

Mac Bethad mac Findláich was born in 1005. His fictional character, portrayed by Shakespeare, has overshadowed the historical figure that was Scotland's last Gaelic King.

The fictional character was a tyrant and murderer. The historical figure encouraged Christianity and imposed law and order in a period of history that was embroiled in a struggle for power. The Dark Ages.

History suggests a more just rule. Time for you to decide.

Macbeth was born the same year that his grandfather (Malcolm II) became King of Alba.

His father, Finleigh, was the Mormaer (high steward of an ancient Celtic province) of Moray. A province that had reluctantly integrated with Alba, it retained an “independent-minded” perspective and a powerful position within Alba.

As a powerful province, Moray attracted much attention. In 989, at the battle of Skitten, Finleigh was defeated by Sigurd Hlodvisson “the Stout” and surrendered the province.

When Malcolm II (Máel Coluim mac Cináeda) failed to regain the province by force, he entered into an alliance with Sigurd.

In return for the province of Moray, he offered the hand of his daughter, Olif, and the earldom of Caithness and Sutherland. Sigurd accepted the offer and control of the province returned to Finleigh.

Olif was the third daughter of Malcolm II. Doada, the second daughter, was married to Finleigh. The first daughter, Bethoc was married to the Abbot of Dunkeld, Crínán who was also Mormaer of Atholl.

Each of the daughters had a son to their respective husbands. The son of Sigurd was named Thorfinn (Thorfinn Sigurdsson). the son of Finleigh was named Macbeth

(Mac Bethad mac Findláich. The son of Crinan was named Duncan (Donnchad mac Crínáin).

MACBETH | THE EARLY YEARS

The law required the formal education of all children of important chieftains. As part of his education, Macbeth, at the age of 7, was sent to his grandfathers court. The term of study lasted about ten years and was under the tutelage of a Christian monk.

He was not alone.

When Thorfinn was just 5 years old, his father Jarl Sigurd died in battle in Ireland. Thorfinn was a favourite of Malcolm II. In his determination to provide for Thorfinn, he provided the same tutelage that was afforded Macbeth and, additionally, conferred on him the districts of Caithness and Sutherland.

What isn't clear, is whether Duncan was afforded the same opportunity. Although it does seem likely.

MACBETH | MORMAER OF MORAY

Macbeth's father died in 1020 (reputedly at the hands of his cousins Malcolm and Gille Coemgáin). The title of Mormaer passed to Gille Coemgáin.

Gille Coemgáin held the position of Mormaer for 12 years. On the orders of Malcolm II, he was burnt alive, at his stronghold, with approximately 50 of his followers. His death resulted in the election of Macbeth to the title of Mormaer of Moray in 1032.

In the same period, Thorfinn succeeded to the jarldom of Orkney and Shetland. That presented him with a divided allegiance. An allegiance to Norway for his jarldom and an allegiance to Alba for his earldom.

Thorfinn says in the Heimskringla that he was allied to Malcolm II. He counted on Malcolm's support to resist the "tyranny" of Norwegian King Olaf Haraldsson.

In 1034, King Malcolm II died.

As the tánaise rí (the King in Waiting as nominated by Malcolm II) Duncan, grandson of Malcolm II, at the age of 33, was acclaimed as King Duncan I, High King and successor to the provinces of Alba. The ceremony took place on 30 November 1034.

The first 4 years of Duncan's reign were without conflict. He was, however, restless. The earldom of Caithness and Sutherland was a source of irritation. He was not allied with Thorfinn in the same way as his grandfather. More specifically, he wanted the territory back, by force if necessary, or at the very least, to make Thorfinn pay tribute for it.

A further opportunity for expansion arose in 1038. The Earl of Northumbria attacked southern Scotland and was halted by Duncan I. His advisors wanted him to take revenge and attack northern England.

Duncan decided to invade both the Orkneys and northern England. He would lead a force south in to England whilst his nephew Moddan would attack the Orkneys. It would end with the ultimate price for his ambition. His life.

On reaching the fortified city of Durham, Duncan's cavalry attempted an assault which ended in near annihilation. The rest of the army routed when the Northumbrians mounted a counteraction.

While fleeing north in disorder, Duncan I was faced with further bad news. He met his nephew Moddan who told him about his own defeat in the Orkneys.

He was, however, not finished. He raised a considerable force from his clans and supporters and advanced north. Duncan made his way by sea, King Echmarcach and his Irish army travelled by land. The aim, simply, was to secure the territory held by Thorfinn.

MACBETH | HIGH KING OF SCOTLAND

What isn't clear, up to this point, is the role of Macbeth.

Macbeth was, by all accounts, one of the King's most distinguished generals.

Whether that reputation was gained in the service of Malcolm II or Duncan I is open to debate.

However, what is clear, is that on 14 August, 1040, the army of the Jarl of Orkney, was supported by the Mormaer of Moray, Macbeth.

Duncan I met Thorfinn in the battle of Torfness (Burghead) at Standing Stone in the parish of Duffus. Having suffered significant losses, the King withdrew from the battle, with his bodyguard. He headed back toward Spynie where he expected to meet up with the Irish reinforcements.

What Duncan didn't know was that Macbeth was stationed on the River Lossie. He had intercepted King Echmarcach and the Irish reinforcements and had prevented their further progress.

Macbeth received an urgent message from Thorfinn. It was an update on the battle, which was still undecided, and, more importantly it outlined the withdrawal of Duncan. Macbeth immediately set out to intercept Duncan with a small contingent from his main force on the Lossie.

He met and defeated the King in a second battle at Pitgaveney (then called Bothnagowan) near Elgin.

Macbeth himself delivered a mortal wound to the King on the battlefield. An act that is in sharp contrast to the Shakespearian play.

It is not clear whether the King died on the battlefield or later of his wound and having first sought refuge in Elgin.

Whilst the slaying of Duncan I may not have been murder, it could reasonably be regarded, on Macbeth's behalf, as treason.

Later that month Macbeth, leading the victorious army, entered Scone, the Scottish capital, with Thorfinn's in support. To the citizens of the capital he presented himself as candidate to the throne.

Macbeth, at the age of thirty-five, was crowned High King of Scotland. He then quickly secured all that was unconquered by the Norwegians and Thorfinn.

In effect, the whole country was virtually under the dominion of the two cousins. Thorfinn himself ruling over the north western provinces, while Macbeth reigned over everything else.

The overthrow of Duncan was the overthrow of an unpopular king with ill judged intentions of expanding into England and the Orkney Kingdom. Contemporary chroniclers did not write favourably of Duncan, viewing him as a tyrant and oppressor. They believed that by choosing MacBeth, Scotland had changed to a better ruler.

MACBETH | THE RULER

For the most part Macbeth ruled a relatively peaceful and prosperous kingdom. He and his wife Gruoch were particularly generous to the church, especially to the monastery of Loch Leven in Kinross.

The only domestic disruption during Macbeth's reign occurred in 1045.

Raising some of the southern clans, Crínán, the Abbot of Dunkeld and Mormaer of Atholl (father of King Duncan I), met King Macbeth in battle near Dunkeld. After a brief engagement the rebels were defeated and the Mormaer of Atholl killed in the action.

Scotland enjoyed nine years of peace giving Macbeth the opportunity to make a pilgrimage to Rome. There he met the pope and gave alms to the poor as befitting a head of state.

After his return from Rome the political problems of England began affecting his realm. In 1052 Normans fleeing the chaotic situation in England fled north and were welcome in Macbeth's court. By Celtic law and custom, all travellers were always given haven. However, this act of kindness incurred the resentment of powerful English lords.

From 1054 to 1057 Macbeth was under constant assault from his southern neighbour.

In the summer of 1054, Malcolm MacDuncan (son of King Duncan I), and more commonly referred to as Malcolm Ceanmor, accompanied the Earl of Northumbria in an invasion of the southern provinces of Scotland.

On the 27th of July, Macbeth's forces met the invaders at Dunsinnan, close to Scone between Perth and Dundee. The outcome was indecisive, however, Malcolm took control of Cumbria - the southernmost province in Scotland - becoming their king. Malcolm did not gain any support from the Scottish clans, they remained stoutly loyal to their King Macbeth.

MACBETH | WHAT'S DONE IS DONE

The role of the Norwegians and, specifically, that of the son of the King of Norway and Torfinn, the Jarl of Orkney, would, however, play a significant role in Macbeth's downfall.

Their attempt to invade England, and the destruction of their fleet at sea, prompted a response from the King of England (Edward the Confessor) who sent an army into Scotland to remove the power of the Norwegians.

The end came on August 15, 1057 when, after battle, Malcolm MacDuncan's men killed King Macbeth as he tried to make it to his province, Moray, with a contingent of bodyguards.

His final stand was the Peel-Ring at Lumphanan and here in the end, seeing the situation desperate, he armed himself, had the gates opened and rode forth "to try his last".

He received his death wound at Cairnbeth and his horse galloped off with the bleeding King still mounted. After crossing the valley, it carried him round the shoulder of the hill opposite, and two miles northward.

No man saw Macbeth die. His pursuers found his body on the side of Perk Hill, where he must have dropped from his horse. There, tradition says, he was buried. A cairn, now planted with trees, marks the spot.

His body was finally buried, contrary to Shakespeare's play, on the holy isle of Iona, in a ceremony worthy of a lawful king of Scotland.

The Irish and Pictish additions to the 'Historia Britonum' speak of him as "the vigorous Macbrethack."

The "Duan Albanach" calls him "Macbeathadh the renowned."
Macbeth was no more or less brutal or murderous than any other ruler of this time.