The archaeology of burgage plots in Scottish medieval towns: a review

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ABSTRACT

Burgage plots, typically narrow strips of land with a house near the street frontage, are one of the most striking features of the medieval townscape. Archaeological excavations in Scottish burghs over the last twenty-five years have recovered considerable evidence concerning their nature, development and function, and the paper aims to provide an overview of the archaeological evidence for this feature of Scottish burghs. Includes a specialist report on
As populations grew, "burgage plots" could be split into smaller additional units. In medieval England and Scotland, and some parts of the Welsh Marches, burgage plots or burgage tenements were inclosed fields extending the confines of a town, established by the lord of the manor, as divisions of the 'open' manorial fields. The burgesses (equivalents of "burghers") to whom these tracts were allotted, as tenants of the enclosed lands, paid a cash rent instead of, as previously, feudal service. In 1207, for instance, Maurice Paynell, the Lord of the Manor of Leeds, granted a charter to 'his burgesses of Leeds' to build a 'new town', and the medieval burgh in Scotland represents a seriously underused and under-represented resource in historical fiction, which is a real shame, because in archaeological terms, it's one of the most widely-studied aspects of medieval life we've got. It's certainly one of the most rewarding to explore upon the ground. The burgh is laid out in linear-fashion along a single main street, which is overlooked on one (or both) sides by a series of 'burgage plots.' These were independent land holdings created by the landowner which were then sub-let to interested investors: their layout follows a consistent pattern, with the front elevation of the house usually overlooking the street frontage, and the 'backlands' stretching out to the rear.