

Early Historic

c. 300 – c. 1000 AD

The Early Historic period was another time of huge change across the whole of the British Isles. Many small kingdoms were being created, some eventually coming together to form Scotland and England. Ireland and Wales continued to be formed of many small kingdoms. During this period written accounts began to be created to document these kingdoms and the lineage of their kings and leaders. However, the written sources are fragmentary, often being re-written, translated, and copied many times through the centuries. As with any history we have to remember the writers of the time wanted us to know and think certain things so not everything they write can be taken at face value.

Although we know from the few surviving historical sources and archaeological evidence that groups like the Vikings from Scandinavia, the Scots from Ireland and the native Picts were jostling for control in different parts of Scotland, it is hard to tell how much this affected most people. The archaeological remains for an event like a battle, that might be very important in the history, can be very hard to find.

Some of the sites that are well known include hillforts. These are large enclosures with deep ditches and banks. Excavations at some of these sites, including Craig Phadrig near Inverness, have recovered moulds for producing fine metalwork and fragments of pottery that once contained wine imported from the continent. This may be evidence that the individuals in charge at these sites were controlling access to imported goods and perhaps the best craftspeople to maintain their power.

Many fine religious items and jewellery were created in this period. Pennanular brooches represent incredible craft skill and access to valuable materials including silver and gold. The intricate knotwork designs also reflect the artwork found on stone monuments, such as Pictish symbol stones, and in decorated religious texts, such as the Lindisfarne Gospels.

Christianity became the predominant religion during this period, as evidenced by carved crosses, reliquaries (for holding relics) church buildings and monastic communities, such as at Portmahomack. Although difficult to date, simple carved crosses on undressed stones are also thought to begin appearing in this period. Christians are usually buried with no grave goods, so there are less personal artefacts found.

Things to think about:

What may not survive from this period?

What impact can religion have on what survives?



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The Rogart Brooch, made during the 8th century, was one of a number found during railway construction. It is now in the NMS, Edinburgh

See also:

Box 3 object sheets: Pictish Carved Stone, Antler Comb, Viking Ring Money and Arabic Coins
CT Silver Currency Production

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