

The Economic Development of Medieval St Andrews: The Archaeological Evidence

Introduction:

In their recent study on life in late medieval St Andrews, Elizabeth Ewan has rightly noted that the wealth of surviving charters and writs has placed historians in an excellent position to reconstruct the ecclesiastical burgh's economy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.¹ However, when it comes to the town's economic development over the prior three centuries, reconstructions have proven more difficult to develop due to the ecclesiastical focus of the majority of the surviving sources. Since the 1970s, though, urban archaeologists have made substantive efforts to bridge this gap. In light of their labours, this essay will evaluate how the extant archaeological evidence enhances historical understanding of medieval St Andrews's economic development. Various indicators of economic performance - such as urbanisation, production, and commerce - will be considered in relation to evidence of ecclesiastical construction, quarrying, fishing, hide processing, and ceramics. In doing so, this essay will highlight how the archaeological evidence, particularly when used alongside the written record, can help us to establish and date the presence of economic activity in and around medieval St Andrews and improve our historical understanding of the burgh's long-term economic development.

Urbanisation:

Within St Andrews stand several ruined ecclesiastical buildings that played a central role in the operation of the burgh throughout the latter half of the medieval period. These structures are testament to periods of monumental stone construction: St Rules in the late eleventh century, with further developments in the mid-twelfth century; the Cathedral from the latter half of the twelfth century to the end of the thirteenth; and the Castle during the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, and then again in the late fourteenth century when it was rebuilt.² These projects differed significantly from the construction of relatively small timber structures which would have dominated most of the land inside the burgh throughout the medieval period.³ The construction of these buildings will have created increased demand for local secondary production (masonry, carpentry, metalwork, glass production) and provided work for both local and itinerant labourers and craftspeople.⁴ However, these projects

¹ Elizabeth Ewan, 'Living in the Late Medieval Town of St Andrews', in Michael Brown and Katie Stevenson (eds), *Medieval St Andrews: Church, Cult, City* (Woodbridge, 2017), 117-140.

² Anne Simpson and Sylvia Stevenson, *St Andrews: the archaeological implications of development* (Edinburgh, 1981), 8-11.

³ Derek Hall, *Burgess, Merchant, and Priest* (Edinburgh, 2002), 17.

⁴ H. Johnson, 'Cathedral Building and the Medieval Economy', in *Explorations in Entrepreneurial History*, Vol. 4 (1967), 191-207.

will have also required increased levels of primary production to provide the necessary resources. A charter from the early thirteenth century notes that Hugh of Nydie granted the monks of Balmerino free passage through his lands to quarry stone within Nydie quarry.⁵ A topographical survey conducted within the 1920s for the 2nd edition of the Six-inch OS map appears to have identified this quarry in Nydie Woods to the west of Strathkinness, approximately 320m from the King's Highway to St Andrews.⁶ Subsequent geological analysis of the masonry used to construct Balmerino Abbey determined the stone to be calciferous sandstone, the base strata of the Carboniferous formation, of identical structure to that found at Nydie Quarry.⁷ Whilst such geological analysis does not appear to have been published on the medieval buildings of St Andrews, analysis of some of the carved stones discovered within the priory precinct suggests that they are also composed of Lower Carboniferous sandstone.⁸ The topographical survey identified several other quarry sites surrounding Strathkinness, though as of yet no intrusive survey has taken place to determine their chronology of exploitation. Considering the proximity of these quarries to one of the main roads leading to St Andrews and the evidence of the use of Nydie for monastic construction within Fife, it seems likely that this area was used to extract stone for construction projects within St Andrews. However, Hugh implies the stone was a donation, and it was the monks who were responsible for arranging its quarrying and transport.⁹ There may have been little commercial exchange involved in the acquisition of these resources, particularly considering that the land grant of the Boar's Raik to St Andrews priory included lands at Strathkinness.¹⁰ As such, we perhaps need to view the economic impact of these large, ecclesiastically funded construction projects primarily in terms of growth in secondary production and employment opportunities driven by a redistribution of wealth accumulated by the church.

Fishing:

St Andrews sits atop a headland surrounded to the north and east by the sea. It is likely then that fishing formed an important source of food production for the settlement from its early foundations. Fish bones and marine mollusc shells are present across many of the excavated assemblages from St

⁵ 'Donacio Hugonis de Nidi quarrarij sui de Nidyn.', in William Turnbull (ed.), *The Chartularies of Balmerino and Lindores* (Edinburgh, 1841), 35.

⁶ Ordnance Survey, 'OS Six-inch map, 2nd edition, Fife and Kinross Sheet VIII.SE, 1920', *National Library of Scotland Website*, <<https://maps.nls.uk/view/75530950>>, [accessed 28th November 2022]; R. Smith and N. Johnson, 'Quarry to Abbey: an Ancient Fife route.', in *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, Vol.83 (1949), 166.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁸ Andrew McMillan of the British Geological Survey, cited in Isabel Henderson, 'Descriptive Catalogue of the Surviving Parts of the Monument', in Sally Foster (ed.), *St. Andrews Sarcophagus: A Pictish Masterpiece and its International Connection* (Dublin, 1998), 21.

⁹ 'Donacio Hugonis de Nidi quarrarij sui de Nidyn.', 35.

¹⁰ Simon Taylor, *The Place-Names of Fife Vol. 3: St Andrews and the East Neuk* (Donington, 2009), 420-425.

Andrews.¹¹ Whilst many species of marine molluscs could have been foraged by members of a household for domestic consumption, the presence of bones of economically viable deep water species such as haddock and cod found in deposits excavated at the Byre Theatre and Castlecliffe indicates commercial fishing activity operating out of the burgh.¹² Furthermore, considering the number of shells discovered in medieval archaeological contexts at St Andrews and the other east coast burghs of Scotland, it has been suggested that these burghs may have been involved in the trade of barrelled oysters.¹³ This foodstuff would have required salt to extend its shelf life for transport and trade over distance. Whilst a medieval salt pan has not been excavated in Scotland, there exists written record of salt panning operations in the early thirteenth century in the marshes of Balgove and Strathtyrum which were providing for the needs of the priory.¹⁴ The primary market where the catch was sold within St Andrews was located on North Street, marked by the Fish Cross which stood in between St Salvator's Chapel and the crossroads with North Castle Street.¹⁵ Until the seventeenth century, North Castle Street was known as 'Fish Gait', taking its name from the route between the harbour and the fish market, or from the professions of the street's residents.¹⁶ Excavation at 29 North Street in 1987 indicates that this area of the burgh remained relatively undeveloped until the fourteenth century. However, as the Geddy Map depicts, this area of North Street and much of Fish Gait had been developed by the 1580s.¹⁷ Furthermore, by 1479 South Castle Street was being referred to as 'Fishers Vennel,' strengthening the association between this northeast corner of the burgh and the fishing community.¹⁸ Accordingly, it seems plausible that the development of Fish Gait, and the frontage of the east end of North Street, between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, may be the direct result of the growth of the fishing industry in St Andrews and may also indicate increased prosperity for some of those involved in fishing or selling the catch.

¹¹ Derek Hall and Catherine Smith, 'The Archaeology of Medieval St Andrews', in Michael Brown and Katie Stevenson (eds), *Medieval St Andrews: Church, Cult, City* (Woodbridge, 2017), 177-178; Ewan, 'Living in the Late Medieval Town of St Andrews', 128.

¹² R. Ceron-Carrasco, 'The Fish Remains', in C. J. Moloney and L. Baker, 'Evidence for the Form and Nature of a Medieval Burgage Plot in St Andrews: An Archaeological Excavation on the Site of the Byre Theatre, Abbey Street, St Andrews', in *Tayside and Fife Archaeological Journal*, Vol.7 (2001), 73; John Lewis, 'Excavations at St Andrews, Castlecliffe, 1988-90', in *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, Vol.126 (1996), 672.

¹³ Hall and Smith, 'The Archaeology of Medieval St Andrews', 178.

¹⁴ 'Conuentio inter nof t Archidiaconū · fci Andř ·', in T Thomson (ed.), *Liber Cartarum Prioratus Sancti Andree in Scotia; E Registro Ipso in Archivis Baronum De Panmure Hodie Asservato* (Edinburgh, 1841), 315-16.

¹⁵ Ewan, 'Living in the Late Medieval Town of St Andrews', 128-129.

¹⁶ Robert Smart and Kenneth Fraser, *St Andrews Street Names* (St Andrews, 1995), 45.

¹⁷ Peter Clark, 'North Street', in M.J. Rains and D.W. Hall (eds.), *Excavation in St Andrews 1980-89: A Decade of Archaeology in a Historic Scottish Burgh* (Glenrothes, 1997), 31-35; John Geddy, 'S. Andre sive Andreapolis Scotiae Universitas Metropolitana.', *National Library of Scotland Website* <<https://maps.nls.uk/view/00001427>>, [accessed 28th November 2022].

¹⁸ St Andrews, St Andrews University Library, B65/23/82c, Thomas Walker, Notarial Instrument – 18 March 1478 [1479]. Good

Tanneries:

Whilst a charter of Walter Marr informs us that by 1557 a guild had been formed by the tanners and cordiners of St Andrews, the archaeological record helps us to further understand the presence and development of this industry over the preceding centuries.¹⁹ Many of the bones of sheep and cattle recovered from St Andrews' medieval archaeological contexts are from more mature animals. As Derek Hall and Catherine Smith have argued, this suggests that these livestock were likely not being raised primarily for the purpose of providing meat for the inhabitants of St Andrews, but for the production of large, durable hides or wool.²⁰ The most significant evidence of a medieval tannery was discovered at Castlecliffe between 1988 and 1990. Here, the foundations of a structure that housed four tanning pits were discovered, dated by their morphology and the pottery assemblage to the fourteenth century.²¹ This suggests that a commercially minded individual or individuals took advantage of an opportunity to establish a workshop on land that had previously been occupied by timber dwellings in the thirteenth century, perhaps abandoned due to the Scottish Wars of Independence or following the destruction of the Castle in 1337. Considering that 95% of the bones recovered from the infill of one of the tanning pits were from cats, it also seems likely that alongside the processing of cattle, sheep, and goat hides, the site was also used to prepare cat skins, which may have been exported or worked into garments by the town's tailors.²² However, as anyone who has encountered tanneries before knows, the process produces a deeply unpleasant smell, which may be the reason that the evidence of tanning activity at this site disappears at approximately the same time as the Castle is being rebuilt and occupied by Bishop Walter Trail in the 1390s.²³

Tanneries like that located at Castlecliff produced leather to be used by such craftspeople as the cordiners mentioned in the charter of Walter Marr. However, it is likely that some of these workshops will have also produced parchment. Whilst we have written evidence of parchment makers supporting the students and teachers of St Andrews within the 1413 Papal Bull founding the university, demand for this material in St Andrews stretched back further.²⁴ The earliest surviving manuscript believed to have been produced within the priory of St Andrews, is an *Opera* of St

¹⁹ St Andrews, St Andrews University Library, B65/23/330c, Walter Marr, Charter - 12 March 1556 [1557].

²⁰ Hall and Smith, 'The Archaeology of Medieval St Andrews', 176.

²¹ John Lewis, 'Excavations at St Andrews, Castlecliffe, 1988-90', 615-624.

²² *Ibid.*, 634, 669-671.

²³ *Ibid.*, 615, 624-625.

²⁴ Pope Benedict XIII, 'Papal bull of foundation of the University of St Andrews, 1412 (UYUY100/facs), in W.C. Dickinson, G. Donaldson, I.A. Milne (eds.), *A Source Book of Scottish History*, vol.1, *From the Earliest Times to 1424* (London, 1958 - 2nd edition), 212-216.

Augustine of Hippo dating from the late twelfth century.²⁵ The work numbers 323 folios and will have required hundreds of hides to produce. It seems likely that the demand for parchment will have increased from the foundation of the priory in the 1140s, before expanding further following the completion of the Cathedral in the thirteenth century - the cloisters of which featured at least two bookpresses to display these manuscripts. Assuming an increase in local parchment production based on the urbanisation of ecclesiastical property is speculative. However, this trajectory of growth would match the broader trend of increased manuscript production associated with the expansion of monastic houses within the British Isles between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, as identified by Eltjo Buringh's codicological and statistical study of 30,000 surviving manuscripts.²⁶

Ceramics:

As is common in medieval settlements, ceramics have represented the most prolific type of material evidence recovered from excavations within St Andrews. Many of the potsherds discovered have been categorised as Scottish white gritty ware, dated by association to between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, which were produced in vast quantities in Scotland between the rivers Tay and Tweed.²⁷ However, perhaps because ceramic production tended to be located on the peripheries of a settlement, which in the case of St Andrews has been subject to significant development over recent centuries, archaeologists have yet to identify a pottery production site within the burgh or in its immediate surroundings.²⁸ As such, it is unclear whether St Andrews was a major production centre for these ceramics, or if the burgh instead acted as one of the most important consumers for a local production site within Fife. One centre of production may have been located at Tentsmuir. Here, during the 1930s and 1940s, several thousand Scottish white gritty ware sherds were recovered from midden mounds, about a dozen of which were identified in relative proximity to the River Eden, which was used as a trading port with St Andrews – though a kiln site has not been discovered.²⁹ In 1984, George Haggarty suggested, in light of the recently excavated ceramic assemblage from Kelso Abbey, that the arrival of the monks in the twelfth century may have been directly linked to the growth of production of Scottish white gritty wares along the Tweed - either through their own work or by encouraging tenants to develop production centres on the Tironensians' recently acquired land grants.³⁰ As this

²⁵ 'St Augustine of Hippo, "Opera"', *St Andrews University Collections Website*, <<https://collections.st-andrews.ac.uk/item/collected-works-of-augustine-of-hippo/762337>>, [accessed 28th November 2022].

²⁶ Eltjo Buringh, *Medieval Manuscript Production in the Latin West: Explorations with a Global Database* (Leiden, 2011), 348-350, 363.

²⁷ Hall and Smith, 'The Archaeology of Medieval St Andrews', 174.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 175.

²⁹ Derek Hall, 'Scottish White Gritty Ware from antiquarian excavations in Tentsmuir Forest, Fife', in *Tayside and Fife Archaeological Journal*, Vol.8 (2002), 138-144; Ewan, 'Living in the Late Medieval Town of St Andrews', 122.

³⁰ George Haggarty, 'Observations on the ceramic material from phase 1 pits BY and AQ', in Christopher Tabraham, 'Excavations at Kelso Abbey', in *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, Vol.114 (1984), 395-397.

ceramic style is not associated with eleventh century archaeological contexts, it is quite possible that the foundation of the priory, followed by the foundation of the ecclesiastical burgh, were the key stimuli that underpinned the relatively sudden explosion of white gritty ware production within Fife during the twelfth century.³¹ However, as an absolute chronology for Fife-made white gritty ware has yet to be established, we are currently unable to determine how St Andrews' consumption of this ceramic style developed during the late medieval period.³²

Commerce:

Attempts to understand the development of commerce in St Andrews have largely been frustrated by the lived-in nature of the burgh's key commercial areas. Even small-scale excavations have predominantly been confined to the backlands of the three main streets. Moreover, the Victorian destruction of associated infrastructure, such as the tolbooth and the market cross, has also caused issues.³³ Such issues have been exacerbated, though, by a lack of published material from the 2011 watching brief conducted on Market Street which excavated the foundations of the tolbooth, the market cross, and the tron.³⁴ The best archaeological evidence of overseas commercial connections, either direct or indirect, to the burgh comes in the form of foreign ceramics such as Scarborough Type 1 and 2, Low Countries Greyware, and pottery of unidentified French origin.³⁵ However, they appear to have been discovered in insufficient quantities to make any reliable assessment about how the quantity of these imported ceramics fluctuated over time.³⁶ Therefore, it has not been possible, for example, to use ceramic evidence to understand how Scotland's supposed trade-deficit with the Low Countries following the Wars of Scottish Independence manifested in St Andrews, or to understand the shift in Scottish overseas commerce from the Low Countries to France during the early sixteenth century.³⁷ In fact, so few foreign ceramics have been found compared to the other east coast burghs that it has been suggested that the local industry was sufficient to cater to local demand and that minimal quantities of European wares were imported to St Andrews - perhaps reflecting the unsuitability of the harbour for larger trading vessels until the sixteenth century.³⁸ However, it is

³¹ Derek Hall, 'The pottery', in M.J. Rains and D.W. Hall (eds.), *Excavation in St Andrews 1980-89: A Decade of Archaeology in a Historic Scottish Burgh* (Glenrothes, 1997), 56.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ David Bowler, 'Forward', in M.J. Rains and D.W. Hall (eds.), *Excavation in St Andrews 1980-89: A Decade of Archaeology in a Historic Scottish Burgh* (Glenrothes, 1997), 1.

³⁴ CANMORE, 'St Andrews, Market Street, General', *CANMORE Website*, <<https://canmore.org.uk/site/94528/st-andrews-market-street-general>>, [accessed 28th November 2022].

³⁵ Derek Hall, 'The pottery', 40-55.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 56-57.

³⁷ Alexander Stevenson, *Trade between Scotland and the Low Countries in the Later Middle Ages* (Aberdeen, 1982), i-iv.

³⁸ Hall and Smith, 'The Archaeology of Medieval St Andrews', 174-175.

equally possible that this phenomenon reflects a lack of excavation at the east end of South Street, where the wealthier burghesses who could easily afford such foreign imports dwelled. As a result of these present challenges, archaeological evidence from St Andrews is currently insufficient to reconstruct the development of overseas commerce within the burgh during the medieval period.

Conclusion:

Much of what can be understood about the economic development of St Andrews based upon the extant archaeological evidence relates to the archaeology of urbanisation and frequently highlights the centrality of the bishop and the priory as driving forces behind economic growth. The monumental development of St Rules, the Cathedral, and the Castle would have stimulated secondary production and broader economic activity through employment opportunities. However, given the likelihood that stone was extracted from church land or given in alms, it is unclear whether the associated increase in resource extraction had a significant impact on the economy. It appears that the development of the north-east of the burgh from the fourteenth century was directly linked to the fishing community and may indicate the growth of this industry and its trade within the burgh and beyond. Excavation at Castlecliffe suggests an expansion of tannery activity into this area during the period of the Castle's destruction. It is also possible that growth in ecclesiastical and monastic infrastructure resulted in a growth in parchment production – a somewhat speculative conclusion that nevertheless is supported by analysis of manuscript production. There is clear evidence that St Andrews was a major consumer of Scottish white gritty ware from the inception of the burgh, and production might be directly related to the establishment of the priory. However, as kiln sites have not been discovered, it is unclear whether the burgh also acted as a major producer. A lack of established chronology for these wares has also inhibited attempts to monitor consumption or production of pottery over time. Furthermore, the small quantities of discovered foreign wares have hindered attempts to reconstruct the development of overseas commerce. This has led to suggestions that imports of foreign ceramics were minimal or that direct overseas trade was relatively insignificant. As such, it is clear that many questions still remain unanswered regarding both local and long-distance trade. Therefore, in order for archaeological evidence to further enhance the historical understanding of the economic development of St Andrews, future research should focus on analysis of both native and foreign wares and upon the key commercial area of central Market Street and east South Street.

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