

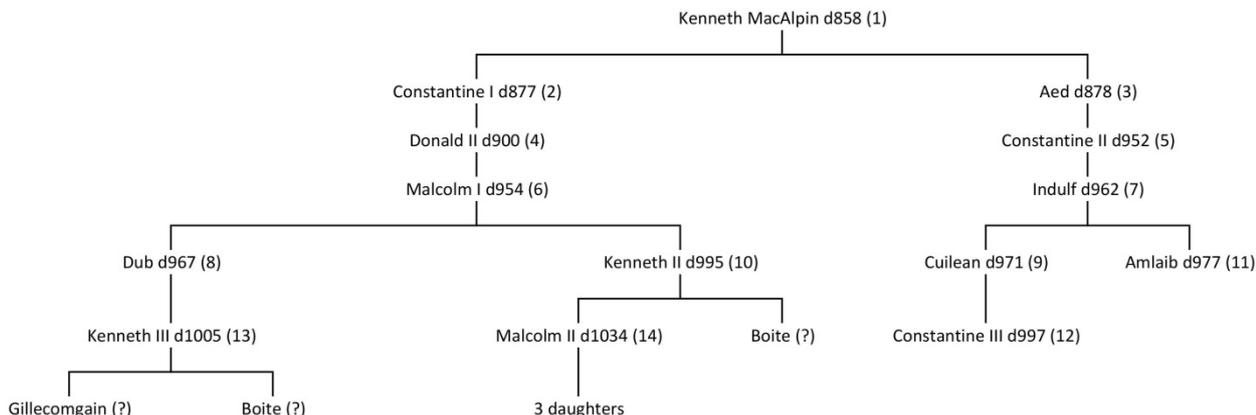
In light of the forthcoming movie about MacBeth (due for release in early October) which is based around the Shakespearean version of the tale, I thought I would put together a synopsis of what we believe we know about MacBeth and Scotland in his time. Some of the personal relationships I refer to are best guesses, reliant upon non-contemporary sources. Some are my own best guesses too!

Background to MacBeth and his time

First, some context. MacBeth was born into a Scotland towards the end of a critically important – and very violent – phase of its history.

After the destruction of the northern Pictish Kingdom of Fortriu around the Moray Firth by the Norse Vikings during the 9th century, it took quite some time before the Kings of the southern Pictish Kingdom of Alba, based around Perthshire and Angus, managed to retake the lands of Fortriu from the Norse – after what is likely to have been a fierce fight. It was in fact as late as the 960s that King Indulf was killed fighting at Cullen, and King Dub was killed at Forres. Both Indulf and his son Amlaib actually had Norse names (Indulf and Olaf), so it some intermarriage with the Norse took place, and the conquest had perhaps been less a case of Scots versus Vikings than we might today think.

There was certainly still much violence among the Scottish nobility. For the best part of 150 years, two rival royal lines had warred with each other as well as their external enemies, and exchanged tenure of the crown. In 997 the last of the line of Aed, son of Kenneth MacAlpin, was killed, leaving only the survivors from the line of Constantine, son of Kenneth MacAlpin to fight it out among themselves.



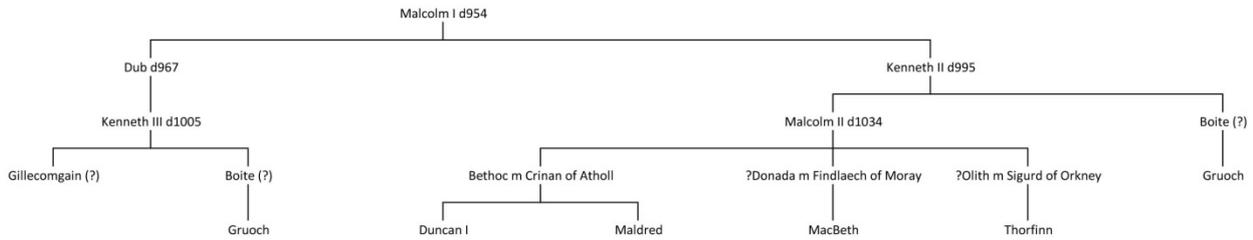
Notes

- (1) succeeded by his brother Donald, who died in 862
- (2) killed in battle with Norse, or executed afterwards
- (3) killed by Giric macDungal, his successor, of unknown birth
- (4) killed at Dunnottar by the Norse
- (5) abdicated in the 940s aged 70+ in favour of Malcolm I
- (6) killed in battle in the Mearns, possibly at Dunnottar
- (7) killed in battle with the Norse at Cullen
- (8) killed near Forres having been ejected from Alba by Cuilean
- (9) killed in a hall burning in Lothian
- (10) killed in the Mearns by Scots
- (11) killed by Kenneth II, possibly after a short reign as King
- (12) killed in battle with Scots near Perth
- (13) killed in battle in Strathearn by Malcolm II
- (14) probably died of natural causes

Descendants of Kenneth MacAlpin

In about 1005, Malcolm II defeated his cousin Kenneth III in battle and seized the throne. Over the course of his reign, he “removed” Kenneth’s male children and grandchildren from the equation. When Malcolm died in 1034, he had done his best to ensure that only his bloodline could become King. Unfortunately, his own children were all daughters and could not succeed him directly.

Malcolm’s eldest daughter, Bethoc, was married to Crinan, who was both Mormaer (a provincial ruler of semi-royal status) of Atholl and Abbot of Dunkeld (possibly the senior churchman in all Scotland at the time). His second, Donada, had been married to Findlaech, who was Mormaer of Moray by about 1005. A third daughter, Olith, is said to have been married to Sigurd, the Norse Jarl (Earl) of Orkney in about 1009. Crinan, Findlaech and Sigurd between them ruled over all the bits of Scotland north of the Tay that was not the personal domain of the king.



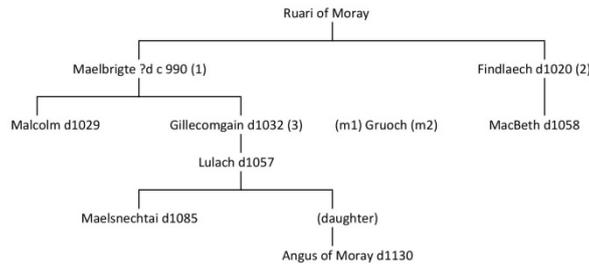
Notes

- (1) Boite MacKenneth is known from a single reference. It is not known for certain whether he was the son of Kenneth II or Kenneth III
- (2) There have been suggestions that Kenneth III had a son Gillecomgain, but this is disputed
- (3) The Orkneyinga Saga says that Sigurd of Orkney married a daughter of King Malcolm. Olith is commonly said to be her name, but there is no contemporary record of this.
- (4) The connection between MacBeth and Malcolm II through a daughter Donada is much disputed.

Descendants of Malcolm I

MacBeth was born into the Moray family in about 1005. The family was not immune to the brutal infighting that was rife within the line of the kings. Not much is known of his uncle, Maelbrigte, unless the Earl MacBeth who fought with Earl Ljot at Skitten in Caithness is the same man, but named incorrectly. Ljot died c980, so our MacBeth's father Findlaech had probably been mormaer for between 10 and 20 years by the time of MacBeth's birth. Territorially the mormaers of Atholl and Moray were rivals sharing a common border, and it seems likely that by marrying one daughter into Atholl and one into Moray, King Malcolm II had been trying to create a cross-dynasty alliance. If so, it failed.

In 1020, Findlaech was murdered by his nephews Malcolm and Gillacomgain, who set fire to the hall he was trapped inside. Presumably the 15 year old MacBeth fled for his life to Malcolm's court, but we do not hear anything of his whereabouts for over a decade. The records we have list a number of events which are of vital importance to our understanding of the latter part of Malcolm's reign, and reflect an ongoing cycle of violence within the high nobility of Scotland.



Notes

- (1) We don't know when Maelbrigte died.
- (2) Findlaech was killed in a hall-burning by his nephews Malcolm and Gillecomgain.
- (3) Gillecomgain and his warband were killed in a hall-burning. MacBeth is presumed to have been involved.

The House of Moray

In 1027, Dunkeld, the home of Crinan of Atholl and his wife Bethoc, was burned, not a particularly uncommon event apart from the fact that Dunkeld was the power base of one of the two most powerful men in the kingdom after the king himself. This was possibly the reused Iron Age fort of King's Seat, just to the north of Dunkeld and clearly visible as a tree-covered hill summit from the A9 overlooking the Tay.

There are few individuals who could attack Atholl with confidence, but the three most obvious candidates would be the Jarl of Orkney & Caithness, the mormaer of Moray, or the King himself. There is no mention of Viking attacks on Dunkeld in the Orkneyinga Saga, and the Irish Annals say that it was an internal struggle within Alba, which narrows the culprit down to Moray or Malcolm. Given his ruthless elimination of rivals to his own descendants, it appears unlikely that Malcolm would have chosen to attack the stronghold of his son-in-law, which leaves Malcolm and Gillacomgain of Moray the most likely assailants.

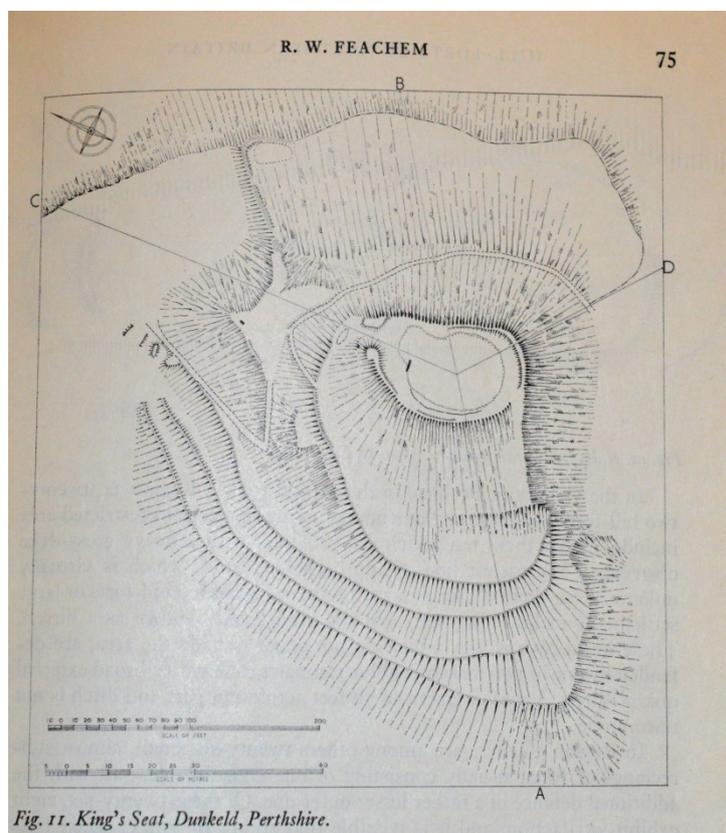


Fig. 11. King's Seat, Dunkeld, Perthshire.

Plan of the fort at Dunkeld as shown in Feachem's article in "The Iron Age in Northern Britain"

In 1029, mormaer Malcolm of Moray died and was succeeded by his brother Gillacomgain. There is no suggestion in the records of any foul play or violence, but it would appear unusual if he had avoided an unnatural death. At an unknown date, Gillacomgain married Gruoch, the grand-daughter of King Kenneth III. The circumstances of this marriage are completely unknown. On the surface it appears unlikely that King Malcolm would have knowingly permitted a descendant of his cousin to survive – even less would he have allowed a daughter of a rival royal line to marry into an alternative branch of the powerful Moray dynasty to that he had chosen for his own daughter.

By marrying Gruoch, Gillacomgain was placing himself as a direct rival to Malcolm's grandson MacBeth, having already probably been responsible for an attack on Dunkeld - and another bloodline of Malcolm's. We can assume that the birth of a son, Lulach, to Gillacomgain and Gruoch made the matter even more serious for the King as Lulach was an obvious rival to the throne for his grandchildren.

It comes as no surprise to find that in 1032, Gillacomgain and his war band were burned to death in an echo of the murder of Findlaech. There seems little doubt that MacBeth was involved with this, and it seems probable that he was acting with the approval of the King – potentially even at his instruction. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for 1031 records that alongside King Malcolm, MacBeth was one of two other kings who submitted to King Cnut when he visited Scotland. It is possible that the King had already appointed MacBeth as Mormaer of Moray at this point, prior to his being sent north to deal with Gillacomgain, this status making him appear kingly to the chronicler.

A further indication of Malcolm's determination to deal with the line of Kenneth III once and for all is a somewhat cryptic reference which states that in 1033 or 1034 "the son of MacBoete Mac Kenneth was killed by Malcolm MacKenneth". The Boete referred to here was one of the sons of Kenneth III (Gruoch's father), and Malcolm MacKenneth was the King. Whilst the name is left incomplete, the message is clear. Within a year of the death of Gruoch's husband, her nephew (or son!) had been killed at the instruction of the King. We might also consider this mopping up the work of MacBeth, who had definitely taken charge of the province of Moray by this time, presumably with Malcolm's approval.

King Duncan – the brief and unhappy reign of the chosen heir

In 1034, King Malcolm died, and was succeeded as he would have wished, by Duncan, the son of his eldest daughter. It is likely that Duncan was in his early thirties, and may have been younger than this. He was at best inexperienced,

and does not appear to have been particularly astute as a politician or as a general. Less charitably he could be described as inept.

King Malcolm had given his grandson Thorfinn Sigurdsson the title Jarl of Caithness when only five years old. The energetic and successful Jarl, saw this as a gift, and was unimpressed when Duncan sent messengers north to advise Thorfinn (by this time also ruler of much of Orkney) that he should consider Duncan his High King. Duncan even appears to have appointed his nephew Moddan as Earl in Thorfinn's place, whose army the Norse cut to shreds near Thurso in 1040.

At about the same time, Duncan decided to invade Northumbria and led an army to besiege Durham, but his forces also suffered a heavy defeat, and he was forced to retreat. Upon hearing the news of the events at Thurso, Duncan decided that he needed to put his own realm in order as a priority, and led an army north himself.



Durham – a strongly defensive site for a church site - and the target of Duncan in 1040. Photograph from Wikipedia commons and subject to copyright as outlined on the page for “Durham”

Accounts of what happened to Duncan vary. If we are to believe the assertion that Duncan can be equated with the Orkneyinga Saga's “Karl Hundasson”, then Duncan led a fleet of 11 ships north and was soundly defeated a third time, escaping the battle by ship. The Saga is the source for the story of Moddan, who is not otherwise attested, and was trapped a second time with an army at Thurso, and was defeated a second time, this time paying with his life. In the Saga Thorfinn pursued the King south and brought him to battle at Torfness, most probably either the old Pictish fort at Burghead, or Tarbert Ness. The Saga does not confirm the fate of Karl Hundasson. It says that after a fierce battle, the King fled the field, and some reports said he had been killed. A further note in the Chronicle of the Kings identifies the location of Duncan's death as Bothngouane, which has been identified as Pitgaveny, north of Elgin.

If Duncan is not to be associated with “Karl Hundasson”, there is no other near-contemporary account which tells Duncan's story. It has been suggested that Karl was a name given to MacBeth; but the only dating for Karl's reign is after the death of Thorfinn's grandfather Hlodvir, perhaps around 988, so the identification is far from clear, and may in fact be a composite character made up of the actions of more than one individual.

However two further facts are recorded - the Annals of Tighernach report that King Duncan was killed by his own subjects, and Marianus Scotus says that he was killed by his general, MacBeth of Moray. It is not until Fordun's account of the 14th century that Fordun tells the tale that Duncan was on a progress through the Kingdom dispensing justice and collecting tribute, when he was met with resistance in Moray, and killed.



Model of Burghead Fort, possible location of Torfness where Thorfinn is said to have defeated Karl Hundasson

It is beyond doubt that Duncan had suffered a substantial defeat at Durham, and if we allow for exaggeration in the Saga, it is possible to conclude that part of the Karl Hundasson story could represent the memory of a failed assertion of royal authority over Caithness - such as the progress Fordun describes. Although a long drive, it is only about 15 miles from Tarbert Ness to Burghead as the longship sails, and at the time, Pitgaveny would have been on the coast of Spynie Loch, which was salt water and open to the sea, so the distances involved for either location being identified as Torfness are perfectly feasible.

What we seem to have with Duncan, then, is a king whose military ability was probably considered unacceptable by his nobility, attempting to assert his authority over them, and finding them unwilling to accept it. In such circumstances the king was forced to arms, and died in battle as the result. Whatever MacBeth's loyalties up to 1040, he had chosen to defy – and kill – the King. It is likely, but unproven, that by this time MacBeth had also married the widowed Gruoch – or at least decided that he was going to.

MacBeth takes the throne

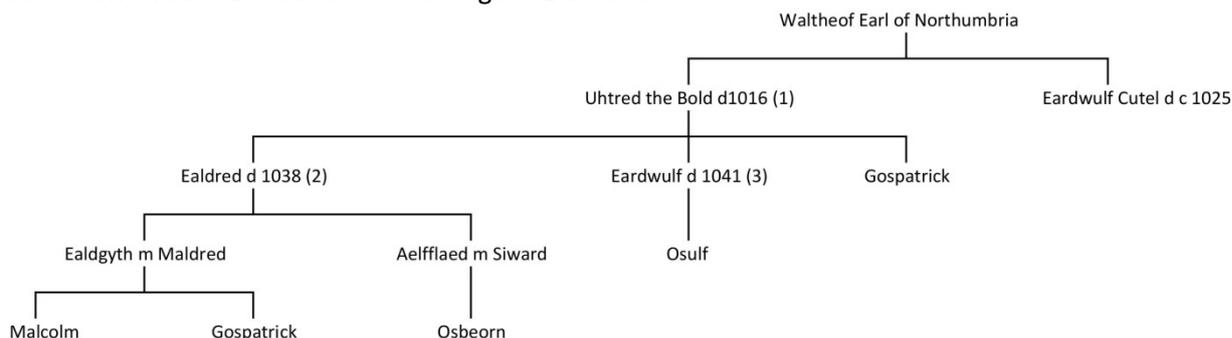
Gruoch – and her son Lulach – were the last descendants of Kenneth III left alive that we know of, and indisputably royal. Of the line of Malcolm II, there were the young sons of Duncan, (Malcolm and Donald), Jarl Thorfinn who was thoroughly Norse in his outlook and unacceptable to the Scots, and MacBeth. With marriage to Gruoch, MacBeth united the two possible rival bloodlines into one claim to the throne. Faced with this realpolitik, and the chance that her son Lulach would become king after MacBeth, Gruoch seems to have agreed to the deal, and married the man most likely to have been responsible for the death of her first husband.

It is surprising to note that MacBeth did not seem to have pursued Duncan's sons, and this is one of the aspects of his reign used to highlight what a wise and civilised ruler he was, but it may well be the case that he was not able to do so effectively in any case. The elder, Malcolm, appears to have spent his time in England, most likely in Northumbria, and the younger brother disappeared into the Isles.

So, in 1040 MacBeth was crowned King after a meeting of the chief nobles of the realm. It is unlikely there was much opposition given the alternatives, even from Crinan of Atholl, although he may well have chosen to remain absent. There were probably no alternatives put forward. King Duncan did have a younger brother Maldred, but he was probably in England, having married a daughter of a previous Earl of Bernicia (the northern part of Northumbria) in 1036.

The Northumbrian problem

Maldred, although linked closely with the Northumbrian Earls, was supposedly in a position of authority over Cumbria. This was not the modern English county, but the former British kingdom of Strathclyde, which may have stretched down the west coast into what is now England, and certainly bordered the Northumbrian lands. This area was only loosely part of the Scottish kingdom, and remained so for the next century at least before a border began to stabilise. With Maldred's nephew Malcolm in the Northumbria court, Maldred's wife a member of the Bernician dynasty, and the aggressive Earl Siward in Northumbria, we might suspect that MacBeth faced a formidable alliance across the whole southern border. However, we know that Earl Eardwulf of Bernicia had raided Cumbria in 1038, and Duncan himself had been raiding Bernicia when besieging Durham in 1040. If Maldred was associated with Cumbria, the relationship between his immediate family and Northumbria was at best "complicated". Eardwulf may even have been involved in Duncan's ill-fated siege of Durham.



Notes

- (1) Uhtred was killed at the instigation of Cnut by a Northumbrian noble, Thurbrand
- (2) Ealdred killed Thurbrand in the 1020s and was killed by the Thurbrands son
- (3) Eardwulf was killed at the instigation of Hathacnut by Siward
- (4) In 1067 Gospatrick was made Earl of Northumbria, and exiled in 1072 to become Lord of Dunbar. It is not clear if this was the son of Maldred, the son of Uhtred the Bold, or another member of the family.

House of Northumbria

The next events of MacBeth's reign we know of come from the Orkneyinga Saga, which says that Jarl Thorfinn of Orkney raided into the Hebrides, parts of Scotland, and finally England in 1040 or 1041 from a base in Galloway. Whilst Galloway itself was part of the Norse Kingdom of Man, and lay outside the orbit of MacBeth's authority, it is unlikely that the Norse Jarl would have chosen to raid England without his cousin's tacit agreement – even with the confusion caused by the death of Harold "Harefoot", the brief reign of Harthacnut, and start of Edward the Confessor's reign.

It appears that the raid into England led to defeat, leading Thorfinn to return to Orkney vowing revenge. We might believe this was at the hands of Eardwulf, Siward, Maldred or a combination of their forces, but events were taking a sinister turn in Northumbria. Having given offence to Harthacnut (perhaps being involved in the siege of Durham), Eardwulf of Bernicia was murdered by Siward in 1041, who became Earl of all Northumbria as a result. As Siward had just murdered his brother-in-law, it is unlikely that Maldred stuck around for long if he was in Northumbria, and may have returned to his own lands of Cumbria. It would be reasonable to assume that his nephew Malcolm remained with him.

Thorfinn did not take his defeat lightly, and returned with a larger force to England the following year. The Saga states that he led his troops all across England through the summer, defeating the English in two pitched battles before returning to Orkney. Allowing for the usual hyperbole of the Saga, it seems that at the very least Thorfinn led an army into England and spent some considerable time there. An alternate explanation for Eardwulf's murder is that he and Maldred could have worked with Thorfinn against Siward, in which case relations between Thorfinn and MacBeth are likely to have chilled slightly.

However, given the possible breach with Siward, Maldred and Malcolm were vulnerable, and it seems perfectly reasonable to suggest that Thorfinn's activity in Cumbria was an attempt sponsored by MacBeth to remove the elder son of Duncan. Since Donald, the younger son was hidden away in the Isles by Crinan, it could also be significant that the other area highlighted as a target for Thorfinn was the Hebrides and west coast of Scotland.



The border region c1000 AD as per Alex Woolf in "From Pictland to Alba" with Lothian and Cumbria marked. Bamburgh was the capital of Bernicia, which also included Durham at its peak.

The Atholl problem and problems at home

The next three years of MacBeth's reign pass without comment by his contemporaries, but in 1045 the records state that Crinan was killed in a battle between the Scots, and there is the possibility that Maldred was also killed at about this time. At around this time, Northumbrian influence spread westwards, and it may be that Siward was concentrating on retaliation against the Cumbrian realm, and had driven Maldred out. As with the attack on Dunkeld, it is unlikely that anyone other than MacBeth was the other party involved in Crinan's final battle. The bald statement has been elaborated upon by later chroniclers, but the fact remains that we know nothing further of this event.

MacBeth had now been on the throne for five years, and was well regarded as king. His position ought to have been secure, yet he had failed to eliminate the rivals to his throne. His principal opponent was Crinan, who held Atholl, the central province of the Scottish realm, which lay between Moray (presumably still a significant power base for MacBeth), and the royal heartlands around the Firth of Tay.

Whether MacBeth was ambushed by Crinan, or led an attack upon Atholl, we don't know. However, MacBeth had probably been involved in the attack on Dunkeld in 1027 as a prominent member of King Malcolm's war band, and may have decided that a pre-emptive strike upon his foe was also justified. Perhaps, as some have suggested, Maldred was present and an assault on MacBeth was being planned. Either way, the final outcome was a disaster for the Dunkeld dynasty. With Crinan dead, Duncan and Maldred dead, and the two young princes in exile being pursued by a hostile MacBeth, the prospects did not look good.

In 1046, the Annals of Lindisfarne and Durham say that Earl Siward invaded Scotland. By this date, the elder of the exiled princes was perhaps at an age where he could be considered old enough to fight. According to the Holinshed Chronicle Malcolm had spent time at the court of Edward the Confessor. This is certainly possible as Siward was a constant supporter of the English King, but the truth is that we have no evidence of this. Documentation interpreted to suggest Malcolm was granted land in Corby actually dates to well after Malcolm's death, and most likely relates to lands in the Earldom of Huntingdon held by King David I.

If Siward did invade Scotland, it would have been with the authority of the English King behind him. The text of the Annal in question translates to "Earl Siward came to Scotland with a great army and expelled King MacBeth, and appointed another; but after his departure MacBeth recovered the Kingdom". There is no hint of an invasion of

Scotland in this year in any of the contemporary records, as the Annal postdates events by 150 years. The reason given for the invasion was the breaking the terms of a treaty between MacBeth and Siward.

It appears on balance unlikely that Siward and his army did expel MacBeth from Scotland. However a treaty between the two men which was so important that its breaking resulted in invasion can only have related to each honouring the borders of the other. Perhaps the treaty had been drawn up after Thorfinn's activities a few years previously and within the first couple of years of MacBeth's rule. It could be the case that following the battle which resulted in Crinan's death, MacBeth followed a fleeing Maldred and chased him back into Northumbria, crossing the border in the process with his army. This would certainly be cause for Siward to retaliate.

However, it could also be the case that Siward was seeking to expand the border of the Bernician part of his Earldom towards the Forth at a time when MacBeth was dealing with rebellion in Scotland. Bernicia had originally included both Dunbar and Edinburgh, but the province of Lothian had been granted to the Scots in 973. The border is likely to have been maintained at the Tweed, but it is quite likely that the Kings of England and Northumbrian Earls still regarded Lothian as unfinished business.

In this context, the campaign of Siward into Scotland in 1046 could well be seen as an attempt to re-annex Lothian into his Earldom – and to England, particularly if MacBeth had seen fit to cross the border into Northumbria proper in pursuit of Maldred. However, the rapid retaking of "Scotland" and ejection of Siward's appointee appears unlikely in such a scenario, as would Siward's repeated presence at Edward's court in 1046 since the canny Earl would almost certainly have wanted to ensure conquered territory was secure. Retaliatory action, and exaggeration of the event, seems the more probable.

Secure at last?

By 1050, MacBeth was secure on his throne. External threats had been neutralised – presumably a new treaty was in place with Siward, and disruption in the far north had been resolved. Jarl Thorfinn had been forced to cede a third of Orkney to his nephew Rognvald, and the two had fallen out and gone to war with each other. At one point, Thorfinn had been trapped in a burning hall, but escaped, carrying his wife through a breach he had made in the wall. Rognvald had believed him dead, but was caught by surprise in Kirkwall at feast, tracked down by Thorfinn and his men, and killed in 1046. Thorfinn then had to deal directly with the King of Norway who had vowed revenge, but by 1050 everything appeared to be quiet again.

With the north peaceful, his southern border secure and the Atholl dynasty defeated, MacBeth undertook a pilgrimage to Rome, possibly in the company of his cousin Thorfinn, who visited Rome in the same year. The reason assumed for their visits was simply conventional piety and royal fashion at the time; when MacBeth was at Rome, he was extremely generous with his alms giving. It is likely that the pilgrimage involved leaving Scotland in autumn 1049 in order to permit MacBeth to arrive by Easter – the best time to be in Rome – and therefore arriving back after almost a year's absence – unless he was able to sail in his cousin's fleet, in which case it would still mean a four month absence at least.

In 1052, MacBeth was still secure on his throne and well-renowned. Friction between the Anglo-Saxon nobility used to serving Danish masters, and Normans brought to England by King Edward, had culminated in the exiling of arguably the most powerful man in the Kingdom, Godwin Earl of Wessex following a falling out with the king. The two men were reconciled after an armed stand-off, but the price of Godwin's peace was the expulsion of many of Edward's Normans. Most returned to Normandy, but two at least chose to leave their estates and move to Scotland and MacBeth's court.

Osbern Pentecost, and his compatriot Hugh, were part of a substantial group of Normans who had held land in and around Herefordshire, their leader having supplanted the disgraced eldest son of Godwin (who had been banished and sent to Jerusalem as penance for the murder of his cousin) as Earl of Hereford. Godwin clearly disliked Earl Ralph, who had opposed his return, and it is quite possible that Osbern led a substantial group of Herefordshire Normans north through Mercia that year.



The earthwork motte at Ewyas Harold, built by Osbern Pentecost c1050 before he and his associates fled to Scotland. Again sourced from Wikipedia with relevant copyright under “Ewyas Harold Castle”

In addition to his widely praised trip to Rome, MacBeth is said to have been generous to the Church in Scotland. This is due to the survival of two deeds detailing gifts of land by MacBeth and Queen Gruoch to the community of monks living on Loch Leven. Two grants of land in a reign of seventeen years is hardly evidence of piety beyond what was normally expected of monarchs at the time, and neither is his pilgrimage to Rome.

In fact, as he had been responsible for the death of Crinan, Abbot of Dunkeld as well as Mormaer of Atholl, we may instead consider that the pilgrimage of MacBeth to Rome was a penance, and that his relationship with the Church in Scotland was until this point very rocky. The Abbacy of Dunkeld was probably the most senior position in the Scottish church as well as a lay magnate of the highest order. As the position was hereditary, MacBeth was also probably keeping any successor out of his post. It might be that MacBeth killing Crinan was almost as serious a matter as the murder of Thomas Becket a century later.

If so, his actions appear to have rehabilitated him in the eyes of the Irish church at least. In the Prophecy of Berchan his reign is alluded to as a time of plenty, he himself as a powerful and successful warrior king. It is likely that the Prophecy is the only survivor of a substantial volume of poetic work praising him.

Invasion and defeat

However, MacBeth’s failure to do as his grandfather had done – namely eliminate all possible opposition – had left two exiled princes thirsty for revenge and his throne. There was also Earl Siward on his southern border, keen to reassert Northumbrian authority on the lands south of the Forth. Eleventh century politics being what they were, it is possible that at this time the exiled prince Malcolm, probably now in his early twenties, had come to see the powerful Earl as a valuable ally, and put to one side the murder of his uncle Eardwulf. However it is also possible that other scions of the family were in attendance in Northumbria, waiting for their opportunity.

In 1054. Siward led a large army into Scotland, supported by a fleet. On 27th July Siward’s army met and defeated that of MacBeth. The fighting was clearly very fierce, and Siward lost one of his sons, Osbern, and his nephew, another Siward. Other casualties were the entire force of Norman knights who had been exiled to Scotland a few years previously. The only other named casualty is Dolfin son of Finntor. Dolfin is also a name with links to the Bernician line, with one of Maldred’s nephews bearing the name, but Finntor is otherwise unknown. Reversing the name elements one notices it is comparable with Thorfinn, but he had no son called Dolfin that we know of.

The 12th century account of events written by John of Worcester (who tended to use a northern version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle as his source material) records that after defeating MacBeth, Siward set up “Mael Coluim, son of the king of the Cumbrians” in his place. There are similarities between this reference and the records relating to Siward’s invasion of 1046, and some historians have suggested that the two invasions might be the result of misplaced accounts of a single invasion. It is still usually assumed that Malcolm, son of the King of the Cumbrians was the exiled prince Malcolm, son of Duncan.

However, it seems quite possible that the Malcolm installed by Siward was a son of Maldred, commonly associated with Cumbria and therefore cousin to the exiled prince. Maldred could, indeed, still be alive and well as we have no confirmed record of his death, and ruling Cumbria/Strathclyde as a fief under Siward's authority after the unrecorded campaigns resulting in the supremacy of Northumbria over Cumbria mentioned earlier.

Again, looking at contemporary accounts only, we might only have been talking about a reconquest of Lothian and the extension of Northumbrian power to the Forth or even the Tay, but if so there was an unintended consequence. Although Lothian was not to be considered part of Scotland proper, it was considered to be territory which was held by the Kings of Scots. MacBeth had now been ejected from Lothian, perhaps for the second time, and was therefore perhaps to be considered unable to be a reliable defender of the Kingdom. However later accounts tell us a different story.

It is not until the 14th/15th century Wyntoun's chronicle that we are granted a little more information about the critical campaign of Siward against MacBeth. It is to him that we owe the connection of MacBeth to Dunsinane, and Birnam. He also tells us of a critical and hard-fought battle which took place at Dunsinane on the 27th July 1054, and was known as the Battle of the Seven Sleepers after the feast-day on which it was fought.



Dunsinane Hill is the peak in the centre, my photograph

Despite the lack of contemporary records, the links with Dunsinane and Birnam have never been challenged. Dunsinane Hill is a sizeable fort which was used at around the time of MacBeth, and lies roughly half way between Perth and Dundee, although a bit further north in the Sidlaw Hills. Birnam is a small village on the Tay at least ten miles away as the crow flies. As the soldier marches, it is much further, with the River Isla to cross as well.

Birnam is notable for being a short distance from Dunkeld, the seat of the Atholl dynasty and eleven years previously the abbey of Crinan. We don't know who held the Abbacy after Crinan. The next incumbent we know of was some fifty years later, and then was a member of the royal family. As the position was hereditary, the default Abbot may even have been the exiled prince Malcolm, the senior direct heir of Crinan, choosing to live peacefully under MacBeth's rule at this point.

The description of an assault by Siward by land and sea could easily reflect the transfer of forces by ship up the Tay to Dunkeld, and his acting as a second front of attack on MacBeth, who was presumably to the south preparing for an attack by Siward. The tale of Siward's army passing from Birnam to Dunsinane in camouflage comes from Wyntoun's chronicle, and may reflect a tradition of an unexpected attack from the north upon MacBeth. This could conceivably have been the moment that Malcolm the prince and possible abbot chose to raise his banner against MacBeth.

Either way Dunsinane does appear to be a plausible site for such a battle to take place. It is only eight miles from Scone, where the Kings of Scots were crowned, and lies right in the royal heartlands. The result was indecisive. The Scots were defeated, but at a heavy cost, and MacBeth himself escaped.

The next three years are frustratingly a blank, but MacBeth seems to have retreated north to his original power base - Moray. Scotland had once again divided along the traditional lines of the two Pictish Kingdoms, with two rival Kings – MacBeth in the north, and his rival in the south. The Chronicle of Melrose records that Malcolm was crowned at Scone shortly after the battle in 1054, installed by Siward.

In 1055 the formidable Northumbrian Earl died in York, probably of dysentery, and his Earldom passed to Tostig Godwinsson, the third son of the Earl of Wessex. Tostig is unlikely to have been a source of much support to Malcolm, and was later to be accused of failing to respond to Scottish raids on Northumbria. As a southern English noble, his focus was firmly on the English royal court at this time. This suggests that after Siward's campaign of 1054, there was sufficient momentum in the war against MacBeth for Malcolm to maintain it without official Northumbrian help – apart from the undoubted opportunists hoping for a bit of treasure and reward for their support.

Three Kings in Scotland?

It is likely that war continued between the two rival kings. In Pictish times, Dunnottar was a border fortress between the two kingdoms, although it is not clear which Pictish kingdom held it. The passes through the mountains to Moray from Alba – the lands held by Malcolm – were strategically vital and would have been the sources of much fighting. Once Malcolm had successfully taken control of the territory dominated by Dunnottar, he was able to head up the Dee, from where passes led to Strathbogie and Strathspey, and the Moray plain, without leaving himself outflanked, as could have happened if he had headed up the Don.

An intriguing possibility raised by the concept of Siward placing Malcolm son of Maldred on the throne, and MacBeth ejecting him is that the exiled Malcolm son of Duncan took up his claim to the throne during this period, after MacBeth had defeated his cousin, as suggested above. It is even possible that Malcolm had fought for MacBeth against his cousin if he had been installed as Abbot of Dunkeld as part of MacBeth's penance, and had quietly been building a power base in Atholl, biding his time. In such a case we could interpret the naval force as summoning Malcolm son of Duncan to battle in support of Malcolm son of Maldred, and then the two Malcolms fighting it out after MacBeth's defeat. We could even have had three armies fighting each other at Dunsinane.

However, in records for 1057 we finally get some indication as to what had been happening over the previous three years. The contemporary Marianus Scotus dates the end of MacBeth's reign to 8th September 1057, but as this is the anniversary of Duncan's death the date raises a number of questions. At first it seems just too convenient, a chronicler's device to emphasise that Duncan's removal was murder, illegal, immoral – in fact everything that contemporaries would not have seen it. Given that Marianus was writing in the 11th century, and in Ireland, a politically neutral country, this seems unlikely.

The symbolism of the date still seems to be too strong for coincidence. It may be that MacBeth resigned his crown on this date, willingly or otherwise, and that his actions resulting in the death of not just Duncan, but also Crinan, were perceived to have offended God, who may have seemed to abandon his cause – despite his pilgrimage to Rome, donations to the church, and possible acceptance of Malcolm as Abbot of Dunkeld.

It is possible that MacBeth was injured during the fighting in 1054-1057, or had fallen ill. He was by this date in his mid-fifties at least, and could have been seen as yesterday's man. He may also have been losing support in the absence of convincing victories over Malcolm and the Northumbrians, and under pressure to step aside in favour of a younger, more vigorous leader. He resigned his throne to his stepson Lulach, by now a man in his mid-twenties at least, and Lulach was crowned at Scone on 15th August 1057 – three weeks before the end date of MacBeth's reign given by Marianus Scotus.

According to the annals, Lulach was killed the following March. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle says that he was slain by Malcolm through treachery, and the site of his death is traditionally placed at Essie, in Strathbogie. His by-name, "the fatuous" or "the stupid" suggests that he may have been lured by Malcolm to a meeting and killed under safe-conduct or during a truce. Essie old parish church is just to the east of Rhynie, and a few miles to the south near

Mossat is a standing stone called Lulach's stone. The location itself does suggest some kind of border meeting could have been taking place, but it is also possible that a battle of some description occurred. The pass from Strathdon to Strathbogie is strategically vital, as shown by the recent discoveries dating to the Pictish period of several high status sites around Rhynie, as well as the choice of Kildrummy, with its impressive castle, for the seat of the Earldom of Mar later in the medieval period.

With Lulach dead under suspicious circumstances, the aging MacBeth was left to fight on alone. His death is recorded after that of Lulach in the chronicles, one of which places his death after an attack upon England led by the son of the King of Norway. This suggests he may have fought on for several weeks or months after Lulach was killed. Unfortunately we do not know when the Norwegian venture took place, but as naval campaigns tended to happen in the summer, MacBeth may have held out – or hidden – for a few months after Lulach's death in the March. The traditional location of his death is Lumphanan in Deeside.



The Peel of Lumphanan, 13th century earthwork castle traditionally associated with MacBeth's death

Lumphanan is the site of a medieval earthwork castle which dates to no earlier than the 13th century, but Lumphanan church is traditionally stated to have been built on the site of earlier churches. The naming of a well as MacBeths Well, as well as MacBeth's Stone nearby, and MacBeth's cairn a mile to the north are clearly assigned to later buildings by folklore, (as is the case with Lulach's Stone) but it may well be the case that MacBeth had taken refuge in a church here and was seized and executed, since his death is described as "cruel" by the Melrose Chronicle.

One final curious theory driven by the idea that Lulach was killed at Essie, and MacBeth later at Lumphanan, is that Malcolm came from the north with support from Orkney. It is certainly the case that he was later married to the widow of Thorfinn, Ingibiorg, by whom he had two sons. However, Thorfinn himself lived until the later years of the reign of Harald Hardrada of Norway, who ruled from 1046 to 1066, so we must assume that he outlived MacBeth. Thorfinn appears to have been a fairly constant supporter of MacBeth as far as we can tell, and it seems unlikely that he would have supported Malcolm against the king. His sons appear to have served with the Norwegian King in 1066 but are not mentioned before this, but unauthorised support cannot be ruled out, and the marriage of Malcolm to Ingibiorg remains a mystery.

Aftermath and conclusions

Malcolm reigned for a long time, eventually dying in battle in 1093 against the English. The infighting for the Scottish throne was to continue, since Lulach's son and grandson both led rebellions against Malcolm and his sons. In addition, Malcolm disowned his sons by Ingibiorg upon his second marriage to Margaret of Wessex, and both they and their descendants were to challenge for the crown, as did his own younger brother, Donald.

The story of the real MacBeth does not follow that of Shakespeare's MacBeth very closely. There were no thanes in MacBeth's time, for example; the word refers to a type of landholding postdating his era, and there are no links between him and Glamis. Ross was part of MacBeth's realm of Moray, and Caithness was part of Thorfinn's realm, so

neither would have had its own ruler. Duncan was killed in battle, not murdered, and was a relatively young man at the time. Gruoch, the historical Lady MacBeth, was probably more concerned with the future of her son Lulach than that of MacBeth and remains almost completely in the shadows. Finally, whilst the MacDuff family may have been rulers of Fife, their origins are very vague – and Fife does not feature in MacBeth's story as we know it, although it would have been important, lying between Lothian and the royal heartland across the Tay. Some historians have suggested the rulers of Fife may have been descendants of Kenneth III son of Dub, who would have had a claim to the throne.

The outline I have given above, and the multiple suggestions are intended to reflect not just the few facts we do know about MacBeth and his reign, but also how little we know of the regional history of the north of Britain as a whole. Overshadowed by the events in England and Normandy, and very sparsely recorded, the reigns of Malcolm II, Duncan, MacBeth and Lulach are shrouded in uncertainty. The interpretation of events and alternative theories are most certainly not the only ones which can be suggested from the brief and unclear evidence we have, but I believe they reflect reasonably accurately how individuals chose to act in this time.

MacBeth is considered by some to have been a usurper because he killed his predecessor. However, this was far from uncommon in his day, and usurpation with political violence was the norm. Few kings died safely in their beds in tenth and eleventh century Scotland. He was probably of the blood royal, and removed a potentially unpopular and unlucky king in Duncan. Ruling strongly and successfully, he put down several rebellions, and was able to withstand invasions from Northumbria. However every warrior's luck runs out one day, and in his turn he was removed, although it took a great effort to do so.

From the trailers for the forthcoming film, it is clear that the directors are using Shakespeare as the basis for their film. But behind the undoubtedly great creation of the Bard was a historical king who may have been the first to truly unite the Kingdom of the Scots with that of Moray, forming the foundation of the later medieval kingdom. He is just as worthy of memory as Shakespeare's fictional king.