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# Poor commons and kings' propines: food and status in later medieval Aberdeen

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## ABSTRACT

Assuring the supply of food and drink in the medieval Scottish town, and safeguarding the town's reputation in relation to this, were at the heart of the burgh government's duties. Some foods were specially associated with the poor; conversely, provision and consumption of high-status comestibles was at the core of guild ceremonial, civic pageantry and celebration, and hospitality offered to important visitors. There was a recognised ranking of crafts engaged in food and drink production, and those who failed to meet expectations were threatened with loss of equipment or status – although burgh officers risked their own reputation when they failed to carry out the prescribed penalties. Employers were expected to give meals to their servants and townspeople had a mutual responsibility to provide sustenance for those engaged in public service. Status and reputation, individual and collective, and social relationships, depended on the successful provision of food and drink.

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The 'material turn' in historical studies has drawn our attention to the 'lives' of durable material objects and the new meanings and purposes taken on by ornaments, clothes, jewels, plate and furniture as they outlived their owners and journeyed from one context to the next. By comparison, consumables – food, drink and fuel which by their very nature were supposed to be used up and needed constant replenishment – had very short lives. Did that detract from their capacity to be 'meaningful' beyond their obviously necessary functions? In the Scottish context, for example, food and drink and other small items (such as cut cloth) were exempt from the normal requirement for commercial transactions that there be a surety for the purchase;<sup>1</sup> nor are

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<sup>1</sup> 'Fragmenta collecta', in *Ancient Laws and Customs of the Burgh of Scotland*, vol. 1: AD 1124–1424, ed. C. Innes (Edinburgh: Scottish Burgh Records Society, 1868), 161.

A number of medieval Scottish terms are used in this paper. The English equivalents are given in brackets; occasionally, more complex terms are explained in the footnotes. When sums of money are used, they are given as encountered in the record and the value of individual coins is explained. Sums expressed as money of account (that is, in pounds, shillings and pence) are not directly comparable to amounts encountered in English records because the two currencies did not operate at parity after 1367. See Nicholas Mayhew's chapter on the medieval

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processed food and drink encountered as bequests, nor were they pawned or even dis-trained, although of course the raw materials from which they were made – grain, live-stock, fish – might well be.<sup>2</sup> Yet, in the towns of medieval Scotland the very perishability and the constant need to replenish food gave it meanings and significance beyond the purely calorific or monetary value; and, because food mattered to everyone, it is a connecting thread enabling us to see relationships between people that might otherwise be hidden.

The records of the burgh of Aberdeen have come down to us in an almost complete series from 1398 to the present day (and thus earlier than the equivalent records for any other Scottish town).<sup>3</sup> They are wide ranging in their business and provide evidence about food and drink in a several contexts. There was a constant stream of bye-laws (often referred to as statutes), sometimes with instructions to officers about enforcement, and there are proceedings concerning those who infringed them. There are lawsuits involving individual members of the burgh community who had failed to supply or pay for food or drink. There are details of the admission of new burgesses and guild members with the associated rituals; and there are just a very few accounts of the expenditure of provosts,<sup>4</sup> bailies (burgh officials) and deans of guild.

As a royal burgh Aberdeen had the privilege of making bye-laws governing trade, so those concerning the quality, distribution and price of food and drink feature abundantly in the record. As a town and thus a place where most people were not engaged in agricultural occupations, Aberdeen relied on external supplies of food.<sup>5</sup> It is true that townspeople, in Aberdeen as elsewhere, were able to grow some of what they needed. Townspeople had holdings of arable land contiguous to the town itself; some pastured cattle on the common ground. Burgage tenements, in Aberdeen as elsewhere, may have included gardens.<sup>6</sup> And, judging from the repeated legislation in the records about pigs having to have rings in their noses (to prevent them from rooting), it does seem as though keeping pigs was a common activity;

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Scottish currency in Elizabeth Gemmill and Nicholas Mayhew, *Changing Values in Medieval Scotland: A Study of Prices, Money, and Weights and Measures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 111–42.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Gemmill, 'Debt, Distraint, Display, and Dead Men's Treasure: Material Culture in Late Medieval Aberdeen', *Journal of Medieval History* 46 (2020): 350–72.

<sup>3</sup> The Council Registers are among the Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire Archives, class reference ACA, CA/1/1/1–16. The present essay deploys material from volumes 1–16, covering the period 1398–1540. Extracts from the Council Registers have been published as follows: J. Stuart, ed., *Extracts from the Council Register of Aberdeen, 1398–1570* (Aberdeen: Spalding Club, 1844); W.C. Dickinson, ed., *Early Records of the Burgh Aberdeen: 1317, 1398–1407*. Scottish History Society Publications, 3rd series, 49 (Edinburgh: Scottish History Society, 1957); E. Gemmill, ed., *Aberdeen Guild Court Records, 1437–1468*. Scottish History Society, 5th series, 17 (Edinburgh: Scottish History Society, 2005). Volumes 1–8 of the registers, covering the period 1398–1511, have been digitised and transcribed in a project funded by The Leverhulme Trust, Aberdeen City Council, and the Research Institute for Irish and Scottish Studies at the University of Aberdeen: <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/riiss/projects/aberdeen-registers-online-213.php> For the documentary records of Scottish burghs, see Iain Flett and Judith Cripps, 'Documentary Sources', in *The Scottish Medieval Town*, eds. Michael Lynch, Michael Spearman and Geoffrey Stell (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1988), 18–41.

<sup>4</sup> The provost (Latin *prepositus*) is also referred to as the alderman in the records; I have used the term provost throughout the essay for the sake of consistency.

<sup>5</sup> This is part of Susan Reynolds' working definition of a town, the other being that townspeople saw themselves as 'different' from the people around them: see D.M. Palliser, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, vol. 1: 500–1300 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1–15 (5).

<sup>6</sup> C. Dyer, 'Gardens and Garden Produce in the Later Middle Ages', in *Food in Medieval England: Diet and Nutrition*, eds. C.M. Woolgar, Dale Serjeantson and Tony Waldron (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 27–40 (29).

pigs, apparently, adapted well to town life.<sup>7</sup> Even so, most food did come from outside.

The details about Aberdeen's trading privileges and how the controls worked have been discussed at length elsewhere and do not need further elaboration here.<sup>8</sup> But the main purpose was to ensure that all food came to the market before it was purchased by townspeople, including craftsmen and retailers as well as consumers buying for their own use. Thus grain, livestock and dairy produce coming from the hinterland could not be sold privately to townspeople going out to meet farmers on their way in to the town; fish landed by boatmen off the coast at Footdee could not be sold at the shore; nor could fruit laden on inbound merchant vessels be bought at the quayside.

Any such activities defrauded the customs and weakened the role of the market. It undermined the status of the market cross as the symbol of the burgh's monopoly on regional trade. It compromised the town's sense of its identity, separate from the surrounding countryside. The idea that farmers, or 'landmen', were 'other' and separate was, indeed, implicit in the burgh government's concern to uphold its reputation for creditworthiness. On this depended its ability to attract landmen and overseas merchants to trade. The town's reputation was particularly exposed when it came to food because so many people, of different means, needed to buy it. The concern with reputation is particularly apparent in the sixteenth century. A statute of April 1529 governing activities of fleshers (butchers) required them to have sureties for paying landward men for the livestock that they bought, to keep the town 'scatheless' and 'wnreprewit' and 'murmwrit' with the landmen in future if the fleshers failed to pay.<sup>9</sup> In January 1532 an inquiry was ordered into those women who bought victuals (grain) in great in the market but who were not 'responsible' and lacked the means to pay for them. The names were to be compiled and proclaimed openly at the market cross so that the landmen would hear and any failure to pay if they did trade with such women would be at their own risk.<sup>10</sup> And in May 1541 when a large consignment of barley had been bought on the town's behalf, the neighbours (townspeople) were summoned to come and pay for their share so that the foreigners could be paid and the provost and bailies not slandered and murmured by them.<sup>11</sup>

Members of the burgh government were clearly concerned to safeguard their own pockets and their reputation; more generally those in authority in medieval Scottish towns used language to appeal to the common interests of the community and a sense of shared endeavour while they were in reality more concerned with staying

<sup>7</sup> Umberto Albarella, 'Pig Husbandry and Pork Consumption', in *Food in Medieval England*, eds. Woolgar, Serjeantson and Waldron, 72–87 (79). For rules in the twelfth-century Burgh Laws about pigs in towns, see C. Innes and R. Renwick, eds., *Ancient Laws and Customs of the Burghs of Scotland*, vol. 1: A.D. 1124–1424 (Edinburgh: Scottish Burgh Records Society, 1868), 41.

<sup>8</sup> Harold Booton, 'Inland Trade: A Study of Aberdeen in the Later Middle Ages', in *Scottish Medieval Town*, eds. Lynch, Spearman and Stell, 148–59; Elizabeth Ewan, *Townlife in Fourteenth-Century Scotland* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), especially 64–7; Gemmill and Mayhew, *Changing Values*, 25–79; Elizabeth Gemmill, 'Signs and Symbols in Medieval Scottish Trade', *Review of Scottish Culture* 13 (2000–1): 7–17; Ian Blanchard and others, 'The Economy: Town and Country', in *Aberdeen Before 1800: A New History*, eds. E. Patricia Denison, David Ditchburn and Michael Lynch (East Linton: Tuckwell, 2002), 129–58 (137–47).

<sup>9</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/12.ii, 552.

<sup>10</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/13, 330.

<sup>11</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/16, 800.

in power.<sup>12</sup> In the same way, Aberdeen's government stressed the needs of the poor when instructing craftsmen to ply their trade in the interests of all, or rebuking them when they did not. Such measures appear frequently in the early decades of the sixteenth century. A statute of February 1508 ordered fishermen to sell fish in pennyworths and two pennyworths to the town dwellers, to rich and to poor, and not to landmen (to whom they had been selling in hundreds and half hundreds) until the town had been served.<sup>13</sup> In March 1508 eight women were amerced for baking cakes (that is, oatcakes) not corresponding to the price of meal, to the great prejudice of poor folk and against the statutes of the town.<sup>14</sup> In January 1522 three named maltmen were ordered to present all their malt to the market on the market day and sell it as the market stood so as not to 'scat the puyr' commodis'.<sup>15</sup> A statute of October 1522 targeted profiteering by those who kept 'open gyrnale' (granary) and sold grain to poor folk more dearly than it was sold on the market day.<sup>16</sup> Finally the assize of bread occasionally distinguished bread for the poor.<sup>17</sup> The assize of bread of October 1527 provided one weight of rye bread (32 ounces) 'well bolted, sourit and dry baked'; 'grossar' stuff of rye for the poor had to be 36 ounces (18 ounces for the penny).<sup>18</sup>

Status within the town did not in itself determine what one was permitted to eat – and Scottish sumptuary laws did not restrict food types according to status (as was on one occasion the case in England).<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, as these rulings show, there were certain types of food which were associated with the poor: fish, meal, malt (for ale), coarse bread. At the other end of the scale was the food and drink suitable for celebration, and for important visitors: kings, nobles, and others of high status.

The records tell us a (very) little about the feasts held for guild members, but enough to show that wine featured prominently. New guild members made a contribution of wine, or varying sums of money to pay for wine, on the occasion of their admission. Payments for wine were also customary at Dunfermline (Fife) and Perth (Perthshire), and spice too.<sup>20</sup> The sums paid at Aberdeen varied according to the circumstances of the admission. Among the new burgesses and guild members for Richard Kintor's provostship in 1460 was John, son of John Thomson de Culcardy, who was received as a guild member in right of his father's freedom. The sum due was 5s. 1½d. and Duncan Alloune came surety for the new member's neighbourliness as well as for the wine.<sup>21</sup> In October 1465 Thomas de Schethin was admitted as a burgess and guild member, paying £3 to the provost and 10s. for wine.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps the wine was a contribution to a feast on the

<sup>12</sup> See, for a discussion of the appeal to the common good in medieval Scottish towns, Claire Hawes, 'The Urban Community in Fifteenth-Century Scotland: Language, Law and Political Practice', *Urban History* 44 (2017): 365–80.

<sup>13</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/6, 806; see also p. 1035, and ACA, CA/1/1/9, 37.

<sup>14</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/8, 816.

<sup>15</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/11, 15.

<sup>16</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/11, 184–5.

<sup>17</sup> In Scotland, the assize of bread was a local ruling, made periodically, as to the maximum price of the loaf of bread. It was based on the local market price of grain – usually wheat but sometimes other grains too. There was also an assize of ale, based on the price of malt, which prescribed the maximum price per gallon.

<sup>18</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/12.i, 260.

<sup>19</sup> A.R. Myers, *English Historical Documents 1327–1485* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1969), 1173; and see C.M. Woolgar, *The Culture of Food in England, 1200–1500* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 11.

<sup>20</sup> E. Patricia Dennison Torrie, ed., *The Gild Court Book of Dunfermline, 1433–1597*. Scottish Record Society, new series, 12 (Edinburgh: Scottish Record Society, 1986); Marion L. Stavert, ed., *The Perth Guildry Book, 1452–1601*. Scottish Record Society, new series, 19 (Edinburgh: Scottish Record Society, 1993).

<sup>21</sup> Gemmill, ed., *Aberdeen Guild Court Records*, 178.

<sup>22</sup> Gemmill, ed., *Aberdeen Guild Court Records*, 188.

occasion of the admission of new members as was customary in some towns in England.<sup>23</sup>

At Dunfermline there was a guild feast by the beginning of the sixteenth century; an account for this at Christmas 1503 included 14s. laid out for wine, 30s. for a barrel of beer, 18d. for bread, 6d. for a 'laid' (load) of coal and 3s. for ale.<sup>24</sup> Again, there is a considerable emphasis on liquid refreshment. We do not have evidence for an annual guild feast at Aberdeen, but there certainly were public ritual celebrations, doubtless at Candlemas (2 February) which was one of the feasts of the civic year in Aberdeen. And there certainly were drinkings of some sort associated with the annual celebrations held in Aberdeen to commemorate the townspeople's social memory of their part in liberating the castle from the occupying English garrison in 1308.<sup>25</sup> The watchword associated with this heroic event, 'Bon Accord', had by the fifteenth century become a title given to characters leading the commemorations, the lords, or abbot and prior, of Bon Accord. The lords of Bon Accord Walter Hay and Thomas Scherar reported formally in court in April 1539 that they had drunk a certain amount of beer in Thomas Brechyn's house – the amount of money involved was left blank. They had, they said, offered to pay for it and he had refused, so they wanted to be sure that the situation would not prejudice them.<sup>26</sup>

Provision of drink was among the provost's (perhaps more pleasant) duties as a means of offering hospitality to important visitors. A list of the expenses of the provost Laurence Leth is included among the court records for 1399, giving us a glimpse of how such entertainments might have proceeded. Payments were made for wine consumed on occasions by various people, including the bishop of Aberdeen, Alexander de Keith, Alexander Sen and Sir Robert Erskine. A sum of 6s. 8d. was given to the 'mimis' (players) of the earl of Crawford. Wine was also delivered to individual homes for consumption (for example, the bishop of Aberdeen appears to have stayed on one occasion in the vicar's house and dined on another in William de Camera's).<sup>27</sup>

Later, the burgh auditors' record of the accounts of Thomas de Camera for his four years as provost between 1432 and 1437<sup>28</sup> show that he sought, for the third of the accounting years, £4 for wax, wine and wheat purchased from Gilbert Meignes for a knight from France ('pro milite Francie'); £14 for wine and a breakfast ('jantaculo') provided in his house for the late earl of Mar (Alexander Stewart, who died in 1435); and £4 10s. for a breakfast for the same earl and the bishop of Aberdeen provided in the tolbooth (the burgh court house and venue for meetings). These were large sums of money, suggesting elaborate breakfasts and plenty of wine. The auditors decided not to pay these and other sums unless he could provide evidence – but not, it seems, because they necessarily thought the expenses unreasonable.<sup>29</sup>

The account of the dean of guild rendered on 5 October 1453 continued the trope of wine offered as a gesture of hospitality to nobles and prelates encountered elsewhere in

<sup>23</sup> Woolgar, *Culture of Food*, 128, 144.

<sup>24</sup> Dennison Torrie, ed., *Gild Court Book of Dunfermline*, 46.

<sup>25</sup> Stephen Boardman, 'Burgh and Realm: Medieval Politics, 1100–1500', in *Aberdeen Before 1800: A New History*, eds. Dennison, Ditchburn and Lynch, 203–23 (206).

<sup>26</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/16, 224.

<sup>27</sup> Dickinson, ed., *Early Records of Aberdeen*, 80–2.

<sup>28</sup> The first account was rendered in September 1433; the fourth account includes the Martinmas Term 1436.

<sup>29</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/4, 114 (and printed, Stuart, ed., *Extracts from the Council Register of Aberdeen*, 43).

British towns.<sup>30</sup> A gallon of red wine was given to each of the countess of Huntly, the dean of Aberdeen, the royal comptroller, the bishop of Aberdeen and the bishop (sic) of St Andrews. The comptroller received a further quart of red and a quart of malmsey.<sup>31</sup> The account for 1470–1 included 10s. 8d. for a gallon of malmsey bought from John of Mar's child (servant) and sent with the serjeant to the earl of Huntly on his first visit to Aberdeen after Michaelmas (29 September). On another occasion half a gallon of red wine bought from Thom Symson and malmsey bought from James Kyn-torr's wife were sent to him. A gallon of malmsey bought for 10s. 8d. was sent to the bishop of Aberdeen the first time that he came from Edinburgh, and a gallon of red bought for 5s. 4d. from John of Mar's child was sent to him in Lent. Other gifts of wine were sent to Lord Erskine, Lord Forbes (Alexander Forbes of that Ilk), the Lord of Erroll (William Hay) and Alexander Lesly, showing the complex constellation of powerful men with whom the burgh needed to engage at this turbulent time in Scottish regional politics.<sup>32</sup>

These payments for (fairly) modest quantities of wine were rather different, however, from the formal and ceremonial presents made to honour important visitors on arrival in the town. Gift-giving was an intrinsic part of medieval and renaissance culture. Food of any kind could be given as a gift, although gifts to the upper echelons of society tended to reflect the status of the recipient and to cluster around wines, game and delicacies.<sup>33</sup> As an instrument of diplomacy gift-giving entailed a sophisticated, choreographed ritual and one with strategic political goals. The choice of gift was critical; gifts must honour both giver and receiver by their appropriateness to the station of each; they needed to symbolise, in a manner acceptable to both, the nature of the relationship between them.<sup>34</sup> Gifts should not, therefore, by their nature appear to place the recipient in a position of need or dependence; nor should they embody exaggerated claims about the status of the giver. The gifts which were made by the burgh of Aberdeen to the Scottish king and other important personages, which were known as 'propines', needed therefore to demonstrate the town's status as a major centre of international trade, but not to imply undue intimacy.

Aberdeen was the regional capital of the north-east and a staging post for all later medieval Scottish kings on their journeys to those parts.<sup>35</sup> The occasion of a royal visit was a time to impress, which was done with gifts of luxurious consumables clearly intended to enhance a feast. Royal propines were costly and were paid out of public funds so they had to be agreed publicly. Although provision of other consumables was not unknown as part of a propine,<sup>36</sup> three luxury items were ubiquitous. Wine, which was imported from

<sup>30</sup> Examples are in Woolgar, *Culture of Food*, 145.

<sup>31</sup> Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire Archives, Aberdeen Guildry Accounts 1453–1650, f. 2r.

<sup>32</sup> Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire Archives, photocopy of Aberdeen, Account of Dean of Guild 1470–1 (original is in Yale University Library, Gordon of Gordonstoun MSS); for relations with powerful magnates in the region in the period, see Boardman, 'Burgh and Realm'.

<sup>33</sup> C.M. Woolgar, 'Gifts of Food in Late Medieval England', *Journal of Medieval History* 37 (2011): 6–18.

<sup>34</sup> See Felicity Heal, 'Royal Gifts and Gift-Exchange in Sixteenth-Century Anglo-Scottish Politics', in *Kings, Lords and Men in Scotland and Britain, 1300–1625: Essays in Honour of Jenny Wormald*, eds. S. Boardman and J. Goodare (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 283–300.

<sup>35</sup> Boardman, 'Burgh and Realm', 204.

<sup>36</sup> For example, coal and fed, perhaps meaning 'fattened', suggesting marts were included as well as wine, wax and scorchet in a propine for James V and the lords of council agreed by the provost, bailies and council in April 1526: ACA, CA/1/1/11, 704.



France or Flanders, and had to be of high quality,<sup>37</sup> was often specified as claret, Gascon, of Poitou, or malmsey; wax, that most elegant and efficient fuel for provision of light (and utterly different from the tallow used in ordinary homes); and the confection known as 'scorchet', a mixture of sugar and rosewater.<sup>38</sup> All these must be provided in bounteous quantity. So, in July 1448 the council agreed a propine to welcome James II: two tuns of Gascon wine, six lights of three stones of wax, and twelve half pounds of scorchet – or failing that 12 whole pounds (scorchet came in 'boystis' or boxes, the size of which must have varied in different consignments).<sup>39</sup> Gifts such as these embellished the royal feast but did not seek to provide it or to dine with the king, nor to imply that the Scottish monarch was short of food. The same sort of 'social distancing' appears in the propine for the bishop of Aberdeen (William Elphinstone) which was agreed in March 1509. It consisted of two puncheons (large containers) of wine for £9, plus 4s. to carry them to the bishop's palace, four stones of wax for 18s., made into torches and prickets at a cost of 3s. Then came 18*d.* for 'the treis makyn and savin', then 20*d.* 'for tua Rauchteris to be the treis'. These may have been intended as parts of a table or other temporary dining facility<sup>40</sup> although it is odd that they occur between two entries providing for lights, so perhaps they were some form of elaborate candelabra. 18*d.* was spent on wicks, two dozen scorchets cost 48s., half a gallon of malmsey 4s. 8*d.*, a gallon of claret 5s. 4*d.*, and half a gallon of white wine 2s. The grand total was £16 3s. 8*d.*<sup>41</sup>

A propine was not necessarily a gift of food; a money propine ('una propina monete') of 100 merks (£66 13s. 4*d.*) was arranged in January 1456 on the occasion of Queen Mary of Gueldres' first visit to the town, funded by a special assedation (lease) of the town's fishings, lands and rents.<sup>42</sup> Money propines seem to have been associated with the burgh seeking particular favours and did not always mean a royal visit was in the offing. In September 1496, for example, 10 named assessors were appointed to raise the sum of £100 from the whole town as a propine to James IV, the price that the town was willing to pay for being excused from the military campaign in support of Richard, duke of York (that is, Perkin Warbeck).<sup>43</sup> The largest recorded propine found in the records for the period covered here, 1000 Scots crowns or £500 (in money of account),<sup>44</sup> was approved by the provost, bailies and council in October 1537; this was for the town's continuing entitlement to the custom on salmon fished in the Don and Dee. Double grassums (rents) were authorised to fund the payment.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>37</sup> In April 1522 a propine of wax and scorchet was agreed for the bishop of Aberdeen, there being no good wine to send him: ACA, CA/1/1/11, 73.

<sup>38</sup> *A Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue*, s.v. scorchet; online at *Dictionaries of the Scots Language*, <https://dsl.ac.uk/entry/dost/scorchet>.

<sup>39</sup> Gemmill, ed., *Aberdeen Guild Court Records*, 118. The tun had a capacity of 252 gallons. The Scots evidence about the size of the puncheon in relation to the tun is equivocal, suggesting that it could vary between 2½ and 4 puncheons to the tun. Cf. the gift to the bishop of Aberdeen, noted for 1509, next. See Gemmill and Mayhew, *Changing Values*, 408.

<sup>40</sup> See Woolgar, *Culture of Food*, 132.

<sup>41</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/8, 937.

<sup>42</sup> Gemmill, ed., *Aberdeen Guild Court Records*, 156.

<sup>43</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/7, 752.

<sup>44</sup> The value of the Scots crowns given explicitly in the record here is lower than those placed on the crowns of James IV (13s. 4*d.*) or James V (20s.) when issued: R.W. Cochran-Patrick, *Records of the Coinage of Scotland, from the Earliest Period to the Union*. 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1876), 1: cxxv, cxxx, cxxxiii; and Gemmill and Mayhew, *Changing Values*, 128, 135 and 139. Another instance of the same valuation occurs in 1499: see below.

<sup>45</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/15, 427–8.



The burden of providing propines, whether in money or consumables (and offered to members of the nobility as well as to the king himself), seems to have been particularly heavy in the late 1490s. As these cases show, propines were often funded by advance spending of burgh revenues from fishings and other property. Sometimes, guild members were asked to provide the propines directly. The outlay on a propine given to James IV in 1497 showed that a number of burgesses had contributed consumables: Thomas Prat 'spisary'; Robert Cullen wine; Robert Blinsel wax. There was also expenditure on the tolbooth on this occasion: 6s. for the making of 'treis' and 8s. to the workmen and a payment of 40s. to the organman. Perhaps the tolbooth was a setting for some form of entertainment or pageant. In addition there was a gift of £5 and a gallon of claret to George Gordon, earl of Huntly, and a half gallon to Lord Oliphant.<sup>46</sup> In September 1499 the provost and council ordered four people to deliver their share of a propine to James IV. John of Cullane and his brother Andrew had to provide a pipe of claret wine, price 10 Scots crowns or £5; Robert Blinsell 24 half 'boystis' (which seems to mean 24 half boxes, suggesting that the term was being used here as a measure) of scorchet, price 36s., and William Fuches four stones of wax, price 4 gold unicorns (that is, £3 12s., a unicorn being worth 18s.).<sup>47</sup> They were to be reimbursed the following Candlemas from the grassums of the town's lands and fishings, whether in lieu of their own grassums or from revenue of others.<sup>48</sup>

The willingness of individuals to take on these obligations in the town's common interest must have stood them in good stead when it came to the next leases of burgh property. But gifts of choice kinds of food were only one element in the preparations for the visits of royalty and nobility. The king would bring large numbers of people with him – friendly nobles (if he was lucky), officials, servants. So a royal visit when it happened was an undertaking to which the whole urban community, not just the elite, had to contribute. The king's retinue needed to buy food, stable their horses and find accommodation. The town's reputation was at stake. The provost made an important announcement on 13 January 1528 (having as was said convened most of the town within the tolbooth for the purpose) of the anticipated arrival of the king, nobles and lords of council to Aberdeen for a justice ayre (eyre). Neighbours were told not to set their lodgings or inns to anyone until they knew more about who was coming – and when they did know, the provost and council would advise as to who would be lodged where. Stablers had to clean their stables and make sure that they had enough corn and fodder to sell for as many horses as they took in. Bakers, fleshers and brewsters had to furnish their product and be answerable to the town. The provost asked for a formal record that he had given the townspeople fair warning – so that, if they were negligent, no one would blame him.<sup>49</sup> Similar instructions were given in anticipation of the arrival of the royal household in January 1530, and this time bakers, brewers, candle-makers and fleshers and all other craftsmen in town were to be prepared to furnish the court at a competent price 'according to the honour of this gude tovrne'.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>46</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/7, 839.

<sup>47</sup> Cochran-Patrick, *Coinage of Scotland*, 1: cxxx; and Gemmill and Mayhew, *Changing Values*, 128, 129 and 139.

<sup>48</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/7, 985. For other examples of propines in the 1490s and the funding arrangements involved, see ACA, CA/1/1/7, 722, 723, 787, 839, 848, 851, 857, 861, 971.

<sup>49</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/12.i, 300.

<sup>50</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/13, 63–4. For the statute preparing for the arrival of the royal household in 1497, see ACA, CA/1/1/7, 846.

Thus food and drink helped to define relationships with those outside the town and enhanced the sense of urban identity and responsibility. Within the town, however, food could create divisions and conflict. In Aberdeen there were many engaged in small-scale food processing and distribution: brewsters, bakers of oatcakes, and hucksters (petty retailers) who sold dairy produce, fruit and vegetables. These activities were dominated by women, including the wives of the unfree (that is, non-burgesses). The value put on some of these activities by the town government was very low. Oatcake baking, in particular, was tolerated during the early 1480s under strict conditions but was generally not allowed during the period covered here.<sup>51</sup> And the status of those who practised these crafts was a crucial factor affecting whether and how they were permitted to make their living. The unfree were always at an economic disadvantage. Most obviously, they had to sell cheaper, weaker ale.<sup>52</sup> The activity of brewing was dominated, in Aberdeen as elsewhere, by women.<sup>53</sup> The same was true of other trades involving working from home with the minimum of equipment and in combination with meeting the needs of the household.

In times of economic hardship these things came to work against them because the town decided it could do without their services. October 1438 was a time of great scarcity of food, and a series of ordinances applied general rationing but specially targeted women and the unfree, forbidding women to buy meal in the market and banning hucksters who were not the wives of burgesses. Bakers were not to sell bread to hucksters for re-sale.<sup>54</sup> The unfree were forbidden to brew in March 1489;<sup>55</sup> and in March 1541 unfree men's wives were forbidden to bake, brew ale or sell bread, or to buy meal, malt, fish or meat for retail.<sup>56</sup>

At quite the other end of the spectrum of victualling trades were the fleshers (butchers and fishmongers) and bakers. They did have infrastructure in the form of, respectively, shambles for slaughtering and jointing meat, and ovens for baking bread. They had to have money to buy livestock and grain or consignments of flour. They had to be of burgess status in order to operate as master craftsmen; indeed the craft that they practised was specified when they were admitted as burgesses.<sup>57</sup> And the status of these crafts was ritually recognised by their place in the annual Candlemas pageants. An ordinance of September 1442 set out the characters in the pageant that each craft group was to provide for the 'offerand of our Lady'. The fleshers and bakers were the only victualling crafts included; others were the litsters (dyers), smiths and hammermen, tailors, skinnners, websters and walkers, and cordwainers. The fleshers followed the cordwainers, who had to provide 'twa or four wodmen and alsmony honest squiares, etc.' Then came the guild

<sup>51</sup> Ordinances of c.1412 and the chamberlain's ayre of February 1435 forbade cake-baking under penalty of banishment: ACA, CA/1/1/2, 182 and ACA, CA/1/1/4, 33. In October 1482, two cake-bakers were allowed per quarter and cake-baking was still tolerated in 1484: ACA, CA/1/1/6, 755 and 883. Cake-baking for sale was prohibited in April 1529: ACA, CA/1/1/12.i, 553.

<sup>52</sup> See Gemmill and Mayhew, *Changing Values*, 49.

<sup>53</sup> Gemmill and Mayhew, *Changing Values*, 50; Judith Bennett, *Ale, Beer and Brewsters in England: A Changing World, 1300–1600* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). The Burgh Laws assumed that it would be women who brewed ale: Innes and Renwick, eds., *Ancient Laws and Customs of the Burghs of Scotland*, 1: 30–1 (clause lxiii).

<sup>54</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/4, 143 (and printed, Gemmill and Mayhew, *Changing Values*, 78).

<sup>55</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/7, 109.

<sup>56</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/16, 763.

<sup>57</sup> Gemmill, ed., *Aberdeen Guild Records*, 19; see also Innes and Renwick, eds., *Ancient Laws and Customs of the Burghs of Scotland*, 1: 10.

brethren, and last the bakers who had to find the minstrels and ‘alsmony honest squyares as thai may’.<sup>58</sup> In the statute for the procession in 1506 fleshers, barbers, bakers and cordwainers were named as the first group in the procession. Skinners, coopers, wrights, hat-makers and bonnet-makers formed the next group; then walkers, litsters, tailors, goldsmiths, blacksmiths and hammermen. This time, however, the fleshers and the bakers were not required to provide costumes, although the other craft groups were; we cannot know whether this was an omission, a welcome respite from an annoying obligation or a slight to be resented.<sup>59</sup>

Butchers and bakers had, then, a recognised status which brewsters did not. But all were subject to frequent controls and penalties for infringement of the bye-laws. The penalty typically associated with a first offence was a monetary fine, although even first offences could incur more serious punishments. The amount of the monetary fine was not always set out in the bye-laws but the standard penalty seems to have been 8s., suggesting that it amounted to more than a licence to trade.<sup>60</sup> For subsequent or more serious offences, the punishments that were threatened involved loss of status of the product or, worse, that of the individual: confiscation of the product (and sometimes its distribution among the poor), public humiliation (being put in the pillory or ‘goif’), destruction of equipment, exclusion from the craft activity or the market, or even banishment. In a particularly explicit sentence in June 1470 the burgh council decided that the bakers who had broken the assize were to remain in the tolbooth until they had paid the penalty of 8s. for their offences; in future they had to keep the assize; if they did not they would be put in the pillory and banished from the craft for a year. Every baker with an oven had to be responsible for all bread baked in their oven under pain of the ‘drawin done’ of the oven.<sup>61</sup>

In fact it was only brewsters and oatcake bakers who were regularly threatened with destruction of their equipment – the bottom of the ale cauldron being struck out or the girdle (that is, the griddle) confiscated. The symbolic gesture also had the practical effect of preventing the humiliated person from engaging in the activity – at least until the equipment were mended or replaced. In that way, such acts of violence were akin to branding on the cheek for those who were banished from the town for offences; it enabled their ready identification if they sought to return.<sup>62</sup>

Egregious and repeat offenders were those most likely to suffer loss of status. In April 1478 William Sprunt and Wil Club, bakers, were told to desist from baking for a year because they had broken the assize and they were said to have ‘greatly trespassed’.<sup>63</sup> An assize found in July 1523 that the market spiller Nans Goldsmytht had ‘vtraiusly (outrageously) mispersoned and strublitt in word’ the bailie David Andersone while he was executing his office. The public ritual that she was to perform was described in detail:

<sup>58</sup> Stuart, ed., *Extracts from the Council Register of Aberdeen*, 9–10.

<sup>59</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/8, 543.

<sup>60</sup> The Burgh Laws had fixed the penalty for infringement of the assize of bread or ale at 8s.: Innes and Renwick, eds., *Ancient Laws and Customs of the Burghs of Scotland Burgh Laws*, 1: 29, 30–1 (clauses lx and lxiii). At Aberdeen in 1401, the penalty for breaking the assize of ale had been set at 12d. for the first offence, 2s. for the second, 3s. for the third (and suspension from the craft for the fourth): Stuart, *Extracts from the Council Register of Aberdeen*, 381, but by the mid fifteenth century the penalty appears to have been settled at 8s.: ACA CA/1/5.i, 246.

<sup>61</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/6, 20.

<sup>62</sup> Ordinances for hucksters made in June 1448 involved the threat of banishment from the town and branding of the cheek: ACA, CA/1/1/5.i, 8.

<sup>63</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/6, 528.

she was to beg David Andersone's forgiveness and to come the following Sunday at time of the high Mass, in the presence of the provost, bailies, council and whole community with a candle of a pound of wax for the Holy Blood light. She was to go down on her knees and beseech the provost to ask the bailie to forgive her; and she was to disavow the words that she had said. All this and more: she was to abstain from buying meal or malt in the market until she was permitted by the provost and the bailie whom she had 'mispersoned'. And if she were to repeat her offence she was to be banished from the town for a year.<sup>64</sup> The wife of Gilbert Brabner was singled out from among dozens of women who in November 1540 were amerced for their first offence of breaking the assize of ale, spoiling the market, or baking and selling cakes. The officers were instructed to take distress from each of them for the sum of 8s. (as indicated above, the standard amercement or 'unlaw'). But Brabner's wife had offended twice; so not only was she amerced for breaking the assize and the officers charged to poind (distrain) her for 8s., they were to bring out the ale and deal it at the market cross. Brabner's wife (she is never named in her own right), seeking to avoid this, took matters into her own hands, 'doun casting' the ale which should have been dealt. This made matters worse; she incurred another amercement for it and the officers were instructed to distrain her for the value of the quantity that had been thrown out and buy the equivalent and deal that at the market cross.<sup>65</sup>

But cases such as these are in fact few and far between. The repeated warnings about loss of status and public humiliation were rarely matched by punishments actually meted out. It is true that the records are full of instances of craftsmen and women being 'convicted' of offences against the bye-laws. But even when amercements were due it is not clear whether or how the money was exacted. Sometimes the offenders were explicitly excused, with a warning, or a promise of good behaviour, or on their 'good bearing', or because it was the first fault during the bailies' year in office. This sort of leniency is especially apparent in the second decade of the sixteenth century.<sup>66</sup> The need to check up on officers responsible for enforcing the assizes of bread, ale and flesh had long been recognised,<sup>67</sup> but a statute of October 1515 (at the beginning of the officers' year of appointment) provided for removal of negligent serjeants who did not bring people to book or concealed their offences and especially in relation to the assizes of bread, ale, flesh and candle.<sup>68</sup> In October 1523 the serjeants were told to take the girdles of women found baking oatcakes for sale and bring them, and the women, before the bailies; if they failed in this they were to be punished.<sup>69</sup> In December 1523, following the amercement of five women for breaking the assize of ale, the provost ordered the bailies to execute the statute about the brewsters and warned that if they did not they would have to recompense the town for the damage caused by their 'sloth'.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>64</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/11, 327.

<sup>65</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/16, 633–5.

<sup>66</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/8, 1140; ACA CA/1/1/9, 659; ACA CA/1/1/11, 370.

<sup>67</sup> See the articles of the Chamberlain's Ayre in Innes and Renwick, eds., *Ancient Laws and Customs of the Burghs of Scotland*, 1: 115, 116, 117.

<sup>68</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/11, 494.

<sup>69</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/11, 359–60.

<sup>70</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/11, 384. This seems to have worked; the following February a total of 39 women were convicted by the assize for brewing 16*d.* ale, that is, ale to sell for a price higher than was allowed. The assize found that because certain of the women were more 'obstinet' than the rest, the bailies were to search their records ('bukis') and actually carry out the penalties. Those convicted twice were to have their ale dealt and pay the unlaw; those who had been

The leniency, characterised as sloth and negligence, was surely a consequence of the closeness of the community in which the laws operated. The dangers of conflict of interest had been recognised in the twelfth-century Burgh Laws which forbade burgh officials (provosts, bailies and bedells) from baking bread to sell and in the articles of the chamberlain's ayre which inquired into bailies who baked bread or brewed ale for sale.<sup>71</sup> These provisions did not mention wives – and of course, in sixteenth-century Aberdeen it was the wives, above all, who were involved. A statute of December 1503 recognised the problem, forbidding serjeants' wives from buying more meal or malt than they needed for themselves, prescribing penalties for both the wife and the serjeant if the rules were broken: the husband was to be deprived of his office.<sup>72</sup> In September 1532 the serjeants were elected on condition that they should execute their office diligently and that their wives should not brew or sell ale or bread.<sup>73</sup> And the council ordained on 7 October 1538 that none of the four officers' wives for the year should brew ale to sell or buy victual to 'tap' (retail) and sell until the following Michaelmas. Again, this was on penalty of the expulsion of their husbands from office.<sup>74</sup>

It is difficult to tell how rigorously the rules were enforced for sellers of food and drink. What is clear, however, is that there were very large numbers of people involved in these minor trades, probably on a part-time basis and with a recognition of the benefits of diversifying. This would suggest in turn that there were plenty of people buying other people's weak ale or coarse oatcakes, that is, those without even the simplest means of preparing food for themselves. The final part of this essay is about those in the town who relied on others for the provision of their food.

First, this will have included servants and apprentices who lived in their masters' household. The variety and size of serving dishes found in Aberdeen burgesses' homes would have allowed for dining beyond the immediate family, enabling servants and visitors to share meals.<sup>75</sup> The occasional references in the records to apprenticeship agreements suggest that food was provided and it would have been natural to dine in the household. In May 1520 Ingram Slaiter undertook to give his servant John Walcar 10s. per year during his apprenticeship for his clothes and 6d. per day when he 'wanted' (that is, went without) his meat – suggesting that normally he was provided with food.<sup>76</sup> Burgesses might also take in paying guests such as visiting merchants. In October 1465 John Newman, a burghess of Dundee (Angus), was in debt to David Dun's wife for his board for six weeks at the rate of 8d. per day; having failed to prove the sum paid he was ordered to pay up the 28s.<sup>77</sup>

Crews of shipping vessels lying in port seem to have been provided with food by the owner of the vessel or given an allowance to cover it. In February 1459 John Stewart was told to obtain testimony that he had given notice to a crew of shipmen to come to their food in his house. If he could not prove this he was to pay each man 2d.

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convicted three times were to have their cauldron bottoms struck out and to pay the fine 'because of their great contempt'. ACA, CA/1/1/11, 401–2.

<sup>71</sup> Innes and Renwick, eds., *Ancient Laws and Customs of the Burghs of Scotland*, 1: 28, 136–7.

<sup>72</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/8, 297.

<sup>73</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/14, 7.

<sup>74</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/16, 18.

<sup>75</sup> Gemmill, 'Debt, Distraint, Display and Dead Men's Treasure', 364.

<sup>76</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/10, 191.

<sup>77</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/5.i, 564.

per day for their costs.<sup>78</sup> Sailors on board ship would be supplied with food during the voyage (as we know from the distinction drawn between beef and tallow which was for the ship's store and shipmen's victual and that which was illicitly exported).<sup>79</sup> Likewise fishermen engaged by masters working for those who leased fishings in the Don and the Dee were to have an allowance of salmon given to them by the masters once a day; a statute of July 1535 sought to distinguish between this and salmon and grilse taken illegally by the fishermen to sell.<sup>80</sup>

The neighbours of the town had a shared responsibility to feed those doing public services. This included the town's 'common minstrels'. David Gethane was amerced in March 1482 for denying food and wages to the common minstrels of the burgh and was ordered to do so in future.<sup>81</sup> In January 1493 a statute provided that the two common minstrels, John and Robert, were to have their 'resonable dietis cirtualie' from the town's neighbours; and if anyone refused to receive them (suggesting that the meals were to be provided in burgesses' own homes) then they could instead give them 12*d.* per day 'batht for mett, drinkis and wagis for simpile folkis'.<sup>82</sup> This seems a high figure, especially by comparison with the 2*d.* per day for shipmen's costs mentioned above, although that did not include wages and was clearly intended to encourage people to provide the food. David Treis was amerced in January 1508 for wrongfully withholding the yearly diet and fee due to the common minstrels Robert Piper and John Piper (probably the same individuals as in the earlier statute but now with a hint of which instruments they played) and was ordered to pay them.<sup>83</sup>

'Songsters' who were hired for a year at a time to sing in the church were, at least for part of the period covered here, supplied with food as part of their remuneration. The town's patron saint was St Nicholas and his church was at the heart of the religious life of the medieval community.<sup>84</sup> The engagement and remuneration of a chaplain were accepted as a shared responsibility. Sir Walter Yng was engaged as chaplain in January 1480 for services in St Nicholas' church for 10 merks yearly and food on five days of the week.<sup>85</sup> By 1505 the arrangement was for eight persons to provide Wat Strachin 'cirtualie' with food and drink each week and he was to have 20*s.* for a gown.<sup>86</sup> In November 1506 Sir David Runseman was feed for a year for 'his mett and drink in dietis ymang the gud mene in the tone', plus 40*s.* to be paid to him by the dean of guild.<sup>87</sup> In August 1507 John Fif was engaged to sing, uphold and sustain divine service in the choir and church; in return they promised him his food and drink to be provided by seven persons, named for each day of the week as well as 40*s.* to be funded from the mails (that is, rents) of one of the town's mills and the amercement of a forestaller, at

<sup>78</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/5.i, 346.

<sup>79</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/6, 935.

<sup>80</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/14, 600.

<sup>81</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/6, 725.

<sup>82</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/7, 386.

<sup>83</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/8, 794.

<sup>84</sup> For services in St Nicholas' Church and its place in the life of the medieval burgh, see Michael Lynch and Gordon DesBrisay with Murray G.H. Pittock, 'The Faith of the People', in *Aberdeen: A New History*, eds. Dennison, Ditchburn and Lynch, 289–308 (291–3).

<sup>85</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/6, 608.

<sup>86</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/8, 463.

<sup>87</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/8, 638.



his choice.<sup>88</sup> In the following year, 3 July 1508, the arrangement was renewed, this time for the 40s. from the mill and a burgess' entry fee of 40s. and his 'burding cirtualie' as he had it at present.<sup>89</sup> It is not clear from the record whether this sort of arrangement persisted further into the sixteenth century, but it does suggest, while it lasted, that it was accepted by Aberdeen burgesses – or some of them – that songsters should be welcome in their homes.

Those engaged on public building works were also provided with food by the town. Among the expenses in the accounts of the provost Thomas de Camera for his fourth year of office, c.1436, was £8 for the board ('pro mensa') of Master Nicholas, on ordinary days ('diebus feriatis') while the work on the new town gate was going on. Master Nicholas confirmed that he had dined ('se comedisse') with Thomas on divers such days but there was no record of how many; the auditors said that they would make a reasonable allowance if they could be informed as to the number. The auditors disallowed however 17s. 2d. given to one John Spens and sought by the accountant because they considered that 4d. per day plus his lunch ('cum prandio suo') was already sufficient. Later arrangements with the town's masons separate the provision of food from the main wage. Four masons were engaged in November 1493 to work on the parish church for a yearly fee of 20 merks (£13 6s. 8d.) each, 'but (that is, without) ale accidentis of the brede'.<sup>90</sup> This may have meant that food was to be provided informally as a separate arrangement, rather than not at all.

Food in medieval Aberdeen could and did actually create and foster social relationships in ways that were a function of people's ongoing need to eat (and drink). Food made it necessary for people to meet, sometimes across social divides. Its very perishability meant that supplies had to be replenished constantly, hence the market which brought people together twice a week and the constant brewing, baking, butchering (and supervision of all of these). Civic pageantry, the conduct of burgh business and guild admissions all involved food (and definitely drink). The provision of food within the burgess home – whether to visitors, servants, dependants or to those engaged to provide services to the town – extended it as a place of social intercourse for those beyond the immediate household. The ceremonial offerings of food and drink to important visitors embodied deference, established reputation, made possible the granting of favour and privilege. Thus, food had the potential to create and change the character of social relationships. And the status of food itself could change: as a ceremonial gift it had a symbolic value far higher than the price of the goods themselves; conversely, when confiscated and doled at the market cross the idea was to take away its value to the craftsman completely. This, however, happened very rarely.

## Note on contributor

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<sup>88</sup> ACA, CA/1/18, 718.

<sup>89</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/8, 845.

<sup>90</sup> ACA, CA/1/1/7, 476–7.