
6 The Coffins

The majority of this section has been extracted from the typescript of an unpublished article entitled 'Slat-bottom coffins from mediaeval Scotland' by W E Boyd, D W Hall and N M McQ Holmes which was prepared in the 1980s and never published, although some of the information within the paper, regarding coffins from the excavations from excavations at Whitefriars, Perth, was published in the monograph publication of that site (Hall 1989). The full text of the article is contained in the site archive.

Within this section, where reference is made for ease of understanding to coffin XX, the number quoted corresponds to the skeleton number (SK references) elsewhere in the report.

6.1 Introduction

There was a marked change in the practice of interment between those made in the external cemetery and those inserted below the floor of the extended church. Only seven of the earlier (Period 2) corpses (from 77 interments) were contained in wooden coffins, but 16 coffins were recovered from the 37 Period 3 burials within the church.

Certain evidence for the presence of coffins was recovered from at least 23 graves, but the amount of material surviving in its original location was in most cases too small to allow any conclusions to be drawn regarding the nature and construction of the coffins. Only five graves (SK31 and SK45 from Period 2b, BP3; SK22 and SK46 from Period 3, BP4; SK18 from Period 3b, BP5) contained remains substantial enough to be considered for further analysis.

It was clear in excavation and subsequent analysis that the coffins were of an unusual form for the medieval period. While the side-boards of the coffins ran longitudinally, as is commonly found, they were constructed with partially open bases formed by separate and spaced cross-boards ('slats'). Three coffins of similar form were excavated in 1982 at the Carmelite Friary, Perth, and have been reported on separately (Boyd 1989; Hall 1989).

6.2 Construction details

The five coffins examined were constructed from longitudinal side-boards but in one example (coffin 31, *illus 24*), the end-board was formed from short upright boards. Although not all of the base-boards survived, the remains of eight were recovered from coffin 46 (*illus 25*), and the recorded spacing of these shows that only one was not recovered. For the other coffins, the spacing of those few base-boards which

remained indicates a maximum of ten boards per coffin. The base-boards are of irregular width, as was the spacing between them, but the widths of the boards (see *Table 2* below) and the spacings were broadly similar to each other.

The lids comprised one or more longitudinal boards, which in coffin 46 (*illus 26*) had collapsed in such a manner as to suggest the lid was originally ridged. It had collapsed onto the body, but the left side sloped sharply down from a ridge along the long axis of the coffin towards the side. The right side lay fairly flat. This suggests that the lid was made in two pieces, each sloping down from a central raised ridge. In this context it is worth noting that, in 1844, a number of oak coffins 'straight at the sides but with their lids rising to a ridge in the centre' were found during excavations to the south of the Parliament House, within the bounds of the old St Giles' kirkyard (RCAHMS 1951, 25).

Unlike the examples from Perth (Hall 1989), the coffins at St Giles' were nailed together. All five of those analysed in detail produced an abundance of nails, mostly *in situ*, with minimum numbers ranging from 24 (coffin 45) to 60 (coffin 46). The wood remains have deteriorated too far to be able to show any evidence of corner jointing or how well the boards fitted together. Given the large number of nails used, it is unlikely that carpentered joints were used. The base-boards were nailed upwards into the overlying side-boards, usually with a pair of nails at either end of the base-board but in some cases with single nails. Occasionally, notably on some boards of SK46 (that which was most fully recovered), the pairs were augmented with a third, horizontal, nail. The end-boards on coffins 22 and 45 were attached, abutting onto the inner surface of the side-boards, using three horizontal nails at each side, one each at the top, middle and bottom, and driven through the sides into the end-boards. In coffin 31, the end-boards, which were upright, abutted onto the ends of the side-boards and were nailed horizontally through the ends into the sides. The lids were attached to the coffin bodies using a small number of nails (usually about half a dozen), which were normally found at the ends and corners of the coffins. In coffins 18 and 22, nails were found between the legs of the skeletons (between thighs and calves), and these nails may originally have served to fasten lid-boards together. All the coffins tapered in width towards the feet end.

The St Giles' coffins, in contrast to those from Perth (Hall 1989), were articulated containers, and were probably portable. They appear, however, to have been relatively crudely built, and cannot be seen as finely craftsman-carpentered objects. They



Illus 24 Coffin 31, showing vertical end slats at foot end of coffin



Illus 25 Coffin 46, showing slats in base of grave after removal of skeleton

were crate-like containers, rather than enclosed boxes, and it may be that they were not intended to be carried for any great distance, and were intended more for static display. Unlike the Perth examples, they show no obvious evidence for the re-use of wood in their construction. The use of numerous small cross-boards, rather than larger longitudinal base-boards may possibly suggest, however, that the coffins were made cheaply, possibly even using woodworking off-cuts or ends from longer boards.

6.3 Discussion

While the coffins from St Giles' and the Carmelite Friary in Perth are similar in appearance, they are not of the same form, as the Perth examples were assembled in the grave and were not designed to be portable (Hall 1989). The St Giles' examples of portable, slat-bottomed coffins appear to be unique in medieval Britain. There are, however, parallels from non-British sites.

A number of well-preserved wooden coffins of various designs have been excavated from the church graveyard at Søndregate, Trondheim, Norway (Long 1975). These are, in some cases at least, articulated

and probably portable coffins which are fastened together entirely with wooden nails. The bases of two coffins consist of five or six cross-boards. The dating of these is uncertain, but they probably belong in the period from the 12th to the 14th century.

Similar wooden coffins have been excavated at a site within medieval Lund (Blomqvist & Martensson 1963, chapters 2 & 5, figs 21, 64 & 85). Of the nearly 300 graves containing remains of wooden or stone coffins, five contained slat-bottom wooden coffins. These are of a variety of ages and exhibit varying construction techniques.

The earliest is associated with a stave church, dating from the 11th or 12th century, which was probably the predecessor of the later church of St Drotten. This early coffin has nine broad base-boards of uneven width, which are separated by narrow gaps. They are nailed, with metal nails, through from the base to the sides. The later coffins, associated with the church of St Drotten, include a pre-13th-century example with four narrow base-boards set into holes in the coffin sides. An early 13th-century example – a child's coffin – is of similar construction, in this case with five cylindrical cross-slats set in holes in the sides. Two late medieval coffins, with no clear date, have four and two narrow cross-boards



Illus 26 Coffin 46, showing lid in situ over skeleton

nailed onto the base of the sides, the latter being another child's coffin. One coffin exhibits an intermediate style of construction, whereby the bottom board, running longitudinally, rests on three cross-slats, which are apparently set in holes in the sides. From Blomqvist's & Martensson's comments, these are not unexpected finds. On page 287 they state that '... it [the coffin in grave 282] was found in a late medieval level – a period to which this type of coffin would normally be assigned' (Blomqvist's & Martensson 1963, 287). It is unclear whether they refer to the shape of the coffin (it is rectangular in plan rather than tapered), or to the presence of slat cross-boards, but it is clear that the slat-bottom coffins at Lund are one in a wide range of coffin construction techniques in medieval northern Europe.