

# MACBETH: SCOTLAND'S LAST CELTIC KING

*Macbeth, who ruled from 1040 to 1057, was the last of Scotland's Gaelic-speaking kings. Like his Celtic ancestors, he was described as "fierce." If Macbeth had defeated Malcolm Canmore, today's relationship between Scotland and England might be very different.*

## THE CELTIC HERITAGE

Bronze Age burials in central Europe are history's first record of the Celts. In 1400 B.C., a people living near the Rhine began burying their dead in mounds called *tumuli*. Traces of the early Celts can also be found in place-names such as *briga* (hill), *dunum* (fortress), and *seno* (old). These names provide evidence that the Celts lived throughout central Europe, spreading into Italy, the British Isles, and even Asia Minor.

The historian Strabo (c. 63 B.C.—c. A.D. 24) gives one of the earliest written descriptions of the Celts. "The whole race, which is now called Gallic or Galatic, is madly fond of war, high-spirited and quick to battle, but otherwise straightforward and not of evil character....At any time or place and on whatever pretext you stir them up, you will have them ready to face danger, even if they have nothing on their side but their own strength and courage. On the other hand if won over by gentle persuasion they willingly devote their energies to useful pursuits and even take to a literary education...."

Strabo notes that "three classes of men [are] held in special honor: the Bards, the Vates, and the Druids. The Bards are singers and poets; the Vates [are] interpreters of [omens and natural events]; while the Druids...are [priests who are] believed to be the most just of men."

The Celts honored many deities. Some, such as Lug, are known only by name. Others, such as Mother Earth and the Three-Headed God, were worshipped under three aspects, or forms. Wells and rivers

had their own patron deities; rivers such as the Boyne and the Shannon were even considered goddesses. Animal deities included the bull god Tauros Trigaranus, the horse goddess Epona, and the boar god Moccus.

## THE ROMAN INVASION

The Celts probably brought their religion to Britain around 2000 B.C. Different tribes spread over the entire island. As many as 16 tribes are believed to have settled in Scotland. The Celts dominated all of Britain until Julius Caesar began a series of Roman invasions in 55 B.C. Some southern tribes were conquered by the invaders. But the Highland tribes took advantage of increasing Roman weakness to push the invaders southward. In 122 A.D., the harried Romans built Hadrian's Wall, a great stone barrier designed to contain the aggressive northern tribes. The wall, like all Roman attempts to subdue the Celts, ultimately failed. In the 5th century, the Celts were once again independent.

## THE SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY

By this time, Christian missionaries such as St. Ninian and St. Columba had established monasteries on Scotland's eastern coast. There Celtic monks preserved their legends in beautiful illuminated manuscripts. They also offered free schooling to anyone who was willing to help with their work—fishing, farming, and copying manuscripts. Some of the students, inspired by St. Columba's conversion of the Picts of northern Scotland, became missionaries.

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## Macbeth: Scotland's Last Celtic King *continued*

Eventually, the Celtic Church consisted of a network of monasteries that preserved learning and spread the Christian faith. However, their isolation from the church's central government eventually led to conflict between the Celtic Church and the Roman Church.

### THE UNIFICATION OF SCOTLAND

In the 8th century, Viking raiders attacked coastal monasteries and villages. As the invaders penetrated into the interior of the country, some tribes were destroyed. Others found strength in unity. When Kenneth Mac Alpine became king of the Scots in 841, the neighboring Picts had suffered heavy losses from Danish pirates. Kenneth seized the opportunity to conquer them; in 844, he became the first king to rule both the Scots and the Picts.

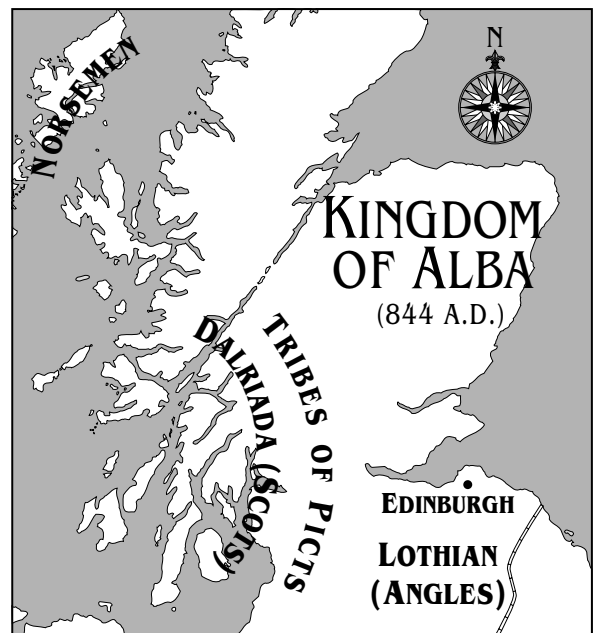
Kenneth's successors continued to govern a unified kingdom. They tried to extend their borders to the southwest by conquering Edinburgh. But the most significant expansion of Scottish territory came when Malcolm II conquered the Angles living in Lothian in 1018. His attempts to extend his rule to the north met with less success, because many northern clan leaders resisted his authority.

### MACBETH'S PLACE IN HISTORY

Malcolm II, like most early Scottish kings, killed his predecessor. Malcolm was succeeded by his grandson, Duncan, whose rule lasted only six years. Duncan's right to the throne was disputed by many, including Macbeth. When Duncan's army marched north of the River Spey, he entered Moray lands. Macbeth, who was Earl of Moray, joined Thorfinn of Orkney in a fierce battle against Duncan. Macbeth killed Duncan near Elgin, then marched south to Scone where he was crowned.

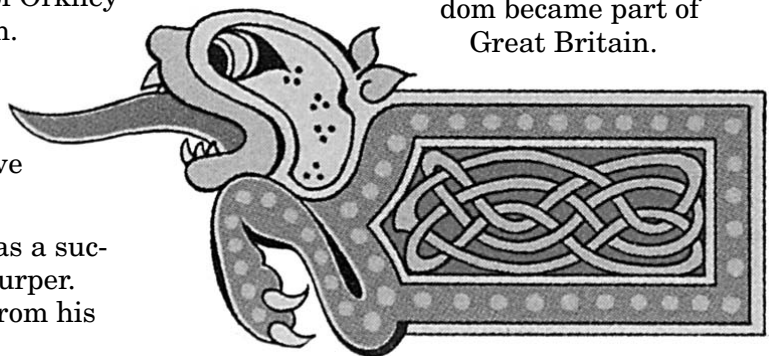
What impact did Macbeth have on Scottish history?

- His contemporaries saw him as a successful rebel rather than a usurper. Macbeth received the crown from his



peers, and his people prospered under his rule. As St. Berchan described his rule, "There was abundance in Alba east and west/Under the reign of the fierce Red One."

- Macbeth ended the conflict between the Scottish Church and the Pope. He and his wife generously supported monasteries, and Macbeth even made a pilgrimage to Rome.
- Macbeth honored Celtic tradition and resisted English influence. He was crowned at Scone and buried at Iona. His successor, who was educated in England and sought military alliances with the English, moved his palace and burial place to Dunfermline. Malcolm III replaced the old ways with the new Anglo-Norman culture. Eventually, his successors thought of themselves as more French than Celt, and his kingdom became part of Great Britain.



Ornament from a Celtic illuminated manuscript