

# **Debt, distraint, display, and dead men's treasure: material culture in late medieval Aberdeen**

By Elizabeth Gemmill, BA, MA, PhD, FRHistS

Associate Professor in History, University of Oxford, Department for Continuing Education and Fellow of Kellogg College

## **Acknowledgements**

The initial research on the Aberdeen burgh court records was conducted between 1986 and 1989 when I was a research assistant at the University of Oxford on a project investigating medieval Scottish prices, directed by Professor Nicholas Mayhew. That project, funded by the University of Oxford and by the Economic and Social Research Council, first drew my attention to the riches of the evidence which I have continued to work on since then. For this present project, I am grateful to Professor Chris Woolgar of the University of Southampton and to Professor Chris Briggs of the University of Cambridge for their advice and encouragement. The transcripts of the sample inventories in the Appendix are produced with kind permission of Aberdeen City Archives, and I should like to acknowledge the assistance provided by Philip Astley, the City Archivist, who provided me with the digital images of volume XI of the Council Registers.

## Introduction

Recent years have seen a burgeoning of scholarship in the area of late medieval and Renaissance material culture. Studies of clothing, jewellery and accessories, plate, furnishings, utensils and other household goods have led to fresh understanding of the meanings and purposes of people's possessions that went far beyond the functional. They could be signifiers of status and aspiration, indicators of credit worthiness, and markers of stages in the personal lifecycle. They may tell us about adoption of new fashions as well as adherence to tradition and custom and the ways in which even personal and precious items could become commodities. And they offer insights into lifestyle, standards of living and patterns of trade. Such studies have tended to focus on areas where the acquisition of material wealth is well-evidenced in the later medieval period: the Low Countries, France, England, and Italy, with the parts of Europe for which the documentary evidence is more scarce being less well represented.<sup>1</sup> This paper is a pilot study of later medieval Aberdeen to show that, even when the written evidence is less copious, there are promising possibilities for better understanding of the material culture of ordinary people.

Later medieval Scotland was, by comparison with her southern neighbours, poor. There was a scarcity of arable land, a harsher climate and a sparser population. Endemic war and internal political insecurities exacerbated the problems. That being said, Scotland's royal burghs enjoyed a particularly privileged trading position having the monopoly of overseas trade within their region. Although its population was small indeed in comparison with London and the cities of Continental Europe,<sup>2</sup> Aberdeen was, along with the capital, Edinburgh, and the burghs of Dundee and Perth, internationally recognised as

---

<sup>1</sup> The literature on these topics is vast, but recent examples of particular interest because they seek to understand the lives of ordinary people (and objects) and not only those of elites are Daniel Lord Smail's study of debt collection in Lucca and Marseille in *Legal Plunder: Households and Debt Collection in Late Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, MA, 2016), Roberta Gilchrist's *Medieval Life: Archaeology and the Life Course* (Woodbridge, 2013), Christopher Dyer, 'Living in peasant houses in late medieval England', *Vernacular Architecture*, 44.1 (2013), 19 – 27, Ben Jervis, Chris Briggs and Matthew Tompkins, 'Exploring texts and objects: escheators' inventories and material culture in medieval English rural households', *Medieval Archaeology*, 59 (2015), 168 – 92, Samuel Cohen, Jr, 'Renaissance attachment to things: material culture in last wills and testaments', *Economic History Review*, 65 (2012), 984-1004, the essays edited by Maryanne Kowaleski and P.J.P. Goldberg in *Medieval Domesticity: Home, Housing and Household in Medieval England* (Cambridge, 2008) and Sarah Stanbury's study of the multiplication of devotional objects as revealed in literary texts in *The Visual Object of Desire in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia, 2002). Margaret H.B. Sanderson's article 'Clothing sixteenth-century Scotland: crafts, clothes and clients', *Review of Scottish Culture*, 22 (2010), 35 – 51, examines clothing, patterns of supply, and the working practices of merchants and craftsmen, mainly for the later sixteenth century, a period slightly later than that addressed in the present paper.

<sup>2</sup> The evidence of the stent (tax) roll of 1408 suggests a population at that time of 3,000: Robert E. Tyson, 'People in the two towns' in E. Patricia Dennison, David Ditchburn and Michael Lynch, eds, *Aberdeen before 1800: A New History* (East Linton, 2002), pp. 111 – 128 (at p. 111).

one of the four great towns of Scotland.<sup>3</sup> Aberdeen had the status of a regional capital beyond the Mounth and her special advantages – the fishings in the Don and the Dee producing salmon which were prized throughout northern Europe, as well as the extensive hinterland which supplied wool, skins and hides for export – enabled her to trade with towns in the Low Countries, Prussia, north Eastern France, and, most naturally of all when circumstances allowed it, England.<sup>4</sup>

The records of later medieval Scotland have survived less well than those for England and the records of her burghs start later than do those of their English counterparts. There is little testamentary evidence before the latter part of the sixteenth century, making it difficult for the historian to find out about individual wealth and the lives of ordinary people and the poor.<sup>5</sup> Many urban records remain unpublished, meaning that economic and social historians have tended to rely on the published national records and on the archaeology which tends to disfavour items such as metals which were recycled and textiles which are less likely to survive. But, for Aberdeen, the council, bailie and gild court books are a treasure. They survive from 1398 in a nearly complete series down to the present day. They are the earliest to survive of their type for Scotland, and the first eight volumes (covering the period to 1511, although volumes are missing for the period between 1414 and 1433) have now been digitised and are publicly available, with plans for transcripts and translations linking to the images.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> For example, a letter of credence for commissaries sent to the town of Bruges on 14 June 1348 named the towns of Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Dundee and Perth 'and all the other great towns of the realm of Scotland': Konstantin Höhlbaum, *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, volume 3 (Halle, 1882-6), pp. 64-5 (no. 131).

<sup>4</sup> In time of truce, licences for trade with Aberdonians are often found in the English records: for examples, see Joseph Bain, ed., *Calendar of Documents Relating to Scotland, Volume IV. AD 1357 - 1509; Addenda 1221 - 1435* (Edinburgh, 1888) nos 992, 1061, and 1347 and Grant G. Simpson and James D. Galbraith, eds, *Calendar of Documents Relating to Scotland Volume V (Supplementary), AD 1108 - 1516* (no date), nos. 994, 1018, 1035 and 1040) and see Alexander Stevenson, 'Trade with the South, 1070 - 1513' in Michael Lynch, Michael Spearman and Geoffrey Stell, eds, *The Scottish Medieval Town* (Edinburgh, 1988), pp. 180 - 206.

<sup>5</sup> For a survey of the documentary sources available for the study of the later medieval Scottish town, see Iain Flett and Judith Cripps, 'Documentary Sources' in *The Scottish Medieval Town*, pp. 18 - 41 and, in the same volume, Michael Lynch, 'The social and economic structure of the larger towns 1450 -1600', pp. 261 - 286, esp. pp. 262-3. Michael Pearce has made a study of Scottish elite inventories of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in 'Approaches to household inventories and household furnishing, 1500 - 1650', in *Architectural Heritage*, 26.1 (2015), 73 - 86. Sanderson has used the evidence of mainly later sixteenth-century testaments to examine clothing, patterns of supply and working practices of merchants and craftsmen in 'Clothing sixteenth-century Scotland'. For a study of 'ordinary' people's consumer behaviour in Scotland, using inventories of a later period, see Stena Nenadic, 'Middle-rank consumers and domestic culture in Edinburgh and Glasgow, 1720 - 1840', *Past and Present*, 145 (1994), 122-156.

<sup>6</sup> <https://scotlandspplaces.gov.uk/digital-volumes/burgh-records/aberdeen-burgh-registers>. The project blog is at [www.aberdeenregisters.org](http://www.aberdeenregisters.org)

The records, written in a mixture of Latin and Scottish English, are wide ranging in business, corresponding to the responsibilities of the burgh authorities for the community as a whole, which included merchants, craftsmen, apprentices, servants, the poor – and of course, women. Merchant lairds and royal visitors appear too. The registers cover legislation as well as governance and the dispensation of justice. Accordingly, there is a wealth of evidence about the material culture of the town, particularly in the form of lawsuits between individuals over pawning and other debts, distraints of goods for private and public debts, inventories of the goods of deceased burgesses, and bye-laws about the conduct of trade, urban pageantry and ceremonial. So, although we do not have hundreds of records of the same type, the very diverse nature of the evidence here enables us to learn about the standards of living not only of the urban elites but of all townspeople. They enable the northerly Scottish burgh to tell its own story (in a way that analogy with southern Britain or even the capital, Edinburgh, never really can) of the quickening of commercial life and the access to material possessions that were characteristic of later medieval and Renaissance Europe. This paper looks in particular at four key elements of burghal life: pawning and pledges, distraint of goods, the passing on of burgesses' goods to their heirs, and the evidence of public display.

The present paper draws on the records which have been studied, mostly in manuscript form, for the period 1398 – 1540. The start date is determined by the start date of the continuous record series. The end date enables examination of continuity and change over nearly a century and a half and in particular of improvements in standards of living and rise in consumerism as has been observed elsewhere in later medieval Europe, expressed in the ownership of luxury clothes and household textiles, furs, accessories, objects of devotion, books, jewellery, and plate.<sup>7</sup> The approach has, of necessity, been to focus on the best-documented examples where sufficient detail is given to enable understanding of the circumstances of the case. The records abound with references to 'wrongful withholding' of items, which enables us to infer that particular things existed (or that it was credible to claim that they did). As part of a later project as proposed in the conclusion it should be possible to take a quantitative approach to such evidence; to see, for example, which items tended to be 'wrongfully withheld' and from whom. Even when such a quantitative approach is taken, the records will only enable us to know about the cases

---

<sup>7</sup> See, for examples, the range of luxury items in fourteenth-century Italian cities in Susan Mosher Stuard, *Gilding the Market: Luxury and Fashion in Fourteenth-Century Italy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), esp. Ch. 2 and Sarah Stanbury, *The Visual Object of Desire in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Penn Press, 2008).

which came to court. As in the present study, it is only when pawning or other credit arrangements went wrong or when fines normally payable in money had to be paid in kind or when inheritance was disputed or was otherwise complicated that public records were made.

Moreover, it is fully acknowledged that one is, at this pilot stage, drawing on very different kinds of evidence. The lists of heritable goods of a wealthy burgess are a very different thing from selected commodities pledged more or less routinely to facilitate trade; and different again is the evidence of the pathetic solitary items wrested from individuals who could not meet their obligations. The rulings about clothing are not only about standards of living and access to goods but about control of craftsmen and the town's own reputation. But taking these diverse forms of evidence together, we are able to make some headway with questions about the kind of goods which were considered to be suitable for commodification, in pawning and other credit arrangements; about the standards of living of ordinary people who had to part with their possessions in order to meet their obligations; about the ways in which status within the town was reflected in the quantity, quality and combinations of people's possessions; about the significance of clothing and jewellery in public displays of status; and the extent to which wealth arising from international trade supported the acquisition of consumer goods.

### **Pawning and pledging**

The most frequently encountered indication of ownership of possessions and of wealth was the use of commodities in credit arrangements, in pawning and as pledges for payment for goods. The council registers are full of cases brought before the courts when pawning arrangements had gone wrong, whether because the person laying their goods 'in wed' could not or would not redeem them; or because the parties disagreed about the amount for which they had been pawned; or, linked to that, because the pawnbroker would not return the goods on demand. We have, therefore, as explained above, only a partial view of the pawning that went on; and a view which is perhaps biased towards unsustainable circumstances or irregular arrangements.

When cases involving pawned or otherwise pledged items did come to court, what is clear is the extent of reliance on the sworn testimony of the parties involved and of any witnesses to the transaction. It seems that, as elsewhere, arrangements were made aurally, in front of witnesses, rather than in writing, which gave considerable room for dispute.<sup>8</sup> It was sometimes necessary as well

---

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Craig Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation: The Culture of Credit and Social Relations in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 96 and 110..

as part of the lawsuit to bring in experts able to determine the fineness and hence the value of precious metals or fine cloth. We rarely have a complete record of the successive stages that a case would go through, from the plaintiff's claim, the instructions of the court or of the sworn assize as to the testimony required in order to decide the matter (and sometimes the assize's decision as to what the outcome should be depending on that testimony), the testimony itself, and the court's ruling. The fact that, typically, we only have evidence of parts of the whole case may indicate that, when it came to it, the matter was dealt with out of court although there must also have been debtors who absconded. An informative case is one before the bailies in July 1441, when Robert de Camera claimed to have pawned to Alexander Goldsmyth, for the sum of 3s., a silver mounted belt ('quoddam cinctorium argentatum') weighing four ounces.. Alexander claimed that it had been pawned for 9s. The assize determined that if Alexander could prove that it had been pawned for more than the 3s. which had been paid back to him then Robert was to pay the difference and Alexander to restore to him three ounces of silver or their value - which he had to swear that the belt had weighed. If on the other hand Robert could prove that the belt weighed more than three ounces then Alexander was to satisfy him accordingly. If however Robert could not prove how much the belt weighed, Alexander was to do so, by his own oath and the oaths of those present when the belt had been broken up. We lose sight of the case here, but what is clear is how much of this had been done on trust. The agreement had been made aurally. No written record was apparently made as to the amount for which the belt had been pawned, or its weight, or the amount of time before it was to be redeemed, or what might happen to it if it were not. (Alexander had, it seems, gone ahead and dismantled the belt.) It is clear too that it was the weight of the silver, not the workmanship or other materials, that was valued.<sup>9</sup>

Belts with silver were, indeed, among the items most commonly pawned, along with other items of precious metal. They were a particularly useful form of dress accessory,<sup>10</sup> but they were also, for the owner, a form of savings; and they were a safe investment for the pawnbroker who knew that they could be melted down and recycled if not redeemed.<sup>11</sup> As well as silver-mounted and gilded belts, there is a high preponderance of pawned silver spoons, gold rings, chains, and 'pecis' of silver. Lengths of cloth and items of made clothing (gowns,

---

<sup>9</sup> Aberdeen Council Registers, The Town House, Aberdeen (hereafter A.C.R.), IV. p. 249.

<sup>10</sup> See Stuard, *Gilding the Market*, esp. pp. 46 – 50.

<sup>11</sup> See Francoise Piponnier and Perrine Mane, *Dress in the Middle Ages*, translated by Caroline Beamish (New Haven and London, 1997), p. 88.

hoods, doublets), are also encountered,<sup>12</sup> as are masers,<sup>13</sup> an anvil,<sup>14</sup> and measures of volume made of tin.<sup>15</sup> The pawning of coins seems to have happened more frequently towards the end of the fifteenth century, perhaps in consequence of the debasement of the currency.<sup>16</sup> For example, in January 1486 it was found by witnesses that the lady of Drum had pawned a harry noble and a royal noble to James Kennarty for only £3; James was told to return the coins to her and was amerced for holding on to the nobles after the £3 had been offered to redeem them. He seems to have been claiming that they were pawned for more.<sup>17</sup> Again, we do not know the motives in this case, but that a lady of title was short of ready cash and was using her gold coins for their metal content rather than their face value seems clear.

Of course, the evidence is only partial, and we do not know whether pawned items such as clothing or equipment were surplus to need and whether the pawning took place to facilitate sustainable commercial activity rather than simply to make ends meet. The fact that, most often, people pawned just one or two selected items of high intrinsic value may mean that pawning was, for many, a regular and accepted part of engagement in urban commercial life rather than an act of desperation. There are, on the other hand, a few cases suggesting otherwise. First, townspeople on occasion gathered together a stash of goods of lower value, perhaps suggesting urgent need of ready cash or an absence of more valuable items. At some time before February 1452 Andrew Bell had pawned part of a fur lining of a gown and a covering of goat skins for 17d.<sup>18</sup> Next, what were obviously highly personal items were sometimes pawned, that must by their very nature have been of sentimental value to the owner and with which they will not have wanted to part permanently. Edmund Louson pawned a gold signet ('unum signetum aureum') to Andrew Pringil for 6s and had to go to the chamberlain's ayre in February 1451 to recover it.<sup>19</sup> In 1498 Sir William Angousone pawned a gold cross and a gold ring for £5.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Eg, William Croft Dickinson, *Early Records of the Burgh of Aberdeen, 1317, 1398 – 1407* (Edinburgh, 1957), p. 36 – a doublet and a long gown (toga), respectively priced at 8s and 20s; A.C.R., II. p. 24, IV. p. 204, and V.i. p. 504.

<sup>13</sup> Eg. A.C.R., V.i. p. 255 and 412.

<sup>14</sup> A.C.R., V.i. p. 541.

<sup>15</sup> Eg. A.C.R., VI. pp. 728 and 732. Smail notes that clothing, accessories, jewellery, fine metalware, and household linens were the items most frequently pawned and pledged: Smail, *Legal Plunder*, esp pp. 75 and 117-18.

<sup>16</sup> Eg. A.C.R., VII. p. 919: pawning of a French crown for 8s. 4d; p. 926, pawning of a unicorn for 14s. On the currency, see Elizabeth Gemmill and Nicholas Mayhew, *Changing Values in Medieval Scotland: A Study of Prices, Money, and Weights and Measures* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 111 – 142.

<sup>17</sup> A.C.R., VI. pp. 243-4.

<sup>18</sup> A.C.R., V.i. p. 137.

<sup>19</sup> A.C.R., V.i. p. 108.

<sup>20</sup> A.C.R., VII. p. 920.

Even devotional articles, then, might be pawned, again, perhaps a sign of great need.<sup>21</sup> In June 1539 the widow Marion Alexandersone brought a suit against John Symon claiming that at Easter she had handed over to him £30, ‘to myne and my barnis vtilite and proffett’. (She was named as the mother of Katherine Andersone.) The *specie* that she had entrusted to him were itemised, and a gilded silver cross worth about 30s that she had handed over was described in great detail:

‘Ane croce of siluer quhilk hes bene gylt ane inschebraid and maire of the stank and the palme of the same siclyk, witht ij gryt knoppis of siluer at ilk ane end and iiij siluer knoppis maid to the fasoune of peirle at the couplyng of the branchis of the said croce, haffand drawi yng one the ane syd of the croce the pictour of Our Lady and on the toder syd the pictour of Our Lord, wortht xxx s’ or tharby...’

This does not read as a conventional pawning arrangement, but rather as an investment; perhaps he was to trade with the money on her and her daughter’s behalf. Marion seems to have become suspicious of John Simon’s intentions when she saw his daughter wearing the cross on Corpus Christi day; and he had refused to return her money on demand. In the end, she proved her point about the cross but only got back part of the money she claimed.<sup>22</sup>

The town would occasionally intervene to make sure that people did not part with their property unwillingly – which sometimes happened when wives were dealing with their husbands’ goods. On 4 November 1444 the court decreed that Patrick Quhite ‘Barbour’ should only have to pay Simon Blabre 15s for a gold ring even though it was worth 40s – on condition that he was not to blame his wife for the ‘tyn yng’ (losing) of it.<sup>23</sup> On 23 April 1460, it was ordained that no inhabitant of the burgh or anyone outside should receive items in pawn from Wat Cutlar’s wife, except ‘dry silver’, because she was a known ‘strower’ of her husband’s goods. If anyone did accept such goods they would have to restore them to him without compensation.<sup>24</sup> These are not the only instances of craftsmen being in possession of precious objects,<sup>25</sup> and even servants

<sup>21</sup> Smail, *Legal Plunder*, pp. 84 and 207, notes that devotional objects were rarely pawned nor collected for payment of debts.

<sup>22</sup> A.C.R., XVI. pp. 276, 280 – 1, and 285.

<sup>23</sup> A.C.R., IV. p. 373.

<sup>24</sup> A.C.R., V.i. p. 390. There was a later case, from 1543, of Alexander Michelson who claimed that his wife Margaret Rolland was giving all his goods away: Gordon DesBrisay, Elizabeth Ewan and H. Lesley Diack, ‘Life in the two towns’ in *Aberdeen before 1800: A New History*, pp. 44 – 69 (at p. 54).

<sup>25</sup> For example, In September 1399 William ‘taillour Blakberd’, also called ‘scissor’, had won his claim against Brice Robert who had wrongfully withheld from him a pair of paternosters with a cross and necklace of silver, priced at 8s: Dickinson, *Early Records of Aberdeen*, pp. 47, 56, 58 and 67. In May of that year there was a case



sometimes had things to pawn. Nicholas, a servant of Will Club, pawned a ring to William of Strade for 5s. There is nothing in the case of May 1465 to suggest that the ring was not his own; the dispute was over the amount for which he had pawned it.<sup>26</sup>

Of course, it was wrong to pawn things that did not belong to you. There was a scandal in 1460, when Brother David Crag, minister of the Trinitarian Friars of Aberdeen, had pawned a gilded silver chalice for the sum of five marks. One Gilbert Kintor had got hold of it – whether he was the pawnbroker we are not told – but he freely returned it to Brother Peter of Stirling on condition that no brother should repeat this sort of thing and indeed pawnbrokers were warned.<sup>27</sup> In this case, the chalice was part of the Trinitarians' institutional endowment rather than the minister's own property so he was not free to pawn it, but he was not unique as the head of a late medieval religious house deploying its assets in order to make ends meet.

There were a variety of people occupied as pawnbrokers. They do not seem to have been a separate craft, although goldsmiths often acted in this capacity having access to cash and being well-placed to recycle (or upcycle) precious metals. Women were frequently active as pawnbrokers, sometimes during their widowhood, suggesting that here, as elsewhere, lending was a means of livelihood at that stage of the lifecycle.<sup>28</sup> Ada, widow of John Kynnynemund', was amerced by the bailies in March 1451 for wrongfully withholding a gold ring pawned to her for 6s. and she was ordered to restore it, the 6s. being paid.<sup>29</sup> In May 1465 Lady Margaret, wife of Sir John de Forbes, sought (through her proctor) the recovery of a gold belt ('quoddam singulum aureum') from Agnes, widow of Robert Scherar, claiming that she had not given it to Donald Mason to pawn but that it was wrongfully taken from her and so Alice should restore it.<sup>30</sup> Members of the clergy acted as pawnbrokers, like Sir Alexander Monemeill, parson of Forbes, who in 1507 had taken a cross of gold and a gold ring with a blue stone in pawn, the cross for three French crowns and the ring for a gold unicorn. He sent his servant to have the items appraised by the goldsmiths David Theman and David Brois'. They appraised the cross, which they said weighed half an ounce and half a unicorn in weight, at 58s. 6d. and the ring to a

---

brought against William by Fersith Rede over the wrongful detention by William taillour Blackberd of a necklace and a pair of beads, perhaps the same items (p. 41).

<sup>26</sup> A.C.R., V.i. p. 546.

<sup>27</sup> Elizabeth Gemmill, ed., *Aberdeen Guild Court Records, 1437 – 1468* (Edinburgh, 2005), p. 178.

<sup>28</sup> Muldoon, *Economy of Obligation*, p. 111; Sanderson, 'Clothing sixteenth-century Scotland', p. 37, has examples of 'wad wives' in Edinburgh. .

<sup>29</sup> A.C.R., V.i. p. 117.

<sup>30</sup> A.C.R., V.i. p. 111.

French crown ‘in all things’ (presumably because of the stone the value of the ring was not only in its weight).<sup>31</sup> In a later example, Master James Wawane, parson of ‘Owne’ (Oyne, Aberdeenshire) and commissary general of the bishop of Aberdeen, took Alexander Bisset’s gold chain and ring for £10 and had to take him to court in July 1529 when Alexander failed to redeem them.<sup>32</sup>

Even though we only know about the cases when things went wrong – when people brought came to court to recover their goods or the money lent – the evidence suggests that Aberdeen had a lively pawnbroking trade. In this Scottish town, as elsewhere in later medieval Europe, networks of credit and debt were a characteristic of daily life for most people.<sup>33</sup> When persons of higher social status – lairdly families or beneficed clergy – engaged in pawnbroking the items at play were of higher value – gilded items, or gold, rather than silver - the latter being encountered among those of artisanal or lower status. But it seems Aberdonians at all social levels, even servants, had something to pawn, and persons with access to cash ready to receive it.

Items of value such as cloth, clothing and precious metal were also used as pledges for payment for goods. When matters came to court the complexity of the chains of commerce that such pledges enabled is revealed. As with pawnbroking, the depositions of sworn witnesses was key in establishing the facts of the case. So, for example, a set of depositions of witnesses was made on 9 December 1502 about the use of a silver belt as a pledge for a purchase of wheat. Alexander Stablaire testified that he was a witness when William Buchane pawned the belt to Alexander Prat as a pledge for five French crowns paid to Walter Blakling for wheat that William had bought from him. He knew nothing, however, about two stones of wool, and none of the other witnesses mentioned anything about wool either. Christine Mortymer said the belt had been pawned by William Buchane to Walter Blakling as a pledge for 5 bolls of wheat at a French crown the boll. Afterwards William was forced to redeem the belt and he delivered it to Alexander Prat for five French crowns. He borrowed £3 of this from Thomas Prat’s wife and the rest he paid himself.<sup>34</sup> Another example reveals the procedure in place that compensated creditors (and protected debtors) if an item were not redeemed. David Murray, acting on his father’s behalf, brought a gold ring for formal appraisal which had been given to

---

<sup>31</sup> A.C.R., VIII. p. 768.

<sup>32</sup> A.C.R., XII.ii. p. 618.

<sup>33</sup> On this point, see Smail, *Legal Plunder* and, for the early modern period, Craig Muldrew, *Economy of Obligation* and Martha C. Howell, *Commerce before Capitalism in Europe, 1300-1600* (Cambridge, 2010). For the availability of credit in later sixteenth-century Edinburgh, see Sanderson, ‘Clothing sixteenth-century Scotland’.

<sup>34</sup> A.C.R., VIII. pp. 175-6.

his father as a pledge for money owing to him. Two goldsmiths then appraised the ring publicly, at the market cross, on four successive days and valued it at eight and a half marks on the basis of the noble being worth two marks. The ring was then offered to anyone who would pay most for it or who would pay the sum at which it was appraised. On this occasion no-one seems to have come forward because the burgh officer was ordered in the court of 27 February 1508 to offer the ring to the owner and, if he refused to pay for it, to deliver it to the creditor. If the value of the ring exceeded the debt then the difference was to be paid to the owner.<sup>35</sup>

Even within families pledges were sometimes made for debts. On 11 January 1465 the assize heard that Janet, widow of Robert Gillespy, had pawned a belt to her daughter Isabel for two demys (gold coins). The assize delivered that Isabel should keep the belt and deliver another, green, belt to her mother. Janet was to hand over 20s and Isabel was to deliver two bolls of bear to her mother or their value.<sup>36</sup>

## **Distraints**

The widespread use of pawning and pledges for payment reveals a complex set of commercial relationships and willingness to engage in credit arrangements. It was rather different, however, when goods were forcibly distrained for obligations already entered into that were unfulfilled. The registers are full of such cases. The collection of customs known as the Burgh Laws and ascribed to the reign of David I forbade burgesses from themselves taking distraints from their debtors,<sup>37</sup> and involving the authorities was of course far preferable to having individuals act on their own account with an implicit threat of violence. When in 1401 the laird of Keith had seized wine and oxen for debts owing to him the townsmen of Aberdeen wrote as intermediaries to the (unnamed) debtor begging him to pay up in order to avoid future ‘sic pundyng and namly in our tovn’.<sup>38</sup> In this case the fact that the creditor was a powerful individual warranted a cautious approach to the problem by the authorities, but an ordinary burgess might find himself in trouble for taking matters into his own hands. John of Catnes had to defend his action of taking a kist and clothes in it from Gilbert Vaus before January 1486 for the ‘annuel’ (rent) due to him.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> A.C.R., VIII. pp. 808-9.

<sup>36</sup> A.C.R., V.i. p. 526.

<sup>37</sup> ‘Leges Burgorum’ in Cosmo Innes, ed., *Ancient Laws and Customs of the Burghs of Scotland, I. AD 1124 – 1424* (Scottish Burgh Records Society, 1868), p. 22 (no. xlv).

<sup>38</sup> J. Stuart, ed., *Extracts from the Council Register of the Burgh of Aberdeen, I. 1398 – 1570* (Spalding Club, 1844), p. 380.

<sup>39</sup> A.C.R., VI. p. 243. As Smail points out, a private distraint could look like theft: see Smail, *Legal Plunder*, pp. 139 - 145.

Sometimes even the burgh officers whose responsibility it was to take distrains on behalf of the burgh were challenged for having done so wrongfully. George Broun challenged the serjeant Alexander Chaumer in November 1478 for having taken a distraint ('poynd') from him of certain broad cloth to the value of 20s, as he said. George for his part was required then to prove that he did not owe two bolls of meal to Gilbert Monson', which in the event, however, he failed to do.<sup>40</sup>

When distrains for debt were taken on behalf of the creditor, the goods were publicly appraised on successive occasions in the market place and sold there if not redeemed by the debtor. As with the cases relating to pawning and pledges, we do not always have a record of each successive stage in the case, nor how often the owner redeemed his property. But a statute of 9 January 1525 set out the process for dealing with distrains taken by the officers which shows how things were supposed to operate by that point. Goods were to be appraised on two market days in each week, that is, on Saturday and Wednesday, auctioned ('roppit') at the market cross and witnessed testimony given as to the highest bidder (and presumably of the price offered). They were then to be offered to the owner, to give him the chance to recover his property. If he refused they were to be offered to whomever had bid the most and the creditor paid from the proceeds; the remainder, after deduction of the officers' fees and the clerk's fee, was to be returned to the owner.<sup>41</sup> It made sense of course to distrain goods which were easy to transport and which could be ascribed a value most easily. In a case of 19 December 1532 Patre Keir won his case against Andrew Keir for part of the money owing to him for wheat and meal he had bought; the officers were told to go and distrain the 'readiest' of Andrew's goods, appraise them according to the sum owing and keep them until further notice as Andrew was out of town.<sup>42</sup> The 'readiest' goods – the items commonly appraised for debt – were, in addition to valuables such as jewellery and belts, metal vessels, especially of brass, pewter or tin, which had an intrinsic value and could be melted down. Devotional articles do not, however, appear to have been distrained, although they were sometimes pawned as we have already seen.

The metal content of goods had a fixed value, so the successive appraisals would tend to come up with the same amount. This was not always the case with other goods. In the valuation in January 1470 of a grey horse distrained from John Fechat' Mathowson in part payment for a Hamburg barrel of salmon owed to William of Marnys, baxter, 12s. were offered on the first day, on

---

<sup>40</sup> A.C.R., VI. pp. 560 and 562.

<sup>41</sup> A.C.R., XI. p. 512.

<sup>42</sup> A.C.R., XIV. p. 66.

subsequent days 20s. and 23s. 4d.; on the fourth day the bid was 26s and the horse was appraised at the same price by three sworn witnesses. This was the sum used to meet the legal costs and to repay the creditor. The officer was given 12d. for his work and 3s for the horse's keep for three weeks. So 22s. was left, leaving 18s. of the 40s. for the salmon debt unpaid.<sup>43</sup> Furs, too, might be appraised with varying results; in October 1521 two furred gowns taken from Walter Philp who owed a total of £8, 15s. to three creditors were appraised differently by experts on each of three occasions.<sup>44</sup> Finally, the goods of William Andersoun were appraised on four occasions from December 1537 and January 1538 for his debt to William Rolland the younger. They included a variety of equipment and raw materials for hatmaking – cauldrons, pans, pairs of cards, buckram, canvas and a 'marekyne' (marten) skin as well as a variety of made goods - 'luggit' bonnets, 'cokart' bonnets, and 'preystis' bonnets. The resulting appraisals varied in amount, although the quantity and nature of the goods distrained from a person who seems to have been a master craftsman suggest that this was a serious matter.<sup>45</sup>

In this case the debtor had found that his stock in trade had been raided, which was rare. It was rare, too, for individuals' households to be ransacked although it did happen. On 19 January 1485 the serjeant presented for appraisal a collection of household items distrained from John Fichet for a debt owed to Thom Symson. They were a covering, priced at 26s, a feather bed, a bolster and two pillows (coddis), for 21s, a pair of sheets, 8s, a mantle, price 4s, two quarts and one pint, price 14s, a pan and a chandler, price 7s. 6d. The total came to £4, 6d.<sup>46</sup>

As well as dealing with private debts, the town officers had to take distrains for non-appearance in court (which seems to have been an endemic problem) and to seize goods when their owners were amerced for offences. Distrains of this kind might be sold for cash or returned to the owner when he paid up.. There survives from 1401 a list of the distrains and cash ('in namis et argento') received by the bailies. They included kettles, an axe, a basin, pots (some of them brass), lavers, a covering, a sword and buckler, a 'grab', a 'garnok', a web, a cloak, a blanket, a bridle 'rym', a sword, a hammer, a grey gown, and pairs of shoes. Each of the items was priced and came to a total of 53s. 10d. while the amount paid in cash was 79s.<sup>47</sup> A similar list, dated 18 September 1406,

---

<sup>43</sup> A.C.R., VI. p. 17.

<sup>44</sup> A.C.R., XI. p. 105. Other examples of three appraisals by experts are at A.C.R. XII.i. pp. 193-4 and 656.

<sup>45</sup> A.C.R., XV. pp. 511-12.

<sup>46</sup> A.C.R., VI. p. 901.

<sup>47</sup> A.C.R., I. pp. 404-5.

itemised the sums received by the alderman as amercements paid in cash and kind. 33s were received in money from named individuals, but 44s. 6d. was received in a long list of individually priced goods: a gown, a pair of leg harness, basins, pots, posnets, cauldrons, a buckler, a kettle, a pan, hammers, a sieve ('syff'), a cloak and a hood.<sup>48</sup> The lists are characterised as essential household equipment and personal clothing and accessories, and we seem in them to encounter the lives of the very poor. Subtly different were the items which were seemingly taken as amercements in kind from a group of bakers. The list of bakers is undated and damaged but its place in the manuscript points to a date in the late 1460s. It suggests that amercements were taken in kind even from craftsmen who, we might expect, should have had access to money. They included quart and pint measures, a piece of black cloth, a pair of gloves, a blue kirtle, a silver spoon, kettles and other vessels.<sup>49</sup>

Each of these three lists leaves a lot of questions unanswered: whether the items had been seized or handed over by the owner himself; what the arrangements were for returning them, if any; and the nature of the offences which led to their being taken in the first place. But what is clear is that a substantial number of people were paying their fines in the form of a miscellany of meagre household goods speaking of poverty rather than plenty and a shortage of ready cash. The forfeiture of personal clothing and cooking utensils must have caused real hardship to the poor, if unrecovered; while some craftsmen would have struggled without the items of equipment that enabled them to carry on their trade. That some craftsmen operated with a 'minimum kit' is revealed by the ruling of the guild court on 8 October 1507, that the wives of dyers and cordwainers who engaged in brewing had to have one vat ('leid') to brew in and another for the main craft.<sup>50</sup>

### **Inventories of burgesses' goods**

In context of this evidence - that some townspeople were forcibly deprived of their household essentials - the inventories of dead burgesses' goods form an interesting counterpoint. These were the items that had survived the lifetime experiences of their owner, having not been pawned (or if they had been, having been redeemed), distrained, or stolen. According to the Burgh Laws, a third of a burgess' goods were to go to the children of his marriage when he died; the eldest son and heir was to have the same share as the rest unless he had taken a portion previously.<sup>51</sup> The burgh government was responsible for conducting

---

<sup>48</sup> Dickinson, *Early Records of Aberdeen*, pp. 220-1.A

<sup>49</sup> A.C.R., V.i. p. 645.

<sup>50</sup> A.C.R., VIII. p. 754.

<sup>51</sup> Burgh Laws, pp. 55-6 (no. cxv).

inquiries into the lands of deceased burgesses and for making sure that the moveable property of heirs came into the right hands. The council registers contain, in addition to the inquisitions post mortem into burgess lands, a number of inventories of ‘goods of heirship’, that is, the property that was to go to the rightful heir. These records do not seem to have been routinely made on the death of any burgess, nor does there appear to have been a particular minimum value or quantity of goods to qualify for inclusion. It was, rather, that the circumstances called for intervention, or at least registration, by the burgh authorities. The inventories were, for the most part, associated with acknowledgements by the heir’s representative that goods had been received, or were claims by the heir or heirs to their inheritance, or were partitions of goods between the heir and the widow. At least 22 inventories of deceased burgesses’ goods were made between 1446 and 1540 and are discussed here.<sup>52</sup>

Between them, the inventories contain over 240 different types of object, including utensils for cooking and brewing and other household equipment, furniture, beds, bedding and other household textiles, tools for craftsmanship, weights and measures, clothing and horseriding gear, armour, and consumables (for example, fish, timber, and cloth). Three inventories have been selected from points within the time frame in order to illustrate the range and types of goods that might be included and their arrangement within the inventory and to exemplify a variety of circumstances in which heirs and other interested parties found themselves which led to the matter being registered. The first, from 1446, is a decree about the division of the moveable goods between the burgess’ heir on the one hand and his widow and her new husband on the other, and how the goods were to be used to pay the deceased burgess’ debts. The next, from 1519, is an acknowledgement by a tailor of a portion of the items claimed by his godson to be due to him. It shows the administrative process: disputed claims were made in a so-called ‘bill of heirship’ – the contents of which the other party agreed with or not - and it is of interest in being from a craftsman’s family although there is little here specific to the tailor’s craft (unlike the items in the dyer’s inventory discussed below). The third document, from 1532, lists the goods which the guardian of a minor acknowledged having received on his behalf, enabling the person who had had custody of these to be discharged of his responsibility. This is the longest of the three lists, and includes descriptions

---

<sup>52</sup> The inventories are in A.C.R., IV. p. 438, A.C.R., V.i. pp. 62, 484 and 532, A.C.R., VI. pp. 482 and 489-90, A.C.R., VII. pp. 297, 400 and 829, A.C.R., VIII. p. 1048, A.C.R., IX. pp. 439, 591 and 639, A.C.R., X. p. 43, A.C.R., XII.i. pp. 486-7, A.C.R., XIV, pp. 552 and 615, A.C.R., XV. pp. 539 and 595-6 and A.C.R., XVI. pp. 166, 365-6 and 466.

of items of quality clothing suggesting that particular attention was paid to these.

The number of inventories here is of course very small, especially in comparison with the hundreds of testaments which form the basis of studies of standards of living and social relations in the late medieval and early modern periods in other parts of Europe.<sup>53</sup> And in only a few cases were the items valued. Nor do they necessarily represent all the burgess's goods. Moreover, the property that they do represent, that of burgesses, was that of the merchants and master craftsmen, men occupying the upper echelons of urban society. The inventories do not tell us about the lifestyle of apprentices, servants, or the very poor. Even so, the patterns that they reveal are sufficiently consistent to warrant their use as a preliminary investigation into the goods in a burgess household in the period.

The Burgh Laws had stipulated that the heir of a burgess should have certain necessary household items: the best table or board with trestles, a table cloth, a towel, a basin, a laver, the best bed with the sheets and all the bedding, the best feather bed (or nop bed (flock mattress) if there were no feather bed), a 'leid' with a maskfat (a vessel for mashing the malt), a 'gylfat' (a brewing vessel for the wort to ferment in), a barrel, a cauldron, a kettle, a brandreth (gridiron), a posnet, a 'chymnay' (fire place or grate), a stoup, and a 'cruk' (hook). These items should not be willed away from the house, and anything built, set or sown in the ground should also stay. The heir should have a kist, a schryne (coffer), a plough, a waggon, a cart, a chair, a brass pot, a pan, a roasting iron, a girdle, a mortar, a pestle, a mazer, a doubler, a cup, twelve spoons, a bench, a form, a stool, a balance and weights, a spade and an axe.<sup>54</sup>

Many of these items do feature in the later medieval inventories as those in the appendix show. It is first worth pointing out the few rather exceptional 'odd men out' lists: the 1477 inventory of the deceased Alexander Fresal's goods which his father, Andrew, acknowledged to have received from his son's executors in the form of a quitclaim. The son's decease during his father's lifetime may suggest a sudden death, but the items listed include (as well as the clothing and household goods that occur in most of the inventories) a number of consumables which look as though they were his merchant's stock in trade,

---

<sup>53</sup> For examples, Kristen M. Burkholder examined 550 wills dating between 1327 and 1487 from the Court of Husting and the Prerogative Court of Canterbury in 'Threads bared: dress and textiles in late medieval English wills', *Medieval Clothing and Textiles*, I, eds Robin Netherton and Gail R. Owen-Crocker (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2005), pp. 133 – 153; Muldrew examined 330 English probate inventories between 1520 and 1714 for *The Economy of Obligation*. For Scotland, Sanderson's 173 testaments for 'Clothing sixteenth-century Scotland' were mainly from the later sixteenth century.

<sup>54</sup> Burgh Laws, pp. 56-7 (no. cxvi).



including timber, fish, salt, linseed and hempseed and various containers.<sup>55</sup> Another unusual inventory is of the goods belonging to the litster (dyer) Thomas Litster. The goods were specifically said to belong to the litster's craft and so give us a glimpse into the craftsman's workshop, with its vats, paddles (trubbis), nets, strainers, a wringer, dishes for woad and various wooden apparatus and iron implements.<sup>56</sup> Finally, the items claimed by Robert Gotthra's son and heir Andrew in February 1538 included some agricultural implements as well as joiner's tools as well as horse and riding equipment, weapons, clothing, and household equipment.<sup>57</sup>

All the inventories, from the earliest of the series, include cooking equipment and utensils: girdles and baking boards, sundry pots, pans and vats, hooks and ladles. The inventories with a larger number of items tend to feature more specialised cooking vessels, with vats distinguished as for fish, flesh, and so on; there are more fish than flesh, perhaps reflective of Aberdeen's riverine and coastal fish supply. Vessels for brewing are everywhere to be found. We know that many households produced ale, candles and oatcakes for sale in this period, from the large numbers of women regularly amerced for illicit brewing, candle making, and cake baking activities although in some households the activity will have been for the household only.<sup>58</sup> Such equipment occurs in prosperous households as well, as item 3 of the appendix shows. Many inventories included pairs of cards for preparing wool for spinning and a couple included combs. The wheels mentioned in many of the sixteenth-century inventories are usually associated with other wool processing items, from which we may infer that they were spinning wheels, and indeed in one case a spinning wheel is specified.<sup>59</sup> One had 'hardin' (a coarse narrow cloth), white cloth, wool and tartan, perhaps suggestive of domestic cloth production.<sup>60</sup> Basins and lavers for washing occur throughout. Weights and measures occur in many inventories, especially liquid measures of capacity and scales, again, as shown in the appendix. The Burgh Laws allowed any burgess to have a measure in his house for measuring his corn, an ell-wand (for cloth), and a stone and pound for weighing.<sup>61</sup> Silver spoons were the most commonly listed precious metal item.<sup>62</sup> Interestingly,

<sup>55</sup> A.C.R., VI. p. 482 (and printed, Stuart, *Extracts from the Council Register of the Burgh of Aberdeen*, p. 408).

<sup>56</sup> A.C.R., VII. p. 297.

<sup>57</sup> A.C.R., XV. p. 539.

<sup>58</sup> See Gemmill and Mayhew, *Changing Values in Medieval Scotland*, esp. pp. 41-2 and 48 – 57.

<sup>59</sup> A.C.R., XIV. p. 615.

<sup>60</sup> A.C.R., XV. pp. 595-6. The activity of spinning in Aberdeen is further revealed by the survival of spindle whorls: Stones, *Tale of Two Burghs*, p. 26.

<sup>61</sup> Burgh Laws, p. 23 (no. xlviii).

<sup>62</sup> Goldberg notes that silver spoons were a item characteristically found in urban inventories: P.J.P. Goldberg, 'The fashioning of bourgeois domesticity in later medieval England: a material culture perspective' in Kowaleski and Goldberg, eds, *Medieval Domesticity*, pp. 124-144.

there are hardly any knives – these being items, perhaps, which individuals will have carried on their person rather than being part of the household.<sup>63</sup>

All this shows the continued importance, throughout the period, of the traditional and functional items that enabled life to carry on in the burgess home: the cooking, heating, lighting, and washing; and the craftsmanship and commerce (revealed by the weights and measures) that were the burgess's livelihood. Such items are suggestive of a great deal of activity, economic as well as domestic, within the household although they do not tell us much about the division of space. Items were often grouped together by their function in the inventories, though somewhat loosely. For example, the list of the tailor Tom Hennersone's goods made in 1519 (item 2 in the appendix) proceeded from clothing to furniture, to pots and plates of various kinds, measures, beds and bedding, and then a miscellany of cooking, brewing and craft equipment along with pepper querns and silver spoons. There is little to suggest that things were distributed among several rooms and indeed we know that most Aberdonians, apart from the wealthier merchants (with their separate booths),<sup>64</sup> lived in a single room although craftsmen would have a workshop on the premises as well.<sup>65</sup>

The home functioned of course as a living space. On furnishings, the items occurring most frequently are bed furnishings, with the accompanying sheets, blankets and pillows ('coddis'). Later inventories were more likely to list featherbeds and standing or arras beds. Many burgess homes included a chair (Aberdeen sharing the characteristic, observed elsewhere in late medieval households, of just one chair for the head of the household),<sup>66</sup> an almaryl, and a table. Trestle tables dominate at first, but stand alone tables as well as settles occur more frequently from the sixteenth century. Chests and coffers are also a characteristic item, and there are clothes presses and 'vair stalls' from the sixteenth century possibly suggesting an advancement in their type.

There are varieties of serving dishes: chargers, doublers, trenchers, dishes, and sometimes saucers, which perhaps points to a range of different types of food served which required vessels of different size and shape. Household items were

---

<sup>63</sup> Cf Gilchrist, *Archaeology and the Life Course*, p. 77, who finds that, by the fifteenth century, it was more common to store the knife at home rather than to carry it.

<sup>64</sup> Sanderson, 'Clothing sixteenth-century Scotland', p. 40.

<sup>65</sup> Geoffrey Stell, 'Housing in the Two Towns', in *Aberdeen before 1800: A New History*, pp. 97-108 (at p. 107), J. Stones, *A Tale of Two Burghs: The Archaeology of Old and New Aberdeen* (Aberdeen, 1987), p. 12, Sanderson, 'Clothing sixteenth-century Scotland', p. 35; and, for England, see Christopher Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages: Social Change in England c. 1200 – 1520* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 203 – 4 and 'Living in peasant houses', p. 24.

<sup>66</sup> Dyer, 'Living in peasant houses', p. 24.

sometimes described by the material of which they were made, especially the metal equipment – iron, tin, pewter, brass or silver. Pots, perhaps made of ceramic and of local manufacture, are not so specified although we are often told the size.<sup>67</sup> But it was the clothes in the inventories, and especially gowns and doublets, that were the most frequently described.<sup>68</sup> Gowns might be called ‘the best’, or said to be of a certain colour (blue, russet, black, brown);<sup>69</sup> lined with lambskin; or of Paris black; doublets were of black satin. Clothing appears much more frequently in the sixteenth-century inventories than in the earlier ones, and the tendency to give details about it is much more pronounced in the inventories of the end of the period. Other items are not described in such detail. This is evidenced by the inventory of goods received by the guardian of Robert Vaus in April 1535 (item 3 in the Appendix), which described the materials, colours, linings, and finish of the clothes, but offered far less detail about the other items. This may be compared with the much briefer information about the clothes in the first of the three inventories in the appendix, from 1446, where the items were described merely as ‘the’ or ‘his’ ‘best’. Also in 1535 we have details of the goods of William Masse, whose son Master Matthew Masse was making a claim for his father’s goods against his widow the best gown of Paris black worth £10 was the single most expensive item, worth the same as all the household goods put together (and they were not individually priced). His other clothing and his armour were similarly high in value.<sup>70</sup> In another example, from 1540, William Anderson described in detail the clothes of his brother Alexander which he claimed from Alexander’s widow Marjorie Rutherford, although the items were not priced: ‘ane hat, a typpat, a reid bonat, a hogtone of demyostage begareit with veluet, a dowblat of black satin, ane blak pair of hois stekin out with tupheit, ane new sark losin with blak werk, ane slyp of ledder, a blak Spanze cloik begareit with velvet, a ryding coit, a ryding hat with hostrage fedders, a jak.’<sup>71</sup> It does all suggest that more attention was being paid to clothing in the sixteenth century – and that at least some people possessed more, and finer, articles of dress that they and their heirs valued highly. The greater incidence of storage for clothes in the sixteenth century, as noted above, points in the same direction. At the same time, the later inventories continued to record humble items of perennial use – the cooking utensils, craft equipment, and basic equipment – suggesting that the presence of more luxurious goods represents an

---

<sup>67</sup> On the local pottery industry, see Stones, *Tale of Two Burghs*, pp. 26 - 7.

<sup>68</sup> This point is also noted by Smail, in his chapter on the description of different items as an indicator of value: Smail, *Legal Plunder*, Chapter 1, ‘The values of things’, pp. 31 - 88.

<sup>69</sup> Burkholder’s study of London wills found that black, blue and red were the most frequently mentioned colours: ‘Threads bared’, p. 140.

<sup>70</sup> A.C.R., XIV. p. 615.

<sup>71</sup> A.C.R., XVI. p. 466.

addition to the household rather than a change in recording practice. The marked increase in clothing is not obviously matched by an increase in other luxury items which reveal a rise in consumer spending in other parts of Europe, such as books, paintings, tapestries, embroidered bedding, jewellery, and objects of devotion. There is just one book – a primer – and very little jewellery. It is possible that these would have been bequeathed separately. Sums of money occur only rarely, but this is perhaps more of a reminder that these are not testaments and should not be taken as an indication of absence of cash or credit arrangements. In this respect the records are in strong contrast with the evidence of Edinburgh testators of the (mainly later) sixteenth century who often left money as bequests.<sup>72</sup>

### **Sumptuary laws and public display**

Gorgeous clothes such as these must only have been worn by the minority in sixteenth-century Aberdeen. Still, the fact that anyone was wearing such things is an indicator that wealthier townspeople did have access to the luxuries which were becoming increasingly available to urban Europeans in the period.

Aberdeen's valuable salmon exports and raw wool were certainly traded by some in return for expensive clothing. On 26 May 1522 the burgess Thomas Waus claimed that John Ratry had received from him a doublet of white scarlet, indented with velvet, worth 45s for which he was promised either a doublet as good, or a barrel of grilse of Aberdeen's measure and quality, or 45s and had failed to do so.<sup>73</sup> In a case before the bailies of 15 March 1538 Thomas Blak sued his agent Alexander Murray for failing to bring back all the items he had ordered from Dieppe from the proceeds of selling his salmon and wool. Fine Paris black, taffeta in various colours, black velvet and various bonnets loom large in the list.<sup>74</sup>

Although some such luxuries will often have been destined for northern lairds rather than for Aberdonians,<sup>75</sup> the evidence of the inventories shows that some of them were acquired by the urban elite. That this was so perhaps helps us to understand the concerns of the Scottish government which, as national rulers and civic authorities had done (in some cases much earlier) elsewhere in Europe, enacted legislation to prevent overspending, to restrict certain kinds of

---

<sup>72</sup> Sanderson, 'Clothing sixteenth-century Scotland', Sums of money are mentioned in only three of the inventories wills:

<sup>73</sup> A.C.R., XI. p. 105.

<sup>74</sup> A.C.R., XV. p. 578. For an earlier example of fish being exported from Aberdeen in return for fine cloth and bonnets, see the account of Master Robart Daloquhy in *Ledger of Andrew Halyburton, Conservator of the Privileges of the Scotch Nation in The Netherlands, 1492-1503* (Edinburgh, 1867), pp. 234 - 5.

<sup>75</sup> Ian Blanchard, Elizabeth Gemmill, Nicholas Mayhew and Ian D. Whyte, 'The economy: town and country' in *Aberdeen before 1800: A New History*, pp. 129 – 158 (at pp. 136-7). p

clothing to particular sections of society, and, accordingly, to affirm the existing social order.<sup>76</sup> For Scotland, a poor country with an adverse balance of trade, extravagance was the more to be deplored.<sup>77</sup>

A royal statute from as early as 1430 ranged over the wearing of furs, silks and elaborately cut clothing by those below a certain property standard, although it allowed aldermen, bailies and council and their wives to wear the furs that were forbidden ordinary townspeople. Burgesses were, however, expected to have weapons and armour, so as well as maintaining the hierarchy the idea was to be available for battle and again many of the inventories include weapons and armour.<sup>78</sup> A statute of 1458 introduced restrictions on clothing because of the poverty in the realm brought about by those in towns and commoners in the country, although, again, it excepted alderman, bailies and council members and their wives from the restriction on those engaged in merchandise from wearing clothes of silk, costly scarlet in gowns, and 'martrik' (marten) fur. Wives and daughters were to wear short kerchiefs with little hoods on their heads like those in England, Flanders and other countries and were not to wear gowns of martrik, 'letvis' (lettice) or tails (trains) of unfitting length or furred underneath, except on holidays. Husbandmen and labourers were to wear grey or white except on holidays when they could wear light blue or green or red and their wives as well, with kerchiefs of their own making. The materials were to cost no more than 40d the ell. No woman was to go to the kirk or market with her head covered so that she could not be recognised and there were restrictions on the clothing of clergy.<sup>79</sup> A further statute of 1471 restricted the wearing of silk.<sup>80</sup>

The enactment of sumptuary legislation by the national government seems to affirm that consumerism expressed itself in particular in the wearing of expensive clothing, with particular emphasis on the kind of material of which

---

<sup>76</sup> Gerhard Jaritz, 'Social grouping and the languages of dress in the late Middle Ages', *The Medieval History Journal*, 3.2 (2000), 235-259 (at p. 238). There is a huge literature on medieval sumptuary law. Key works include Frances E. Baldwin, *Sumptuary Legislation and Personal Display in England*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1926), Alan Hunt, *Governance of the Consuming Passions: A History of Sumptuary Law* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996). Stuard's 'Introduction' in *Gilding the Market* examines sumptuary laws in Italian cities which began for some in the thirteenth century: pp. 1-19 and Frédérique Lachaud examines dress as a signifier of status in England, and attitudes towards it, prior to the sumptuary legislation of the fourteenth century: 'Dress and social status in England before the sumptuary laws', in *Heraldry, Pageantry and Social Display in Medieval England*, edited by Peter Coss and Maurice Keen (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2002), pp. 105 - 123 .

<sup>77</sup> For an account of Scottish sumptuary legislation to the end of the seventeenth century see Frances J. Shaw, 'Sumptuary legislation in Scotland', *Juridical Review*, new series, 24 (1979-80), 81-115. More recently, Melanie Schuessler Bond has provided a summary of the provisions and a reproduction of the texts of the legislation of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in *Dressing the Scottish Court, 1543 – 1553: Clothing in the Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland* (Martlesham: The Boydell Press, 2019), pp. 8- 10 and 659 – 662.

<sup>78</sup> *Acts of the Parliaments of Scotland*, II. p. 18.

<sup>79</sup> *Acts of the Parliaments of Scotland*, II. p. 49.

<sup>80</sup> *Acts of the Parliaments of Scotland*, II. p. 100.

they were made, and the colour. The legislation addressed both men and women. The dress of women was to be in line with that of their nearest male relative, although the independent public appearance of women was acknowledged implicitly in the ruling about their attire when going to the kirk or market. Townspeople (although they were a minority of the population) were perceived to be among those who were, according to the legislation, dressing beyond their station.

This sumptuary legislation was made by the Scottish royal government, but there was a tradition of rulings for burgesses about dress, showing that clothing as a signifier of status had a long history in the Scottish town, both as an indicator of dignity and loss of it. The Burgh Laws had made provision for the clothing of a burghess who had had to sell his lands out of necessity. If it were land he had acquired during his lifetime then he was free to give or sell it at will; but if it were of his inheritance he had to offer it first to the next heirs at three head courts. If they chose to buy it, then they had to provide food and clothing for him, the clothes to be of one colour, grey or white.<sup>81</sup>

There is, in fact, little in the later medieval records of Aberdeen from which we might infer that people were dressing above their station. Although sixteenth-century inventories included high quality clothing with items of satin and velvet trims, there were no furs, linings were of lambskins, and the colour most often encountered was black. Sumptuary legislation was notoriously difficult to enforce, but the evidence of archaeology also suggests that most ordinary Aberdonians, like most people in Europe in this period,<sup>82</sup> did not indulge in an array of fashionable and expensive clothing.<sup>83</sup> There is a scrap of local evidence in the form of a burgh statute of May 1507 which told hatmakers that they should not make hats of 'hewit' (dyed) colours, and especially not with 'thrummis' (fringes) whether dyed or not.<sup>84</sup> The urban authorities seem in fact to have been more concerned to ensure that those engaged in the clothing and shoemaking trades were meeting the needs of ordinary people. These instructions loom especially large in the records at the beginning of the sixteenth century and may perhaps signal new standards of expectation. The town had a long history of assuring the provision of food to townspeople, most

---

<sup>81</sup> *Burgh Laws*, pp. 20-1 (no. xlii).

<sup>82</sup> Francoise Piponnier and Perrine Mane, *Dress in the Middle Ages*, translated by Caroline Beamish (New Haven and London, 1997), pp. 83 – 6. Burkholder concluded that merchants and other town dwellers probably complied with sumptuary legislation but that members of the gentry were more likely to disobey it: 'Threads bared', pp. 143 - 150.

<sup>83</sup> See Elizabeth Ewan, *Townlife in Fourteenth-century Scotland*, p. 28. J. Charles Murray found a range of cloth on sites in Aberdeen, from coarse woollen to imported silk: 'The Archaeological Evidence' in *New Light on Medieval Aberdeen*, edited by J.S. Smith (Aberdeen, 1985), pp. 10 – 19 (at p. 18).

<sup>84</sup> A.C.R., VIII. p. 699.

obviously in the form of the assizes of bread and ale and the regulations concerning quality and behaviour in the market place. Now those rules were being extended to those articles of dress – footwear, headgear, and gloves - which involved such a degree of skill and scale of equipment that they were bought ready made. On 10 June 1504 the alderman and bailies appointed John Rede as the worthiest member of the hatmakers’ craft to inspect the stuff and the hats and report to them.<sup>85</sup> In 1510 shoemakers were told to sell single soled shoes for men for 13d or 14d the pair at the most, double soled shoes for 2s, women’s shoes for 8d, servants’ shoes for 8d, and ‘barnis’ shoes for 6d, 4d, or 3d according to the size of the child. The fact that they did this suggests that people did generally expect to wear shoes which is, indeed, confirmed by archaeological finds.<sup>86</sup> On 14 November 1511 a statute required the town’s skinnners and with the consent of four of them to have good, sufficient made gloves, well sewn and ‘querelit’ to any who wanted to buy, of small or great price and especially to supply the university. All skinnners were to put their mark on their work and guarantee the workmanship and material for the price at which it was being sold.<sup>87</sup> And the deacons of the tailors’ craft were tasked with summoning all the tailors before them, to inspect and reform their practices and to present any faults to the bailies that they could not reform themselves.<sup>88</sup>

The clothes of ordinary people certainly had meaning beyond the functional in later medieval Aberdeen. Most clearly, there was the distinction between work clothes and holiday clothes (as was recognised in the national sumptuary legislation discussed above). For example, on 26 November 1471 the assize ordained that Patrick Couper should forgive his apprentice John Couper for all offences in the past and be a good friend to him until the end of his apprenticeship. He should give him sufficient clothing for the work day to keep him from the cold and ‘hale clathis for the haly day as afferis a prentys’. As his work and efforts improved, Patrick was ‘til amende and better him in met clathe thareftir’.<sup>89</sup>

This idea of best clothes is most often encountered in the provisions for the customary pageantry on holidays which was expected of all townsmen, as an

---

<sup>85</sup> A.C.R., VIII. p. 350.

<sup>86</sup> Eg Desbrisay, Ewan and Diack, ‘Life in the two towns’, in *Aberdeen before 1800: A New History*, p. 62, Ewan, *Townlife*, p. 37 and Stones, *Tale of Two Burghs*, p. 32. On 29 October 1518 four named shoemakers and the rest of the craft admitted to the charge of selling their work dearer than the statute: A.C.R., X. p. 17.

<sup>87</sup> A.C. R., IX. p. 55.

<sup>88</sup> A.C.R., IX. p. 79.

<sup>89</sup> A.C.R., VI. p. 169. There are other examples of apprentices and other servants being supplied with clothes. In 1406 David Gibson was hired by Thomas David for 2s plus a pair of stockings and a pair of shoes priced at 12d: A.C.R., II. p. 273; later, in 1520, Ingram Slaiter undertook in the baillies’ court to give his servant John Walcar 10s a year for his clothes and 6d each day when he did not have meat: A.C.R., X. p. 191.

expression of solidarity and affirmation of the social order and particularly on the feasts of Corpus Christi, St Nicholas, the town's patron saint (6 December), and Candlemas or Purification (2 February).<sup>90</sup> In a statute of 17 May 1507 burgesses and their sons were instructed to be ready to 'pass' in suitable array with the abbot and prior of Bonaccord on every holy day.<sup>91</sup> 'Bonaccord' was the watchword associated with the legend that the townsmen of Aberdeen had participated in the destruction of the castle and the eviction of the English garrison in 1308,<sup>92</sup> although by the mid fifteenth century the abbot and prior of Bonaccord seem to have been changing to the characters Robin Hood and Little John.<sup>93</sup> In 1508, a statute of 8 May (annotated 'Bonacord'), the alderman, bailies and council ruled that all able persons should be ready with their 'arrayment' made in green and yellow, and with bows, arrows, brass and everything else when required by Robin Hood and Little John according to the previous proclamation.<sup>94</sup> On 17 November that year in preparation for St Nicholas' day all 'burgess neighbours and inhabitants burgess sons' were to ride to 'decor' and honour the town in their 'habill array convenient thereto' with 'Robert Huyd' and Little John.<sup>95</sup> At Candlemas, all the crafts were required to process in a prescribed order, wearing the badges of their craft and in their 'best array'. Each craft group was responsible for furnishing the specific characters in the pageant.<sup>96</sup> While attention has been paid in studies of these pageants to the order of procession of the craft groups and the characters that each craft was to supply, a further point is that everyone – not just the crafts - was supposed to make a good showing, in their best clothes.

Putting on a splendid public appearance was of vital importance in a town which had a proud history but which needed to work hard to maintain its

---

<sup>90</sup> See Elizabeth Gemmill, 'Signs and symbols in medieval Scottish trade', *Review of Scottish Culture*, 13 (2000-2001), 7 – 17 (at p. 12).

<sup>91</sup> A.C.R., VIII. p. 695.

<sup>92</sup> See J. Robertson, *The Book of Bon-Accord* (Aberdeen, 1839), pp. 32-6 and 349 -50 and Elizabeth Ewan, 'The age of Bon-Acord: Aberdeen in the fourteenth century' in J.S. Smith, ed, *New Light on Medieval Aberdeen* (Aberdeen, 1985), pp. 32 – 45.

<sup>93</sup> On 30 April 1445 the town council and guild members agreed that because of 'diverse enormyteis' done by the abbots of in the past they would no longer pay fees to them although it is not clear that this was a lasting decision: Stuart, ed., *Extracts from the Council Register of Aberdeen*, p. 14 and Gemmill, ed., *Aberdeen Guild Records*, pp. 99, 121 and 158. In the instructions for St Nicholas' day in 1508 it was said that Robert Huyd and Little John which was called in years bypast abbot and prior of Bonacord: A.C.R., VIII. p. 899.

<sup>94</sup> A.C.R., VIII. p. 828.

<sup>95</sup> A.C.R., VIII. p. 899.

<sup>96</sup> Eg. Stuart, *Extracts from Aberdeen Council Register*, pp. 9-10, A.C.R., VI. p. 903 and VIII. pp. 543, 799, and 1212. For the civic pageantry in later medieval Aberdeen see E. Bain, *Merchant and Craft Guilds: A History of the Aberdeen Incorporated Trades* (Aberdeen, 1887), pp. 49 – 64, Elizabeth Gemmill, 'Signs and symbols in medieval Scottish trade', Michael Lynch and Helen Dingwall, 'Elite society in town and country' in *Aberdeen before 1800: A New History*, pp. 181 – 200 (at pp. 183-4), for the involvement of the crafts in the town's pageants.



reputation in difficult economic times. In an ordinance of 22 January 1485 the alderman and council instructed that Robert Buchan ‘for the worship of the toune and the honeste of merchandis’ whenever going to Flanders should within four days of arriving get himself a new gown and doublet ‘accordand for him’, under penalty of £1 gret towards the fabric of St Nicholas’ kirk. And he was to ride in a cart when any four of his neighbours did. Robert was also to pay 10s to Master Adam of Gordon, parson of ‘Kinkel’ as a contribution towards 30s paid by Master Adam for hiring a cart – which Adam had assigned to the organs.<sup>97</sup> It does rather sound, from the need to mention a penalty, as though Robert may not have been conducting himself properly in the past.

The town songsters were decked out at public expense. On 15 October 1498 the alderman, bailies and members of the council granted 20s to ‘Maunys’ the bellman so that he could purchase a ‘pee’ or jacket to wear when going through the town each Monday morning to name and pray for the souls given to him in a list, according to the town’s custom.<sup>98</sup> On 14 June 1505 the alderman, bailies and members of council hired the songster Wat Strathachin to sing and help hold divine service within St Nicholas’ kirk. He was to take his meals each week from a rota of eight persons and to have 20s from a burgess chosen by him or any of his friends to enable him to purchase a gown.<sup>99</sup>

Conversely, in Aberdeen as elsewhere, public shaming involved stripping off of clothes. In October 1444, for an unspecified offence against his parents, Nicol Club was to ‘fallow the procession in his lynnyng clais iij dayis and sit on his kneis and ask his fader and moder forgiffyne’.<sup>100</sup> On 16 March 1490 William Belty for the ‘gret offenss’ he had committed against Thomas Waus was ordered to put his neck in the pillory with his knife in his hand, and to stand there at Thomas’ will. We are not told what the offence was, but the symbolism of the knife suggests a crime of violence. Afterwards, on the next Sunday, he was to come at the time of High Mass in ‘lynning claths’ (his underwear), with bare legs, feet and head, with a loose gown and a candle weighing a pound; he was to offer the candle to the church and the knife to Thomas in token of his repentance, asking Thomas’ and his friends’ forgiveness on his knees. He was then to pay half a stone of wax to the Holy Blood light. There was of course a

---

<sup>97</sup> Stuart, ed., *Extracts from the Council Register of the Burgh of Aberdeen*, p. 413.

<sup>98</sup> A.C.R., VII. p. 910.

<sup>99</sup> A.C.R., VIII. p. 463. Later arrangements for songsters’ fees did not however mention the gown but instead a fee of 40s: A.C.R., VIII. pp. 638 and 718.

<sup>100</sup> Gemmill, ed., *Aberdeen Guild Court Records 1437 – 1468*, p. 82.

dramatic contrast between the luxury offering and the abject bearing and scant attire of the giver.<sup>101</sup>

## Conclusion

This pilot study shows the richness of the documentary records of Aberdeen, revealing its scope to tell us about quite ordinary people's ownership and use of possessions in an era for which we might think impossible to study these things for want of evidence. We see that, in the Scottish medieval town, as elsewhere in later medieval and Renaissance Europe, objects had layers of meaning and different measures of value. Precious items were used by townspeople of high and low status, not only for display but to facilitate their involvement in trade and commerce. Credit, here as elsewhere, was a way of life. For a fortunate few, and probably those who were engaged in international trade, the inventories are evidence of an increasing supply, at least from the sixteenth century, of luxurious imported clothes and perhaps new kinds of storage arrangements for them. A specially high value seems to have been placed on clothing as compared with the utensils, weights and measures and furniture that were always part of the burgh home and to which burghers had been accustomed since at least the twelfth century. In this respect Aberdeen, and surely Edinburgh and the other great towns of Scotland, appear to have shared to some extent at least in the rise of later medieval consumerism that has been charted in other parts of Europe and to which the sumptuary legislation, enacted in Scotland as elsewhere, is witness. There is however little evidence of undue extravagance. The inventories do not suggest that many Aberdonians possessed the multiple costumes, embroidered fabrics, expensive furs, paintings, books, jewels and plate that might have been encountered in quattrocento Italy, for example; closer to home, the luxury fabrics, range of haberdashery, and trimmings encountered in Edinburgh suggest that the capital, whose merchants supplied the royal court, was in a rather different league (although it should be emphasised that most of the evidence for these comes from the later sixteenth century).<sup>102</sup> Although sumptuary legislation was enacted and was on occasion directed specifically towards townspeople there is no evidence of prosecutions. Moreover it is difficult to know the extent to which the luxury imports, especially from the Netherlands and France, made their way from the burgh to ordinary people in its wide hinterland. Burghal legislation recorded in the Council Registers about supplying goods to the countryside does not speak of luxuries but rather of essential raw materials that were imported – iron, salt, tar,

---

<sup>101</sup> Stuart, ed., *Extracts from the Council Register of the Burgh of Aberdeen*, p. 417. For another example see p. 416. On undress as punishment and insult, see Piponnier and Mane, *Dress in the Middle Ages*, pp. 102-3.

<sup>102</sup> Sanderson, 'Clothing sixteenth-century Scotland'.

soap. And within the town, below the higher echelons of the merchants, we can only discern that some items of clothing and footwear, not imported but produced locally, were becoming more generally available; and that townspeople in general were expected to participate in their best attire in the public displays for holidays.

At the same time there is evidence that some people lived very near the edge, pledging or pawning items that they could ill afford to lose, or having them distrained when they could not pay their debts. The records are full of cases, not explored here for lack of detail, of items 'wrongfully withheld' from their owners, as though possession itself was always at risk even though we are not told the circumstances. So, while some Aberdonians may have begun to acquire precious and beautiful things, it is possible that poverty made their ownership more fragile and the need to put them to fungible use greater.

Further research is now planned. This will involve a systematic gathering of data from Aberdeen's continuous, but as yet unpublished, record series to enable a quantitative analysis of the occurrence of material goods. This will include those encountered in credit arrangements, distrains supervised by the courts, thefts, robberies and other forms of 'wrongful withholding' of items, cargoes of imports and other inventories. The extant records of other medieval Scottish burghs will be used where they survive, in conjunction with those of Aberdeen, for the period up to 1540 when testamentary and other evidence starts to become more copious.

This will enable a more authoritative account of the relationship between people and their things in Scotland in the later medieval period. The present study gives confidence that the Aberdeen records enable us to look at the lives of ordinary people as well as elites. It is intended now to gain a more refined and detailed understanding of that. More can be discovered about the social and economic status of those in possession of particular items. For example, pewter vessels were associated with burgess status; in a list of petty criminals belonging to about 1409 or 1410 was one Thomas Pykar who encouraged burgesses' servants to steal their pewter vessels ('est suggestor famulorum burgensium ad furandum vasa sua stangnea').<sup>103</sup> But how many pewter vessels did they have? And did the thieves not want their silver too? Did townspeople below the status of burgess own such items as well? What about women's ownership of material goods, acquired through inheritance or in the course of commercial activity such as the pawning in which they appear to have played a prominent role? On credit arrangements more generally, an quantitative examination of the evidence of

---

<sup>103</sup> A.C.R., II. p. 83.

distrains, pledges and pawning of goods is called for to see whether these were a perennial and accepted feature of commercial life in the burgh or were indicative of a cycle of poverty that itself changed over time. Finally, the study will reveal more about standards of living in the later medieval Scottish town, as measured by the ownership, use, and display of material goods, how they may have changed during the period, and how Scottish ideas of luxury may be compared with those elsewhere.

Elizabeth Gemmill

University of Oxford

5 June 2019