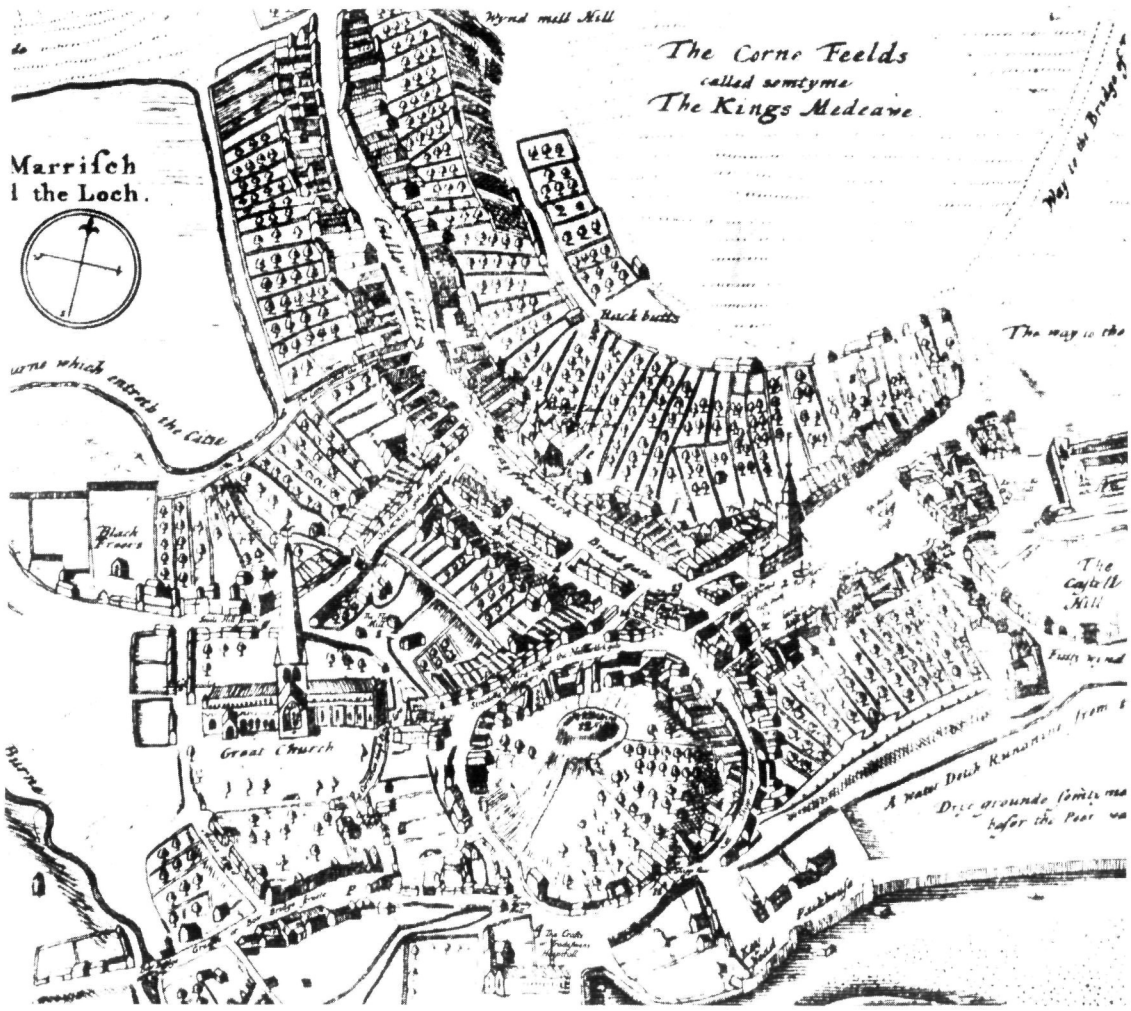
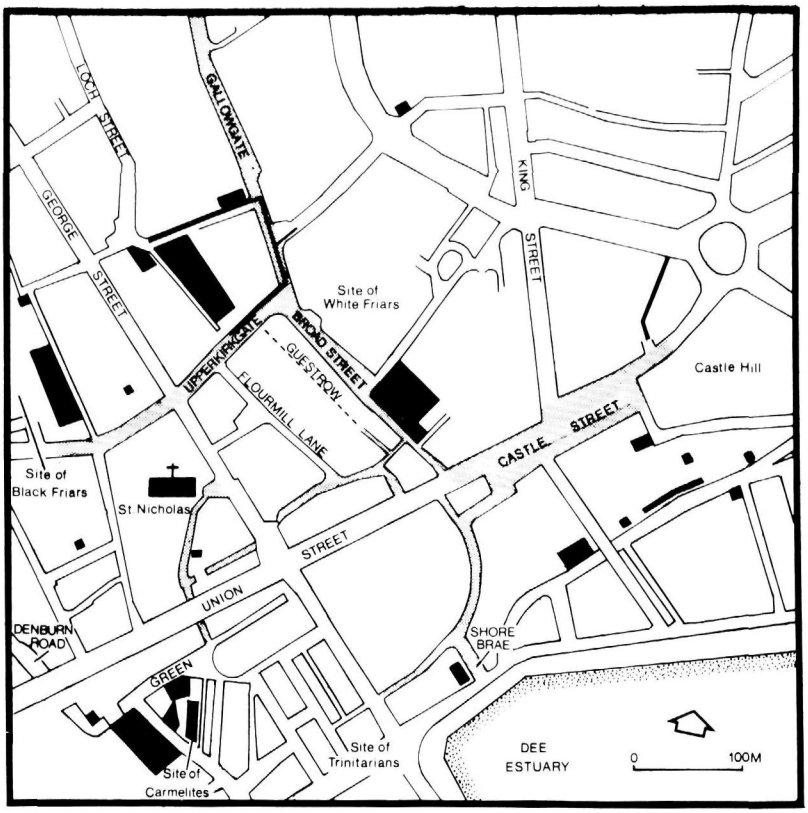
8 CONCLUSIONS J C MURRAY

With the publication of this volume, archaeology in Aberdeen is at a watershed. Eight years of generally fairly small scale excavations allow us to reach some tentative conclusions concerning the town's development, topography and economy in the medieval period. Now, with the imminent onslaught of a major central development, such an assessment is vital in order to focus the aims of our future archaeological involvement before a large area of the medieval town is destroyed.

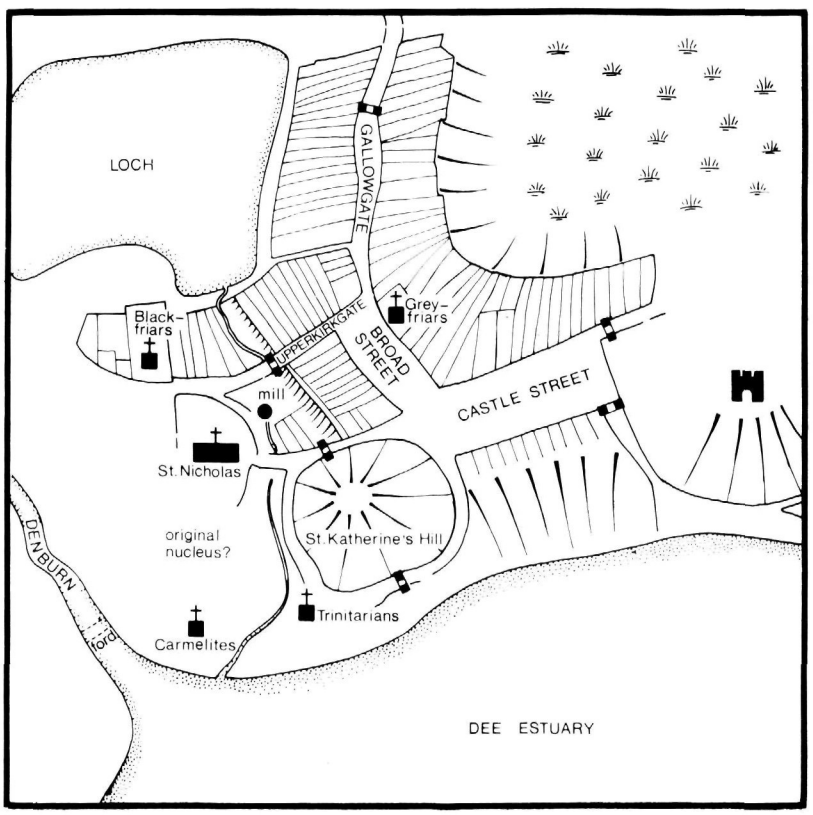
The granting of trading privileges to the town by David I (1124-53) presupposes that the nucleus of a settlement already existed in the early to mid-12th century. None of the excavations within the area enclosed by the ports has produced anything that can be dated earlier than, arguably, the late 12th century. It is therefore worth examining the hypothesis that the original settlement moved. Several local historians (Wyness 1972, 11) have argued that the original settlement was in the area of the Green in the 12th century. However, excavations at the W end of the Green at 2-12 Rennie's Wynd



Ill 130 : Detail of Parson Gordon's map of 1661: the medieval burgh



Ill 131 : Map of Aberdeen showing the excavated sites in relation to the surviving medieval street pattern



Ill 132 : Map of medieval Aberdeen showing main features and topography

(Ill 1:15), 45-59 Green (Ill 1:17) and 67-71 Green (Ill 1:16) have revealed no medieval structures and little artefactual evidence. The S end of 67-71 Green and the site of 2-12 Rennie's Wynd appear to have been largely estuarine and 45-59 Green may be interpreted as garden or cultivated ground attached to the Carmelite Friary in the medieval period. If such an early nucleus existed therefore, and the ex-urban position of St Nicholas church is a strong argument that it may have, it seems reasonable to suggest that it may have stretched from the E end of the Green, N to the church, skirting the base of St Katherine's Hill. Negative archaeological evidence from Harriet St (Ill 1:2) and the Art Gallery extension (Ill 1:1) suggests that it did not extend N of the church. Evidence is very slight, but the church itself appears to have been at least a 12th-century foundation (Hunter, 1974, 240) and among the finds from Hunter's excavation in the church was a coin of Malcolm IV (1153-65). If such had been the site of the original settlement it not only explains the position of the church, but perhaps also the reason for the movement of the town. Expansion on the Green site would have been difficult; to S and W were the estuaries of the Dee and Denburn, to the E was the steep W slope of St Katherine's Hill (so steep that it was still not built up in 1661 when Parson Gordon drew his map). So, one might suggest that by the late 12th century there was a gradual move of the focus of the settlement to the more defensible area to the W on the higher ground near the castle. Incidental support for this is suggested by the position of the lands granted to the religious orders in the mid-13th century (Ill 132). Without exception, they were on the margins of this hypothetical early settlement. Comparison with other towns such as Perth (Stavert 1981, 10) or Canterbury (Tatton-Brown 1981, fig 5) shows that lands granted to the religious orders were generally on marginal or less valuable land and this would accord with the decline of the Green-St Nicholas area as the main settlement became established.

By the late 12th or early 13th century it is clear from a mixture of archaeological and historical sources that the main streets within the ports existed. The street pattern, apparently largely dictated by topography, consisted of two main streets (both meeting near the base of St Katherine's Hill): Broad Street/Gallowgate, with the important route to N and W, and Castle Street, leading to Castle Hill.

Although the main medieval market in Aberdeen was on Castle Street where the flesh and fish crosses remain, it is possible that a second, possibly earlier market existed in Broad Street; the island blocks of 7-67 Broad Street between Guest Row and Broad Street, may represent the colonization of this market area. Indeed Parson Gordon in the commentary to his map refers to the fact that this area, built up by 1661, had formerly been one street (Parson Gordon 1842, 11). There appears to have been no attempt to develop a parallel street system behind either of the two streets, on the pattern which Adams (1978, 33) proposes for some of the early E coast burghs, particularly in the Forth/Tay area. Again, this may be partly topographical, due to the sloping ground on either side of these two streets, or possibly it is due to a lack of pressure on land resulting in the rigs not being sufficiently built up in the medieval period to necessitate a back access. Of the other streets within the medieval area, Upperkirkgate, leading to the church, is well attested archaeologically and Netherkirkgate with its Port existed from at least 1400, as did Futty Wynd and Ship Row. The Vennel/St Paul Street is shown on Gordon's map of 1661 and there is a reference to it in 1526 (see p 77) but it probably did not exist in the medieval period; there was no evidence in the British Telecom trenches along and across the street and there was no evidence in 42 Loch Street, 42 St Paul Street Area G or 45-47 Gallowgate, of any medieval properties with access to it. The town, as it developed by the 13th century, extended on the high ground between St Katherine's Hill to the W, the quayside on the Dee estuary to the S stretching E to the Castle, and on the N to the Loch. It was not a walled town but there appears to have been a considerable degree of natural defence: to the N there was the Loch, along the E margin of the town there was a steep slope down to marshy ground (seen in British Telecom trenches in Little John Street (Ill 1:6) and in an observation site in West North Street (Ill 1:10) and to the S there was a very steep slope to the waterline. The actual line of the shore was probably considerably further inland than at present. The Shore Brae (Ill 1:19) and the Virginia Street sites (Ill 1:20, 21, 23-26) show considerable post-medieval land reclamation which has altered this line. The quay at Shore Brae gives a fair indication of the late-medieval shore line. To the SW, St Katherine's Hill formed a considerable barrier. The only side not naturally defended was the W side, facing St Nicholas church. However, Gordon's map of 1661 shows what may be a bank along

a line between the Netherkirkgate Port and the Upperkirkgate Port and N to the Loch. This may include the culverting of the stream from the Loch mentioned in Gordon's commentary (1842, 10) but it also appears to form some sort of minor defence or, at the least, definition of the edge of the town at this side, which in any case was further protected by the Denburn itself to the W.

One result of the town's position was that, as the settlement grew, it was again confined by natural boundaries, the high spur towards Gallowgate being one of the few areas for expansion, which possibly explains why the position of this port, generally based on the name Porthill (Gordon fails to mark its position on the map), is so far N. The Port may have moved as the town extended. It is hoped that future work on the Gallowgate may plot the exact extent of the town in this direction in the medieval period.

It is generally suggested (eg Adams 1978, 37 who quotes Aberdeen Burgh Records xviii) that the only man-made defence to the burgh other than the ports (without reference to the W bank on Gordon's map), consisted of strong walls at the end of each rig. Certainly Gordon shows a stylised wall or bank around each property in 1661, and Sharpe's Prospect of Aberdeen looking from the NE shows garden walls at the ends of the properties behind Broad Street in 1732. However, excavation does not altogether confirm that this was the case in the earlier period. On the 42 St Paul Street site there was evidence of a possible E-W boundary in Area D, appearing to have taken the form of a bank (D51). Unfortunately this could only be excavated in a small area so that it was not altogether clear if it was indeed a rig end boundary, or a feature within a rig. It did, however, appear to have been near to the N edge of medieval activity on this plot. Nothing comparable was excavated in 42 Loch St/Drums Lane but there was a noticeable reduction in the amount of medieval material N of this point. The British Telecom trench along St Paul Street showed an almost total lack of medieval material until it was level with the backs of the properties fronting on the Gallowgate, where the levels became rich with medieval deposits. Equally, observation of the British Telecom trenches in Little John St showed an abrupt break in medieval deposits about halfway down the hill, unaccompanied by any observed traces of bank or wall; however the traces of a removed wattle fence might not have been seen in the conditions of the observation.

To summarize, the backs of the rigs were possibly less formally defined in the medieval period than is often suggested. Such boundaries as there were may, in the early period, have been mainly intended to control any livestock that were kept in the rig.

Archaeology is beginning to reveal the detailed planning within the town. The long narrow rigs lying at right angles to the street were particularly clear in 42 St Paul Street and to some extent in Broad Street. On 42 St Paul Street, where the boundaries were examined in detail, the 13th-century plots can be shown to have been initially fairly irregular in size. During this period there were substantial buildings on the Broad Street and Gallowgate frontages and the backland areas of Queen Street (Midden Area) and 42 St Paul Street were partially built up.

At the end of the century, c 1300 according to the pottery dating, there was a change. On the 42 St Paul Street site, the boundaries extending back from the Upperkirkgate were redefined, creating more regular plots of 5.5-6.0 m width; whether this was an isolated instance or whether some degree of planning was imposed by the Burgh Council, will only be shown by comparable excavations in other parts of the town.

The actual appearance of the properties is only patchily understood; the frontages on Broad Street and Gallowgate both included remains of buildings which may have stood with their long axis parallel to the street. The structure of these frontage buildings is uncertain but there is an indication that they may have been more sophisticated than the contemporary backlands buildings excavated on 42 St Paul Street. These small post-and-wattle buildings lay along the rigs at right angles to the street, behind the frontage properties, with access up lanes on some of the boundary lines. One such cobbled lane has been excavated. Unlike the comparable site of High Street Perth, the backland area in St Paul Street was not fully built up, nor was there any degree of subdivision within the medieval backlands on sites yet excavated in Aberdeen; only building SAN stood within its own enclosed yard. The overall impression is, therefore, of buildings which were not fully independent of the frontage owners, the occupiers being perhaps poorer craftsmen and their families, or others dependent on the frontage owners. There is no evidence that any craft was undertaken on the excavated

sites with the exception of 6-8 Castle Terrace. At 42 St Paul Street there was a baking oven in one rig but this may have been for domestic use.

The small degree of backland building on this site in the 13th century ceased almost totally during the 14th century when the rigs were used primarily as yards. Throughout the 13th and 14th-century phases there is no impression of population pressure in this area of the burgh. Equally, the fact that the Queen Street (Midden Area) site became a midden in the 14th century and that a large area of Broad Street/Gallowgate could be given to the Franciscans in the 1460's cumulatively suggest a lack of land pressure at this period. Although on the St Paul Street site there was one substantial 15th/17th-century building in the backland, there was relatively little build up of the rigs even in the 17th century when Gordon shows in general only one or two structures directly behind the frontage block and the back of the rigs remaining as garden land.

The large garden areas within the rigs in the medieval period underline an impression that in the 13th and 14th centuries, some animals may have been kept in the burgh. The weed seeds noted in the botanic report may also have come from these backland areas. One might suggest that some herbs and vegetables were grown, but the botanic evidence neither confirms nor denies this. Certainly the areas excavated at 42 St Paul Street Area G and 42 Loch Street, yielded what appeared to be homogenous cultivated earth with some medieval pottery.

This somewhat rural aspect is emphasised by the strong evidence of contact between the town and its surrounding countryside. Not only was Aberdeen a point of export for wool and skins but it was also a consumer of many products from the hinterland. The bone report identifies the bones of domestic food animals many of which must have been brought into the town for slaughter, and the deer, bird and fish bones suggest hunting and fishing in the hinterland. Equally, in the botanic report, a number of wild foods are noted which must have been gathered outside the town: fruits such as blaeberry, rowan, bramble and raspberry, also marginal food plants such as fat hen and nettle. It is clear that moss was gathered for a number of uses. Cultivated cereals such as barley and oats were also brought in.

The post-and-wattle construction of many of the buildings and fences stresses the interaction with the hinterland still further, even a small wattle building (3 m^2) needs in the region of 1000 wattles, posts, clay for daubing and broom, heather, straw or rushes for thatch. All these materials would have been easily available near the town and it has been suggested that the backland buildings were often built by their occupants, so it is probable that they would have cut and gathered the materials themselves.

There was little evidence of the craft industries on the sites excavated to date. While there is a fair amount of leatherwork, of presumably local origin, there are few offcuts to suggest a workshop in the vicinity of any of the excavated sites. The evidence of spinning and weaving and the presence of seeds of flax and of possible dye plants, all suggest cloth production, but generally on a small domestic scale rather than as a craft industry. The fabric of some of the pottery (Chapter 3) has been identified as being of local clay but again there is not yet any indication of the location of the potteries, although they were probably peripheral to the town, perhaps in the Clayhill area to the SW of the medieval burgh. The 17th-century smithy on the Castle Terrace site provides the only excavated evidence of metal working other than random slag samples. It must be stressed however that the lack of evidence of any of the craft industries is almost certainly a reflection of the areas excavated to date, as these appear to have been predominantly residential in the 13th and 14th centuries although the historical records for the St Paul Street site show that by the 16th and 17th centuries there were several workshops and shops there.

Trade is well illustrated by the archaeological material. In particular by the pottery, the source of which can often be readily identified. The main emphasis is on N Sea trade, along the E coast to SE Scotland, E England, particularly Yorkshire and Humberside, and across the N sea to the Low Countries. The scarcity of Scottish pottery in Bergen would suggest little contact between Aberdeen and N Scandinavia at this period. The French products may have reached Aberdeen through entrepôts rather than directly and the isolated sherds of Spanish lustreware and French polychrome must be regarded as strays, possibly due to an individual traveller or to an isolated contact. The odd luxuries from the Mediterranean, such as the Italian silk, the figs and grapes, and the ivory spindle whorl may also have been derived from trade through an entrepôt.

The emphasis on the Low Countries is continued as late as the 17th century, clay tobacco pipes of Dutch manufacture having been found, in particular on the Castle Terrace site. However, it must be stressed that these are a very small item of trade and would, at most, have been a small part of a much larger load.

Before examining the apparent shifts in trade patterns reflected by the pottery it is worth taking note of Colin Platt's remarks that in Southampton, there were some major discrepancies between the picture of trade given by the pottery and that given by the very full customs records of Southampton (Platt and Coleman-Smith 1975, 35-36). Pottery is one of the few identifiable and surviving objects of trade, but one must remember that it must often have been an incidental one and that by far the greater number of the imports may have been food or other organic products which have not survived. It is perhaps only in relation to Scarborough ware that one can see a trade in ceramic per se.

In conclusion, we are beginning to build a more complete picture of Aberdeen in the medieval period. This is possibly all the more important in any assessment of the Scottish burghs because Aberdeen appears from the archaeological evidence of the medieval period to have been a burgh of moderate size and prosperity and therefore perhaps more typical than Perth with its great range of exotic imports and highly built up backlands.

This is perhaps a useful counterbalance to the assessments of the purely documentary evidence which have placed Aberdeen in the 13th and early 14th centuries as one of the most prosperous burghs in Scotland. In the records for Customs receipts quoted in the *Historical Atlas of Scotland* (McNeill and Nicholson (eds) 1975, 63-4, fig 69), Aberdeen trade was very high in the early 14th century, rivalled only by Berwick and Edinburgh and to a lesser extent by Dundee. Although there is some apparent decline in the later 14th century, the Customs Receipts still show it to have been one of the major E coast ports outside the Firth of Forth. Perhaps this predominance is most explicable when it is realised that the taxable exports in this period were wool, fleeces and hides and that Aberdeen as the main NE port would have been the primary outlet for a very considerable rural hinterland. In the assessment of burgh taxation (McNeill and Nicholson (eds) 1975, 64, fig 70), the percentage paid by Aberdeen in 1326-31 exceeds that of any of the other burghs for which records were available: it is almost twice that of Perth although this may reflect a difference in the number of burgesses taxed. Yet while both sets of statistics show Aberdeen in the early 14th century as a very rich burgh, a comparison between Aberdeen and Perth, the two Scottish burghs where most excavation has yet taken place, shows that the apparent standard of living in Perth was considerably higher with more exotic imports and on the excavated sites the backlands were far more highly built up. The picture is equally true if Aberdeen is compared with English towns such as Southampton (Platt and Coleman-Smith 1975) or Kings Lynn (Clark and Carter 1977).

Although it may be argued that choice of excavated sites may change the emphasis, the coverage of sites in Aberdeen, although lacking much in the Castle Street area, is otherwise sufficient for a fairly valid comparison. Aberdeen was an important and wealthy port but this need not necessarily be equated with a sophisticated urban environment. Not withstanding the travels of its merchants and the occasional presence of the Crown, Aberdeen should be regarded as generally isolated from the centres of medieval fashion and as therefore perhaps all the more typical of the majority of Scottish medieval burghs.