

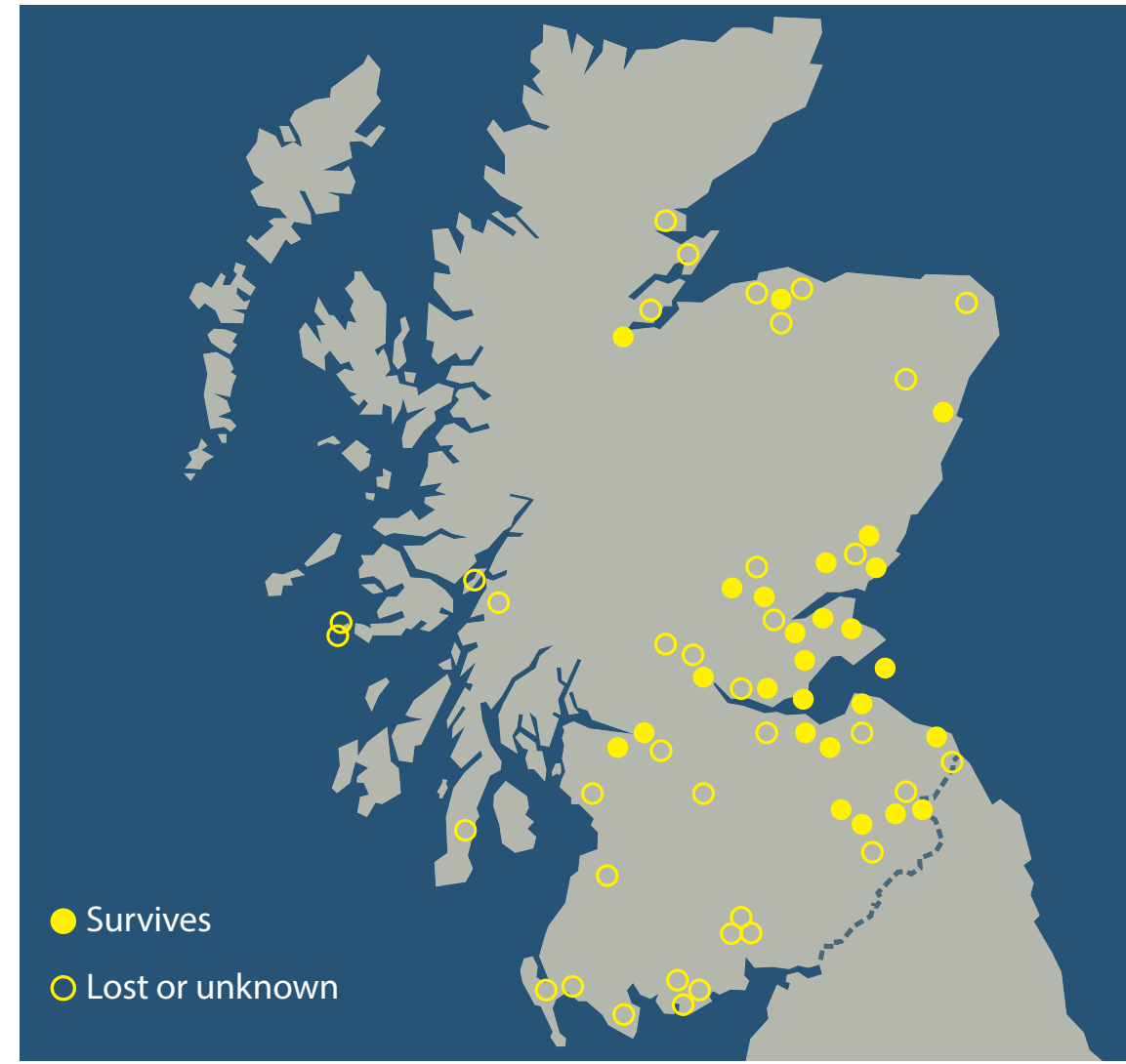
Charters: what survives?

Charters are our main source for twelfth- and thirteenth-century Scotland. Most surviving charters were written for monasteries, which had many properties and privileges and gained considerable expertise in preserving their charters. However, many collections were lost when monasteries declined after the Reformation (1560) and their lands passed to lay lords. Only 27% of Scottish charters from 1100–1250 survive as original single sheets of parchment; even fewer still have their seal attached. The remaining 73% exist only as later copies.

GEOGRAPHICAL SPREAD

Our picture of documents in this period is geographically distorted. Some regions have no institutions with surviving charter collections, even as copies (like Galloway). Others had few if any monasteries, and so lacked large charter collections in the first place (like Caithness). Others are relatively well represented (like Fife).

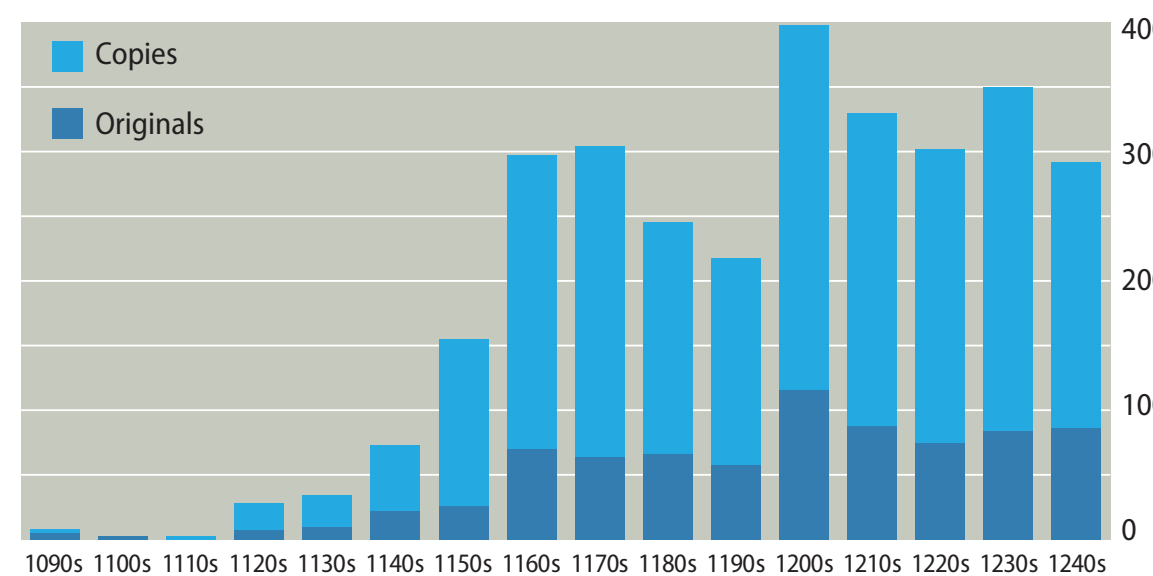
SURVIVAL OF CHARTER COLLECTIONS (RELATING TO 1100–1250) FROM INSTITUTIONS FOUNDED BY 1250



CHRONOLOGICAL SPREAD

Despite losses, the surviving documents point to a gradual increase in their use in the twelfth century.

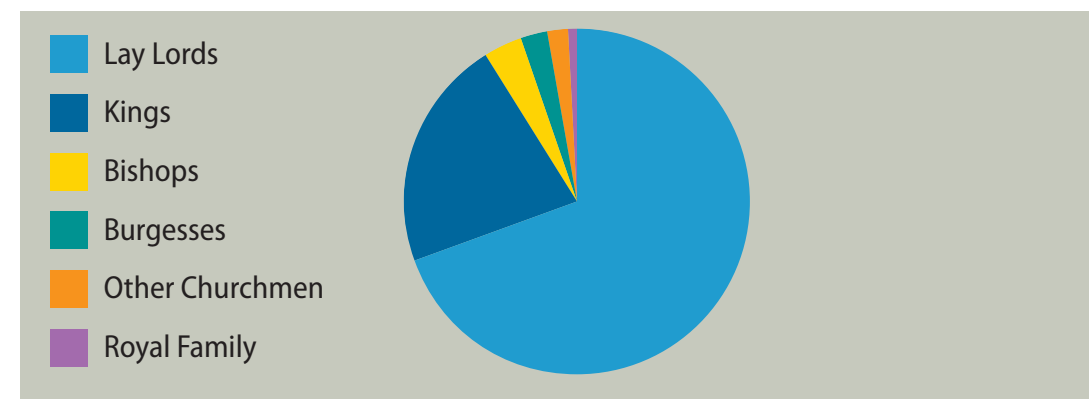
NUMBER OF SURVIVING CHARTERS (by earliest possible decade of creation)



TYPES OF DONOR

It was common for monasteries to seek charters from those in positions of authority in the kingdom: lay lords, kings and bishops.

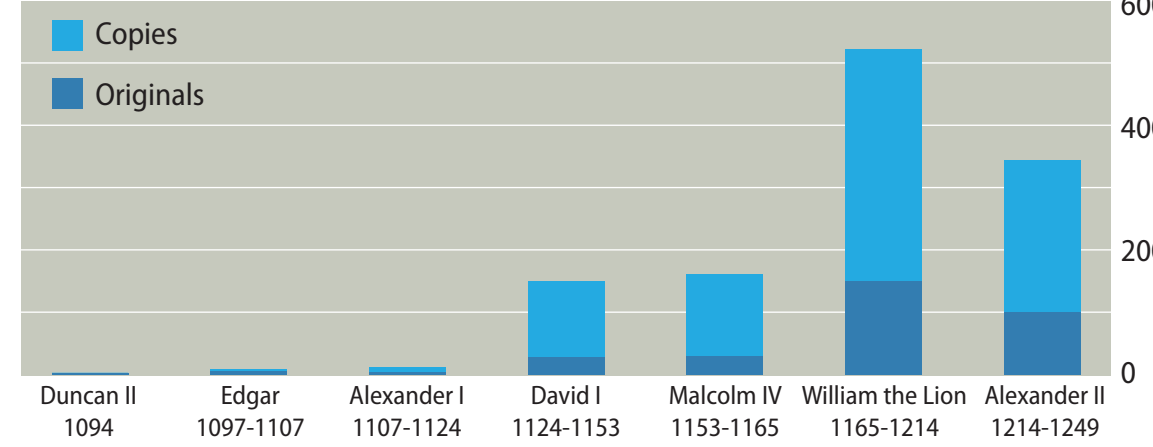
TYPES OF DONOR – Example of Melrose Abbey's Charters



ROYAL DOCUMENTS

The most common royal documents were written instructions. However, only a tiny proportion of these were kept or copied. Most royal documents that survive are charters in which kings gave and confirmed property and privileges.

NUMBER OF SURVIVING ROYAL DOCUMENTS



The earliest surviving example of a royal instruction written in Scotland is a message from King Alexander I (1107–1124) to the prior of Durham Cathedral. Many more one-off documents like this would have been produced, but were not kept by the recipients or have been lost.

