

Medieval

c. 1,000 – 1560 AD

At the beginning of the Medieval period the Highlands were still a frontier of sorts, being a long way from the centres of power in the Central Belt. To the north the Norse controlled Caithness and parts of Sutherland until well into the Medieval period. To the west, the Lords of the Isles based on Islay were fairly independent of the Scottish kingdom. Only gradually during the period did the Scottish kingdom assert itself. David I (reigned 1124-53) utilized the feudal system to bring great swathes of the new country under control. This system of government involved giving land in exchange for service. The king divided the land up and granted it to sympathetic nobles who constructed castles which served as homes, law courts and strongholds when the king's command was threatened.

In order to control trade and collect taxes a number of burghs (towns) were established. These towns were laid out with a castle, church and market cross. Excavations at Cromarty have revealed the remains of structures, pottery, fishing equipment and other artefacts from the 13th century burgh, located between the site of the castle and the shore.



© Susan Kruse
Excavations at Cromarty have shown that it was a thriving trading centre in the Medieval period



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Small decorated circular brooches, occasionally of silver but mostly of bronze, were very popular in Medieval times, lasting far longer in the Highlands than elsewhere in Scotland. This examples is from Dornoch and in Historylinks Museum

During the Medieval period the church also became very important, and the parish network was established. Some Medieval churches were positioned on sites of earlier religious centres, as at Portmahomack which sits on the site of a Pictish monastery. Analysis of the Medieval burials there has given insight into the diet and health of the local community at that time. It suggests that many people lived to a good age and had access to a variety of foods including cereals, meat, dairy and fish. It has also been found that some individuals had grown up on the west coast of Scotland.

The concentration of people into towns with markets means that many artefacts can be found over a small area. Professional craftspeople produced items like glazed pottery and metalwork. In this period in Scotland the first widespread use of coins occur. These were important items of propaganda and economic control, minted and distributed by the King.

Things to think about:

What medieval buildings (or parts of buildings) survive near you?

See also:

Box 3 object sheets: Medieval Coin Die and Coins
CT Creating Coins and Seals

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