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Summary

This thesis explores the impact of Norwegian timber imports on architecture, building works and their organisation in seventeenth century Scotland. Using a wide variety of Scottish, Danish and Norwegian sources, it first investigates trends in timber imports to Scotland from Norway during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. From this evidence, the passage of timber aboard Scottish vessels can be followed from the forest–farms and sawmills on the west coast of Norway, to Scotland’s east coast ports. Here the timber was stockpiled by merchants or delivered directly to building works for use.

By first establishing what the preferred timber cuts from Norway were, it has been possible to identify a significant change in Scottish building design brought about by the emergence of this new timber source. Essentially, Norwegian timber provided Scottish builders with longer spans for structural work; this presented the opportunity to construct buildings beyond the 20 foot limitations of earlier stone vaulted buildings. Such timbers can be identified in surviving buildings, and through careful analysis of supplementary contracts and accounts the increasing use and significance of timber for buildings works has been recognised.

Wider spans allowed for larger buildings with bigger rooms, all requiring flooring, panelling, doors, windows, shutters, partitions, plaster ceilings, and furniture. For the implementation of these items, the technical knowledge and expertise of wrights was required. This increased use and importance of timber in buildings signifies a probable move away from the long-established prominence of master masons in the traditional hierarchy of the building trades, and towards a rise in the authority and influence of master wrights. An examination of the career and principal building works associated with the king’s wright James Baine supports this evaluation. Examples of his work at Panmure, Glamis and Brechin all show that as the work of wrights became more central to the building process, their power and authority also increased. This development is further evident in the membership figures of the trade incorporations examined, where wrights were the controlling craft.

Furthermore, the building case studies demonstrated a transition in building organisation from a system of direct labour to a system based on contracts, revealing the challenges encountered by its adoption, and also Baine’s emergence as main contractor and master of works. For Baine, the shift in power from masons to wrights allowed him to assume roles previously only undertaken by members of the mason craft, which suggests that for a short time in the late seventeenth century, timber might have replaced stone as the key building material used in Scottish great houses.