Hammermen Incorporation which mention members processing on Midsummer's Day, in 1518 'ganging with the brodis' and in 1522 and 1534, 'the men that geid with the provost at midsommer.' (Hunt (ed.) 1889). At this stage it can only be speculation as to what route about the town the Corpus Christi procession took. A commencement at the parish church is logical because of the nature of the feast, the conjunction of guilds and church and the topography of the town (with the Kirk at its centre). One could then speculate on a route that would encompass all or elements of the various guild halls, the town gates (as boundary markers) and the monastic establishments on those boundaries (perhaps the Dominican Blackfriars in particular, as this included royal lodgings). The procession was clearly a lengthy affair as refreshments were called for. Perhaps it culminated in an open space where the various scenes of the Play were then performed? One late, post-medieval entry from the Register of Acts of Council is of interest here. For 23 June 1603 it refers to the play being played on

Tuesday in the playfield. This was apparently at the end of the High Street (Mill 1927, 266; 352). We do not of course know whether the playfield existed before the 17th century or if it came into existence then as part of an upsurge in secular drama. It is perhaps worth giving consideration to some of these elements as future archaeological investigations in the town allow and as part of any research agenda drawn up to pursue the social topography of the town.

#### *Board games and Blood sports: Perth pastimes*

The final element to be considered is the range of games played in the medieval burgh of Perth. Excavations in the town have produced a spectrum of gaming equipment in the shape of pieces and dice, but as yet no boards have been found. There is a wide variety of counters and playing pieces in stone, wood, ceramic and bone. Most are plain though there is a wooden piece with a simple floral design and a bone piece decorated with concentric circles. By far the largest concentration and variety of material came from the Perth High Street excavations of 1975–1978 (Bogdan forthcoming). In addition to the range of counters indicated above, eight bone dice were found, and the assemblage spans the mid-12th to mid-14th centuries. From the same site came a range of casket mounts in bone and wood, the uses of such caskets could well have included storage of gaming equipment. The contexts – floors, pits, middens etc – all suggest casual domestic loss. The assortment of counters and discs can be characterised as local productions for immediate usage in the town: this is material immediately to hand and being used expediently towards the leisure time of craftworkers and tradesmen. The bone dice from the High Street support this inference. They are concentrated on the one site, come mainly from domestic contexts and have a reasonably long chronological spread. They are small objects easily lost. That said one of them is a blank and two of them were found in a metalworker's workshop. This is suggestive of the working of bone alongside metal though it could simply be an individual craftsman's use of bone waste rather than large-scale manufacture (MacGregor, forthcoming). The most likely use of these dice was in gambling and/or controlling the moves of pieces in board games. We should also bear in

mind that dice were used for divination which brought more ecclesiastical condemnation (which dice already attracted because of gambling and because they were used to cast lots for Christ's garments at the Crucifixion). Divination was a widespread and popular practice (Hammond 1925, Brackman 1980) and the presence of dice in Perth should remind us of the multi-functionality of dice, a natural bridge between gaming, gambling and divination because of the underlying notions of fortune and destiny.

The single most significant piece of gaming equipment from Perth is the jet playing-piece from the Meal Vennel site (Cox (ed.) 1996, 782). This is undoubtedly a chess piece, probably a bishop. Carved in a geometric style typical of the 12th-13th centuries it comes from a 15th century context. It has marked signs of wear and would seem to have been lost after some considerable time in use and possession of its owner(s). It is significant both as the only piece of material evidence for chess to come from Perth or indeed any other Scottish burgh (for a review of known Scottish chess pieces see Hall, forthcoming). XRF analysis of the jet (courtesy of the NMS, Edinburgh) has sourced the jet to Whitby, Yorkshire. Only two other jet artefacts survive from excavations in Perth – a faceted bead and a crucifix-pendant – and both have been sourced to Santiago de Compostella. The implication is that jet was not being worked in Perth and that the chess piece was acquired in Yorkshire, an area with key trading contacts with Perth (witness the large quantities of Scarborough ware from Perth excavations). We can then postulate at least one complete chess set in Perth, of comparatively high status and possibly belonging to a burgher or leading craftsman. Collectively all the gaming artefacts from Perth suggest that the town's inhabitants indulged in a range of board and gambling games, at least chess and tables (backgammon) and probably merels as well. The range of material suggests social diversity in the playing of these games and that those playing them had or could find time for leisure at a more personal level. Excavations in Perth have also produced bone skates, musical buzzbones and a ceramic toy (?) sheep which confirm wider leisure pursuits.

There is a further dimension to leisure or play in Perth. Smith's analysis (1998, 880–882) of animal bone assemblages from Scottish medie-

val towns includes a discussion of attitudes towards animals. A range of leisure activities observed for Perth and involving animals include cock-fighting and dog-fighting. It is known from literary sources (Penny 1836, 134–135) that Perth indulged in the fatal sport of cat tossing as late as the 18th century. This was probably related to the wider European phenomenon of cat-tossing feasts, particularly common in France and the Low Countries. These generally took place on St John's Eve or Midsummer and in Perth it was a game associated with the Midsummer or St John's Market. This seems to have been seen as acceptable at the time and not regarded as wantonly cruel, perhaps deriving some credence from Christian teaching on the lack of souls in animals and their permitted exploitation for man's benefit.

## Conclusion

The above analysis has sought to develop an understanding of the changing cultural life of medieval Perth, defining it as a place not divorced from its surroundings and where economic sustenance was not the only agenda. This is neither to decry the importance of the economic life of the town nor to deny the essential intertwining of the cultural and the economic. However much of the evidence for the town's economic activities and contacts has been presented in detail elsewhere, in a variety of excavation reports. But excavation reports as a rule do not venture much beyond the economic assessment of the assemblages and sites they report on and this often leaves a gap in our understanding of wider cultural motivations and mental processes. By examining a range of culturally informative artefacts and institutions I have tried to fill in some of these gaps and to demonstrate the diversity of cultural practice encompassing secular and religious modalities. I have tried to show both individuals and groups within society pursuing these cultural practices, often in contradiction of or contestation with authority.

Christianity was at the centre but it was often, as practised, a syncretic Christianity. It incorporated an imprecise theological understanding and an older stratum of beliefs manifested in the use of amulets and sympathetic magic to protect individuals and property and in the perceived efficacy of the cult of saints (either

at home or on pilgrimage). These practices and beliefs often provided an undertone to more secular practices such as the celebration of romance tales (the Tristram and Iseult mirror case also bears an amuletic inscription), though this also had its own vibrancy. Such celebrations of romance and chivalric culture permeated the whole of society and were not confined to its elites. In the same way the ritualised celebration of the seasonal year was widely celebrated and in Perth it points up how that town was part of the wider countryside, especially in the May-time season. This season was contiguous with the key religious season of renewal, that which followed Easter and came to have as its focus the feast of Corpus Christi. In the context of Perth it is also important to point out that the May-time/Midsummer/Corpus Christi season was also the time of the celebration of the town's patron saint, St John the Baptist. His birthday was (and is) celebrated on the 24 June and its celebration incorporated much from pre-Christian festivities, including midsummer bonfires, common across Europe. It was also when the year's most important market or fair was held, the celebration of which included the tossing of a cat. Corpus Christi was instituted and promulgated by the Papacy but its passionate adoption and adaptation throughout Christendom meant that it was never entirely controlled by the Church. It was both popular and official and celebrated outside the Church by townsfolk – through the guilds – with a variety of processional and dramatic activities. By the

same token the guilds had a significant presence within the parish church through their support and maintenance of a profusion of altars and chantries. The degree to which this represented strongly held beliefs and an attachment to cultural norms is vividly demonstrated through the Reformation when a re-defined Church struggles to outlaw long established religious and secular practices. This clearly visible time of contestation also reminds us that what preceded the Reformation was not a time of stasis in Perth but of on-going change in material expression and of negotiated access to the trappings of status and power. Perth saw its share of religious drama and ritual celebration, generally communally enacted in the open and so socially defining. On a more individual level townsfolk permitted themselves leisure time and pursued a range of gaming activities, whether sanctioned by higher authority or not. Perth during these centuries is geographically on the periphery of Europe but it is fully in tune with European cultural practice, which it moulds to its own shape.

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