

## The Importance of Edinburgh: From Prehistory to the Early Medieval Period

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The city of Edinburgh, enshrined as a royal burgh by King David I in 1124 and designated as the capital city of Scotland in 1457, is an enduring symbol of maintained civil, political, and cultural power in its nearly 900 years of preserved, built history. A side effect of its development has been the effective erasure of pre-medieval artifacts and written history from the area, leading some to question the significance of Edinburgh prior to the rise of the Kingdom of Scotland in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. However, despite its limited historical record, Edinburgh (Din Eidyn) played a significant role during Mesolithic, Roman, and early medieval Britain, shaped by its geographic situation, strategic military importance, and cultural influence. This essay aims to reconstruct through visualization and quantization of the archaeological record the area's influence on a chronology of key events and periods before the 12<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>1</sup> demonstrating Edinburgh's significance in the broader historical landscape.

From the first signs of permanent settlement in prehistoric Scotland, the archaeological record shows that, while the people that lived in Edinburgh may not have exercised extensive power and influence, the area around Edinburgh was a hotbed of human activity. Following the end of the last glacial recession around 12,000 years ago, the first known human settlements were built in Cramond, just eight kilometers from the modern Edinburgh city center. Little is known about the first people to arrive in Scotland, but analysis of similarities between coastal landmarks combined with the discovery of sea craft from the era hints that maritime travel was important in Mesolithic Scotland and would explain the proximity to the coast of early settlements.<sup>2</sup> As sea levels rose, Edinburgh's proximity to the Firth of Forth likely would've provided hunter-gatherers with accessible transport through water shielded from the North Sea, a fertile estuary basin, and access to diverse resources. The use of the area is further evidenced by archaeology sourced from the Canmore site records of the National Record of the Historic Environment (NHRE), a digitization of over 340,000 historical locations spanning the history of the British Isles.<sup>3</sup> Sites dated prior to the 12th century AD are shown in Figure 1.

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<sup>1</sup> All code written to generate tables and visualizations is original work and can be viewed and downloaded here: <https://github.com/woody-hulse/din-eidyn>

<sup>2</sup> Bradley, Richard, and Watson, Aaron. Sailing to Calanais: Monument Complexes and the Sea in the Neolithic of Western Scotland and Beyond. (Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society, 2024), 1–25.

<sup>3</sup> Historic Environment Scotland, Canmore: The Online Catalogue to Scotland's Archaeology, Buildings, Industrial and Maritime Heritage, accessed March 7, 2025, <https://canmore.org.uk>.

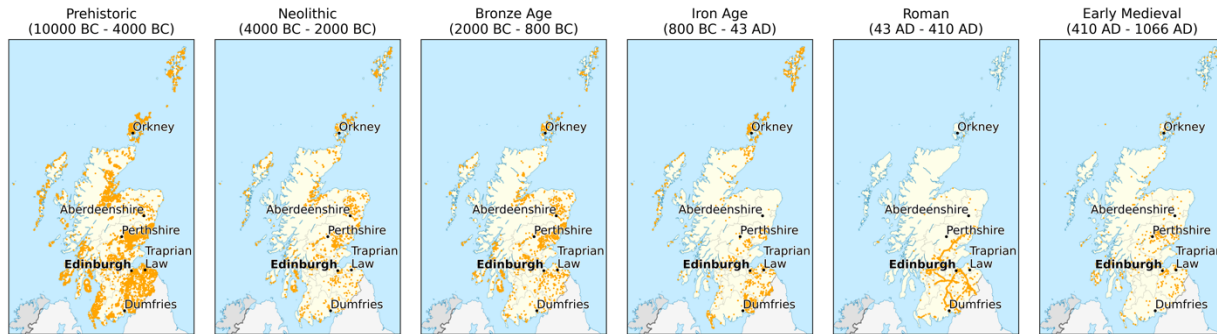


Figure 1. Location of NHRE Canmore Archaeological Sites (Yellow), by Era

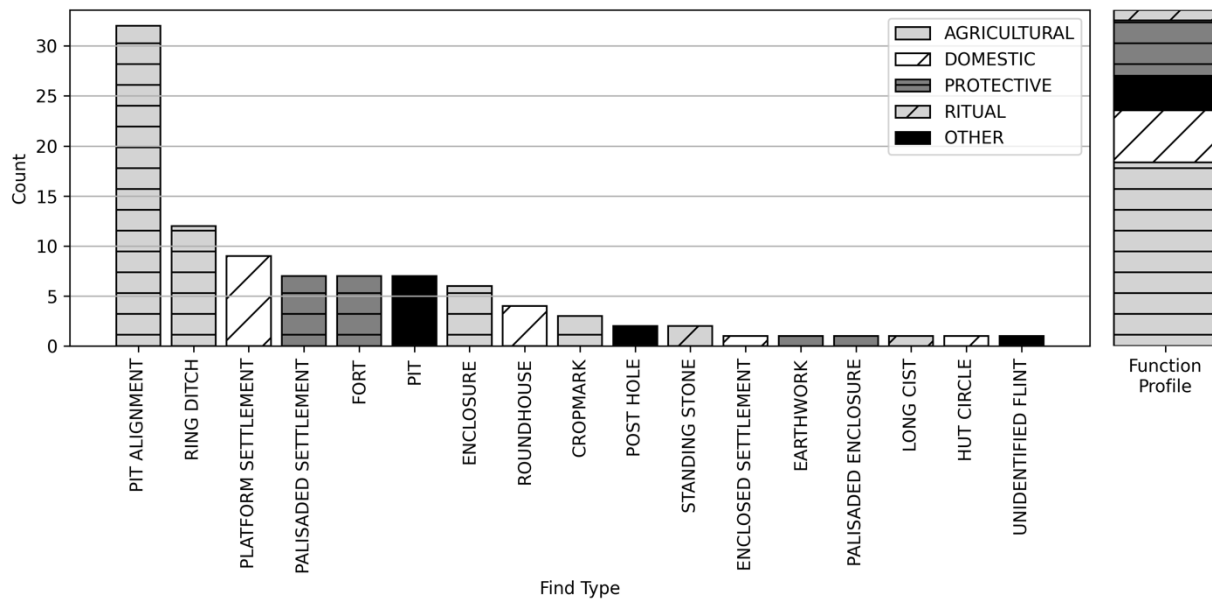


Figure 2. Type and Function of NHRE Prehistoric Archaeological Finds <10km from the Modern Edinburgh City Center

Figure 2 shows a breakdown of site functions in the area surrounding Edinburgh. Analysis of Figure 2 reveals evidence of defense, domestic, agricultural, and cultural activity in Mesolithic archaeological sites. This stands in contrast to other high-activity regions of the time, such as Aberdeenshire, shown in Figure 3, which exhibits predominantly domestic and ritualistic artifacts. These are also indicative of settlement but are likely less habited and contested than the area around Edinburgh.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Tipping, Richard et al. "Environmental Reconstruction and Formation Processes in a Large Mesolithic Lithic Scatter at Nethermills of Crathes, Aberdeenshire, Scotland." *Journal of Archaeological Science Reports* 45, no. 1 (October 2022)

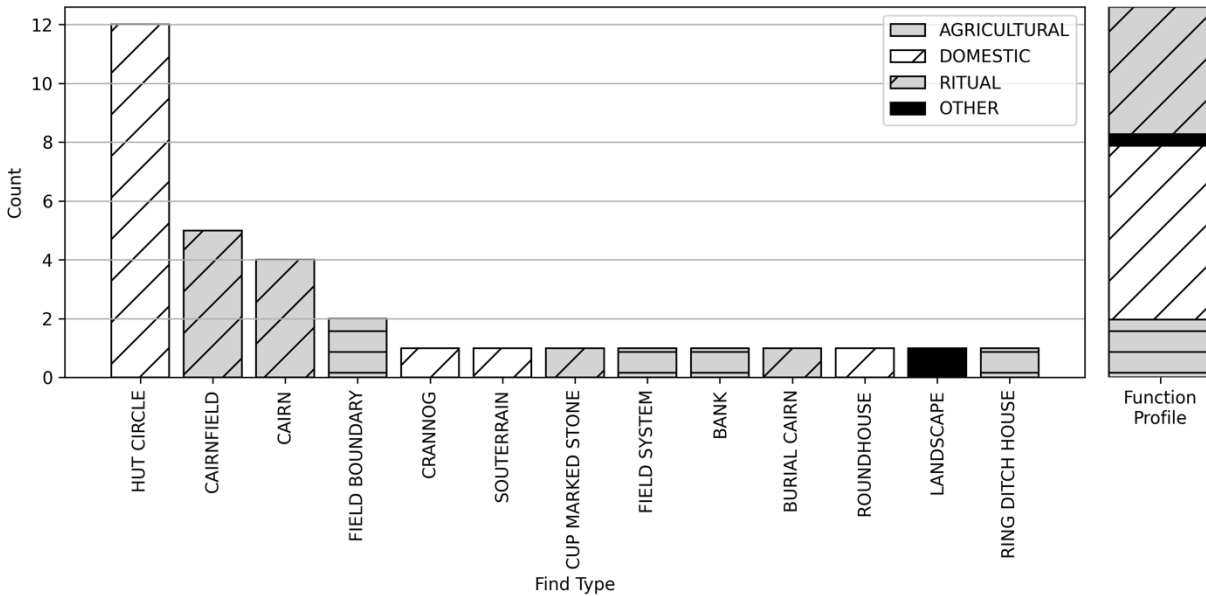


Figure 3. Type and Function of NHRE Prehistoric Archaeological Finds <10km From Aberdeenshire

With Scotland's organization into more expansive tribal networks toward the end of the prehistoric period, scholars can measure the volume of archaeological evidence as a proxy to evaluate relative regional importance in lieu of a written record.<sup>5</sup> Using the positions of the 476 modern towns and cities with a population of over 500 as reference, the area around Edinburgh can be ranked by number of distinct Canmore sites on a per-era basis.

Prehistoric (Rank/Percentile)	Neolithic (Rank/Percentile)	Bronze Age (Rank/Percentile)	Iron Age (Rank/Percentile)	Roman (Rank/Percentile)	Early Medieval (Rank/Percentile)
64 <sup>th</sup> /86 <sup>th</sup>	220 <sup>th</sup> /52 <sup>nd</sup>	237 <sup>th</sup> /49 <sup>th</sup>	116 <sup>th</sup> /75 <sup>th</sup>	56 <sup>th</sup> /87 <sup>th</sup>	27 <sup>th</sup> /94 <sup>th</sup>

Table 1: Rank of Edinburgh Against 467 Scottish Towns of Population >500 in Number of NHRE Canmore Archaeological Sites Discovered Within 10 km, by Era

Although the archaeological record likely reflects conflation in the data introduced by variations in modern population density and regional interest, it is still notable that Edinburgh during the Mesolithic period, compared to other areas and the adjacent Neolithic era, generated a

<sup>5</sup> Forsyth, Katherine, Scotland: A History (Oxford University Press, 2005), 9 – 38.

significantly higher volume of prehistoric findings. Edinburgh's modern biases are counterbalanced by the destruction of artifacts from modern urban development, and analysis of lithic scatters and dating of organic remains suggests a genuinely robust level of activity in the area.<sup>6</sup> Other research on the anthropology concludes similarly that the presence of fortified structures, hearth features, and faunal assemblages in the area around Edinburgh suggest continued, potentially year-round habitation, countering the common supposition that people during the time were fully nomadic or, at least, affirming the persistent utility of Edinburgh to Mesolithic peoples.<sup>7</sup> Edinburgh in this incarnation likely did not possess the conventional "importance" associated with the capability to outwardly exercise power or influence—nor did any other single location in Scotland.<sup>8</sup> Instead, its importance was in the establishment of settlement patterns, which were reused and built upon for centuries, laying the physical groundwork for Din Eidyn as an enduring population center.<sup>9</sup>

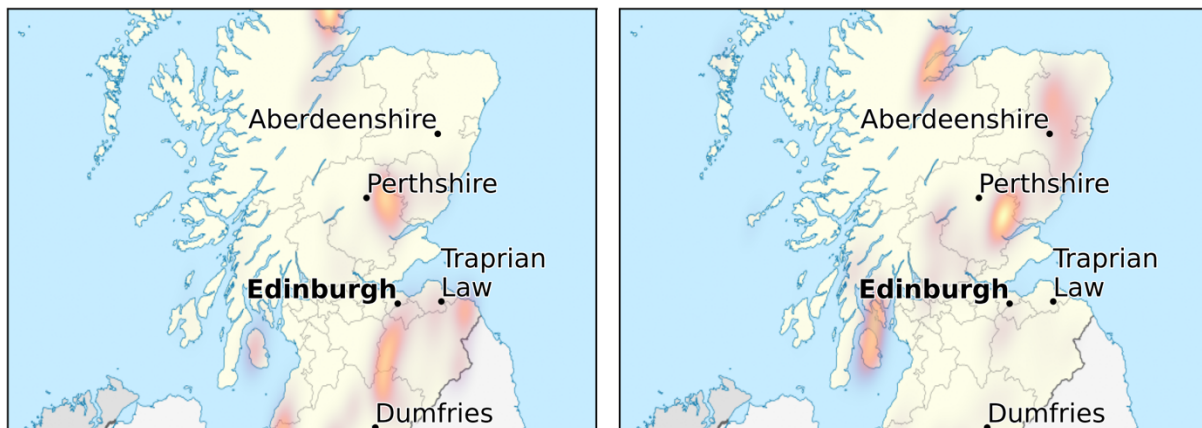


Figure 4. Gaussian Kernel Density Estimation (KDE) Heatmap of NHRE Canmore Archaeological Sites: Mesolithic (left) and Neolithic (right)

Edinburgh's prominence suffered during the Neolithic, Bronze, and early Iron Ages, evidenced by shifts in population. Table 1 indicates a decline of Edinburgh's significance (as a function of the number of local artifacts) in these eras which aligns with the shifts in population

<sup>6</sup> Wickham-Jones, C. 2004. "The Mesolithic in Scotland." *Before Farming* 2004 (1): 1–18.

<sup>7</sup> Engl, Rob, and John Gooder. "'A Home by the Sea': The Excavation of a Robust Mesolithic House of the Late 9th Millennium BC at East Barns, East Lothian." *Scottish Archaeological Internet Reports* 96 (2021).

<sup>8</sup> Forsyth, Katherine, *Scotland: A History*

<sup>9</sup> Whittle, A. "The Archaeology of People: Dimensions of Neolithic Life." London: Routledge, 2003.

centers away from southern Scotland visualized in Figure 4. Although the precise causes of this transition are somewhat unknown, some scholars point to environmental changes, economic pressures, and internal social restructuring as potential catalysts.<sup>10 11</sup> This period in pre-Scottish history is marked by the formation of tribal control and contest, and during this time, the nascent Brittonic Votadini—who would later dominate the region—assumed control of the Lothians as well as the southeastern Scottish coast.<sup>12</sup> Their actions, however, center at Traprain Law, around 30km east of Edinburgh’s city center. From this point, the area around Edinburgh shows comparatively average human influence, and, though it is likely that at some point it was the site of characteristic hillforts of the Votadini, there is insufficient material evidence to conclude that the space was important during the Bronze and early Iron Ages as a non-capital within the tribe.

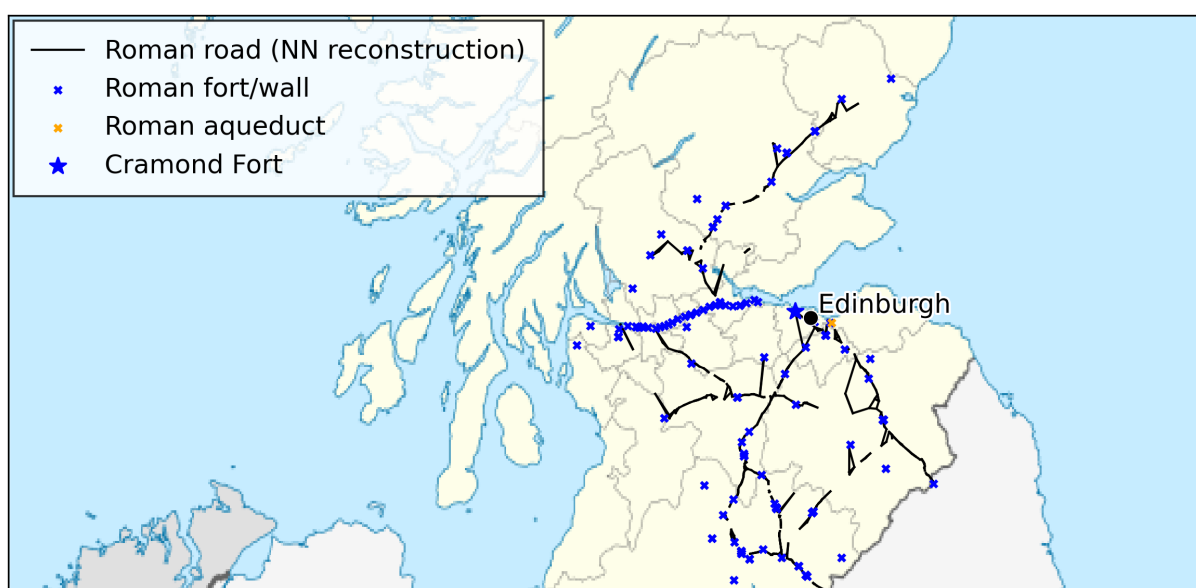


Figure 5. Location of Roman Roads and Forts from NHRE Canmore Site Data. Roads reconstructed from nearest-neighbors analysis of “Road”-classified sites.

The Roman conquests of General Gnaeus Julius Agricola, followed by those of Emperor Antoninus Pius, into southern Scotland in the first and second centuries AD propelled Din Eidyn into a role as a military stronghold—not only during the Roman occupation but also for the Votadini following their eventual retreat and abandonment of the Antonine Wall. Figure 5 is a

<sup>10</sup> Armit, Ian, *Celtic Scotland* (London: B.T. Batsford/Historic Scotland, 1997), 52–54.

<sup>11</sup> Bradley, Richard, *The Prehistory of Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 110–115.

reconstruction of Roman road networks, formed by approximating nearest neighbor connections of Roman-dated NHRE site data, as well as Cramond Fort, built in 142, and other notable fort and wall structures uncovered by archaeologists. These roads and forts converge at Edinburgh.

Upon their invasion of the Votadini, the Romans constructed a network of roads from Roman territory to the Lothians, underscoring the area's strategic importance, as Roman roads functioned as critical conduits for information, trade goods, military logistics, and civilian travel throughout the empire.<sup>13</sup> Rome had strategic interest in supporting Cramond Fort and other military installations and had demonstrated investment in this interest with symbols of military honor, such as the Cramond Lioness. For many of the same reasons that Edinburgh was conducive to settlement in the Mesolithic Era it was strategic for military purposes: proximity to navigable waterways, specifically the River Almond; fertile soils typical of an estuary basin; and naturally defensible hills created by volcanic and glacial activity.<sup>14</sup> Even after the Roman retreat to Hadrian's Wall after the death of Antoninus in 163 AD, studies into artifacts around Cramond and Edinburgh show continued occupation by the Votadini, as well as a continuation in reinforcement of the area through hillforts, particularly fortifications on Castle Rock and Traprain Law.<sup>15</sup>

	Prehistoric	Neolithic	Bronze Age	Iron Age	Roman	Early Medieval
Aberdeenshire	84	44	53	0	0	10
Dumfries	211	25	22	37	84	7
Edinburgh	222	14	17	26	55	28
Orkney	291	50	58	74	0	11
Perthshire	338	13	19	6	0	42
Traprain Law	266	10	15	48	5	10

Table 2: Number of NHRE Archaeological Sites Discovered Within 20km of Selected Scottish Cities, by Era

Although the Votadini tribe was sandwiched between two more powerful groups after the collapse of the Roman Empire in Britain—the Caledonians to the north and Anglian Northumbria

<sup>13</sup> Davies, Hugh, *Roman Roads in Britain* (Stroud: Tempus Publishing, 2008). 5-8

<sup>14</sup> Edwards, Brian, Jenkins, Paul, *Edinburgh: The Making of a Capital City* (Edinburgh Uni. Press, 2005), 64-80

<sup>15</sup> R. W. Feachem, "The Fortifications on Traprain Law," *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 89 (1958): 284–289

to the south, the collapse prompted significant growth for the emerging town of Din Eidyn. Historical evidence suggests that an increase in activity on Castle Rock coupled with a decrease in occupation, and by some accounts an abandonment, of Traprian Law is evidence of the Votadini relocating to Din Eidyn<sup>16</sup> A similar effect is present in Table 2, where compared to Traprian Law, Edinburgh has fivefold the number of sites in the Roman and Early Medieval Eras after having just half in the Iron Age. The resulting kingdom, now under the self-adorned name “Goddodin,” was a warrior-elite culture famously immortalized in the epic “Y Gododdin” composed by Aneirin around the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Though the poems detail defeat, likely at the hands of the Northumbrians at the Battle of Catraeth,<sup>17</sup> the existence of such sophisticated literary works and their improbable oral survival until the 13<sup>th</sup> century indicate a continued cultural significance and intellectual vitality, even amid military turmoil and Northumbrian rule. Despite an otherwise vacant written record of Edinburgh under Northumbrian rule, the archaeological record presented in Table 1 still registers the immediate area in the 94<sup>th</sup> percentile of activity in Scotland. Ultimately, the combined archaeological evidence and enduring literary legacy confirm that, even under Northumbrian dominance, Edinburgh’s resilient cultural identity persevered following the Roman collapse.

The importance of Din Eidyn in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries is best understood as a combination of military, cultural, and royal strategy of the Kingdom of Alba. Some perspectives on the Kingdom’s 960 victory at Din Eidyn ascribe it military importance, arguing that the castle would become key strategically for Malcolm II’s expansion into the Lothians and southern Scotland and that the royal interest was conveyed to this end through the continual investment in restoration and fortification of the castle in the 11<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>18</sup> Other perspectives highlight the royal residence of Queen Margaret in Edinburgh Castle up to her death in 1093 and the construction of St. Margaret’s Chapel on Castle Rock as signifiers of the Kingdom’s intent to use Edinburgh as a religious and royal center. Together, these construct a multifaceted argument towards Edinburgh’s budding military, religious, and political importance in the rising Kingdom of the Alba, setting the stage for its emergence as a pivotal center of Scottish power and identity.

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<sup>16</sup> Traprain Law Environs Project: Fieldwork and Excavations 2000–2004, Scottish Archaeological Internet Reports 21 (2010): 194,

<sup>17</sup> Kenneth H. Jackson, *The Gododdin: The Oldest Scottish Poem* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1969), 3–5.

<sup>18</sup> Alex Woolf, *From Pictland to Alba, 789–1070* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 190–194.



The archaeological record reveals that prehistoric Edinburgh was highly active, and even after millennia of relative insignificance through the Neolithic, Bronze, and Early Iron ages, Edinburgh's history of continued settlement and natural advantages propelled it into importance as early as the second century AD, well before it became a royal burgh in 1124. This enduring pattern of occupation—evident in the fortifications, road networks, and diverse material culture—demonstrates that the region long served as a critical nexus for military and cultural exchange and served an important role in Scotland's formative history.

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### **Online Databases**

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