The Renaissance royal court in Scotland was highly active, variable in structure and originally peripatetic in nature. Several factors hampered the court’s development throughout the sixteenth century: firstly, the Reformation, which took its toll on the court through its restrictive effects on the arts; secondly, an overabundance of royal minorities and the resulting instability and factionalism; and thirdly, a peripatetic nature and structure closely tied to the local kin-based society. This is not to say, however, that there was no forward development of the court. The development that did occur can be closely tied to the court’s relationship with Scotland’s capital, Edinburgh.

As the sixteenth century progressed, Edinburgh cemented its position as Scotland’s governmental and legislative centre. Parliaments and sessions of the lords of council were usually held in Edinburgh, royal charters were usually granted in Edinburgh, coins were minted in Edinburgh, the exchequer was held in Edinburgh, and royal administrative records and the royal treasure were held in Edinburgh Castle. Edinburgh surpassed other royal burghs in overseas trade and size. Its taxation assessment was often as much as Dundee, Perth and Aberdeen combined; on average it contributed between one-fifth and one-quarter of the total burgh taxation. Edinburgh’s population was expanding during this period: the population within its walls was close to 12,000 in 1560, with between 15,000 and 18,000 living in greater Edinburgh (which included the surrounding burghs). There were an estimated 21,000 people in greater

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Edinburgh by 1600. Centralisation led to an increasing number of regular visits from nobles, suitors and Highland chiefs, all of whom contributed to Edinburgh’s growth. Thus, by the reign of James VI, the Scottish court had lost most of its peripatetic nature. The court was settled at Holyroodhouse over half of the time between 1579 and 1603; its base, most definitely, had become Edinburgh.

As the premier royal burgh, Edinburgh was wealthy through its foreign trade. It was self-governing, with its magistrates having direct access to the king. This status also brought financial responsibilities. The burgh council played an active role in accommodating and entertaining ambassadors and foreign dignitaries. This pre-eminent position was clear when Aberdeen’s council, in 1511, described their plans to receive Queen Margaret ‘als honorablie as ony burgh of scotland except edinburgh allanerlie.’ The continued presence of the royal court necessitated some degree of accommodation and conciliation with the burgeoning capital of Edinburgh. Through an analysis of the financial relationships between capital and court in the late sixteenth century, this chapter will suggest that the crown’s heavy reliance on Edinburgh was necessary for the royal court to be comparable to other European courts—and for the king himself to be seen as a worthy successor to the English throne. At the same time, close capital and court associations enhanced Edinburgh’s position in the European trading community.

It has been suggested that ‘burghal life’ in the early Stewart period ‘showed a zest for social stratification’. It was from this social stratification that several influential groups emerged, one of which was the overseas merchants: members of the merchant guildry, who benefited from Edinburgh’s steady accumulation of Scotland’s foreign trade in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This group included several merchant burgesses who gained fortunes and influence through their ties to the royal court. Successful burgesses could advance through the echelons of society by acquiring estates and passing into the ranks of the gentry. By the later sixteenth century, some burgesses had accumulated vast personal fortunes and managed greater wealth than many nobles or landed

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2 Fradenburg, *City, Marriage, Tournament*, 20.
3 Ibid., 29.