

Conventual Seal of the Dominican Friary at Edinburgh

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ABSTRACT

Description of seal matrix, from the Dominican Friary at Edinburgh, which was found near Thirsk, Yorkshire.

The Dominican Friary was founded at Edinburgh in the reign of King Alexander II in or about 1230; the exact date of foundation is not known. It was destroyed by the Protestant Reformers in 1559 and its property granted to the City of Edinburgh in 1567.¹ A seal matrix, apparently discovered at Topcliffe near Thirsk, Yorkshire, and now in private possession, was recently brought in to the Borthwick Institute of Historical Research, University of York, for identification. It proved to be the conventual seal of Edinburgh's Dominican Friary and although impressions of the seal are already known,² it seems worth while to record the discovery of the original matrix.

The seal is pointed oval in shape, of bronze, measuring approximately 50 × 30 mm, and with a ridge and loop at the back. There is some damage to the legend. The device depicts the Coronation of the Virgin, with Christ seated on the right and the Virgin Mary seated on the left. Christ's right arm is upraised in the act of crowning. Beneath these figures, under a triple niche is the depiction of a building, a castle with three towers, with the head of a figure (presumably female, although not now so discernible) placed above each tower. Presumably this is an allusion to *CASTRUM PUELLARUM*, a Latin form for Edinburgh. Stylistically it can probably be ascribed to the late 13th century. The legend is worn and some parts are missing. It reads: *S' CÔVENTVS FR̄M P'DICAT . . DE CASTRO PVELLA[R]* which can be extended to *S[IGILLUM] CONVENTUS FRATRUM PREDICATORUM DE CASTRO PUELLARUM*.

The matrix apparently continued in use until the mid-16th century but may have been lost or stolen when the Friary was destroyed in 1559; certainly by 1561 a new conventual seal was in use. Its design was very similar to that of the original seal, though somewhat inferior in execution. The main difference was the substitution of *EDINBURGH* for *CASTRO PUELLARUM* in the legend.³

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NOTES

- 1 I B Cowan & D E Easson, *Medieval Religious Houses: Scotland* (2nd edn, London, 1976), 118; W Moir Bryce, *The Black Friars of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1911), reprinted from *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club* iii, 13–104.
- 2 This seal is mentioned briefly in W de G Birch, *History of Scottish Seals II: Ecclesiastical and Monastic Seals of Scotland* (Stirling, 1907), 89–90. The prior of the Edinburgh Dominicans also possessed a separate seal (*ibid*, 90), as was usual with the mendicant orders. The best description of both seals is in J H Stevenson & M Wood, *Scottish Heraldic Seals* (Glasgow 1940), i, 206. An engraving of the conventual seal appears in Bryce, *The Black Friars of Edinburgh*, 70.
- 3 Stevenson & Wood, i, 206, citing Elibank charters 18–20 Nov. 1561 (Scottish Record Office G.D. 32/8/12–13).