

Neither inside nor outside the corridors of power: the burghs and petitioning

Abstract

Petitioning is a process involving those without power making requests to those with power. The relationship is never one of equals. While the roles are rarely, if ever, reversed, the burghs in early modern Scotland occupied what was, perhaps uniquely, an ambivalent position with regard to petitioning, largely because of the existence of their own national representative assembly, the Convention of Royal Burghs. The Convention's surprisingly extensive de facto powers in relation both to its individual constituent burghs and to the crown, along with the burghs' presence in parliament as one of its estates, meant that they comprised an integral part of the power-structure of the early modern Scottish state. Yet the burghs also sat outside that power-structure: in contrast to the noble and clerical estates, their social status meant that burghesses virtually never held any of the great offices of state and they were almost completely absent from the executive branches of government (the privy council and the exchequer). Nor were many burghesses ever to be found at court, even before the departure of the monarch to London in 1603, let alone thereafter when the expense of travel and the cost of absence from one's business raised additional barriers for would be merchant-courtiers.

Individually and collectively in their national convention, the burghs of early modern Scotland were both petitioners and the recipients of petitions. Burghesses sat in rooms, occupying positions of power and receiving petitions from supplicants outside those rooms. Yet simultaneously they sat outside rooms occupied by more powerful groups, petitioning them for redress of grievances and advancement of their causes. This paper therefore seeks to achieve an enhanced understanding of how petitioning functioned and was perceived in early modern Scotland by focusing on the pivotal and multifaceted role of the Convention of Royal Burghs. It examines the Convention as a supplicant to the crown for the collective interests of the burghs in relation to things like customs rates, manufacturing monopolies and international trading arrangements. It discusses how it operated as the gatekeeper for individual burghs' requests to the crown for such things as the right to levy hypothecated tolls for the construction and repair of public buildings. And it explores the extent to which it had the power to act as the recipient and granter of petitions in its own right, without reference to any higher authority, from individual burghs and groups within them, both formally constituted ones in the shape of craft guilds and informal groupings of burghesses who had come together for the specific purpose of petitioning.

Alan MacDonald, University of Dundee