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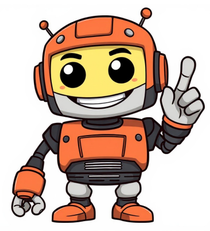

Dr Nicki Scott is a cultural resources adviser at Historic Scotland, an executive agency of the Scottish government charged with safeguarding the nations historic environment and promoting its understanding and enjoyment on behalf of Scottish ministers When were the first castles built in Scotland?Early examples of castles first appear in Scotland in the 1100s its likely that Norman practices were being adopted throughout the country.What are the different types of castles? How did design progress from Motte and Bailey to stone fortresses?Castle design, by its nature, is not a clear progression from one style to another. Motte and bailey was used early in Scotland, as demonstrated at Bass of Inverurie, built by David, Earl of Huntington (1152-1219), however, this type of construction was still being used throughout Scotland well into the 1300s. This style was relatively low cost, quick to construct and required few specialist skills. Few examples of ringwork castles, defined by their defensive bank and ditch, survive; these early simple structures would have been replaced with higher-status stone buildings. High-status castles were often constructed with stone and required wealth and periods of peace to complete, as they had a longer construction time, although early examples of stone castles can be found in Orkney and the North of Scotland as stone was in greater supply throughout this region.Curtain wall castles, complete with high perimeter walls enclosing a normally rectilinear area, housing sub-buildings within it, became dated and were replaced by the tower house castle, comprising a stone tower with adjoining buildings, as seen at Threave Castle in Dumfries and Galloway. While castles had certain features in common, and had many of the same functions, the actual design was rarely replicated exactly from one example to the next and varied according to status, wealth and time. An artists impression of Edinburgh Castle before the Lang Siege of 1573How were castles constructed or located to best repel attacks?Many castles were constructed to take advantage of strategic and fortified locations within the existing local landscape. A good example of this tactic is demonstrated at Edinburgh Castle, which sits on top of a high volcanic rock. Its prominent position offers a clear viewpoint in all directions, while the sheer rock faces surrounding it provide a natural defence and deterrent against sieges. In terms of construction, thick walls with very few openings helped provide defence against siege weapons while corner towers allowed defenders to fire down on attackers from all directions. Moats and ditches also made it harder for attackers to get close to the castle walls themselves. Where arrow slits pierced walls, they were outwardly narrow to reduce the possibility of attackers firing in, and internally splayed to allow the defender a wide angle of attack. Timber hoardings on top of wall-walks were often constructed during a siege. Later these were replaced with stone machicolations and gave cover to defenders, allowing them to fire and drop projectiles through the openings onto the attackers below, as during the Norse attack on Rothesay Castle in 1230 the earliest record of an attack on a Scottish castle. What was the role of a castle in peacetime?Most castles were rarely called into military service so their peacetime role was actually their primary one. Castles acted as administrative centres for lordships, where the lord could dispense justice, incarcerate those awaiting trial, collect rents, entertain and so on. They also provided the lord with comfortable accommodation. The building or remodelling of a castle also had a symbolic function, it represented the control that the lord had over the surrounding landscape. Threave CastleWhat was the best way to attack a castle? Attack plans were formulated depending on the castle and the resources available. During the Wars of Independence with England, James Douglas and Thomas Randolph retook Roxburgh and Edinburgh castles, respectively, by small-scale night-time attacks, scaling the walls with rope ladders. Earlier in the same conflict Edward I had used a siege tower at Bothwell in 1301, he also had miners ready to dig under the walls if necessary undermining was a technique that was also used at St Andrews Castle in the 1500s where the mine and countermine can still be explored by visitors today. What was the best way to defend a castle?Having an adequate garrison was essential, as was ensuring the castles defenders were well supplied, with provisions and fresh water being crucial resources to withstanding a siege. As well as this, ensuring the castle was defended by a loyal garrison was also important. Maintaining loyalty of the garrison itself was not to be underestimated. While siege was required to capture Bothwell Castle in 1301, in the wake of Bannockburn in 1314, the keeper of the castle for Edward II turned both it and its garrison over to Scottish forces.An engraving of Stirling Castle by John SlezerWhat siege weapons did defenders most fear?While its difficult to know this for certain, there are a number of factors that could contribute to fear during a siege. Knowing that a skilled commander was leading the opposing force could be an issue the garrison at Stirling Castle surrendered to Edward I before he had a chance to use his new siege weapon War Wolf in 1304. Although the length of the siege had much to do with this, Edwards rather fearsome reputation may have contributed to this surrender. Disease was probably another concern throughout a siege, as there would be less chance than normal to carry out castle maintenance and chores. What brought about the end of the castle age? Was it just cannon or were there other factors?The growing use of artillery was certainly a factor. Castles designed to withstand trebuchets and siege towers were not necessarily built to withstand the impact of cannon balls, nor were they designed to house cannon for their own defence. There is evidence that many castles were adapted to accommodate these new advances in weaponry, such as Threave Castle, in Dumfries and Galloway, where external ramparts were built to provide gun emplacements.From the 1600s onwards many castles were used primarily as a military garrison or barracks. Edinburgh Castle is still famously used by the British Army to this day.With a more settled society, there was less need for nobles to have a fortified residence with fashions at the time favouring the country house style, which became widely adopted.What is the most complete castle in Scotland today?Edinburgh and Stirling Castles have many of their Medieval and Renaissance buildings still intact, which have been refurbished to represent how they might have looked during these periods.Craigmillar Castle, located just outside Edinburgh, is an example of a well-preserved ruin and today it is much as it would have been when it fell out of use as a residence in the 1700s. Bothwell CastleFor more onthe secrets of Medieval warfare,pick up the new issue ofHistory of War here or subscribe now and save 25% off the cover price. 27th August 2014 By Frances White The superstitions concerning the playMacbethmean that many actors avoid saying its name while in a theatre. If an actor does utter the name of the famous Shakespeare play before a performance they are made to leave the building, spin around three times, spit, curse then knock before theyre allowed to return. The superstitions run so deep that even the opening lines are believed to be cursed and it is referred to strictly as The Scottish Play.The roots of the curse concern the supernatural elements of the play, with some legends stating that real-life witches and witchcraft were used in the original production, or even that real witches cursed the play as it revealed their secrets. Although theres no factual evidence for it, there are also rumours that actors appearing in the original production suffered terrible fates, with the actors playing Macbeth and Lady Macbeth dying either before or after the production. In one legend, a real dagger replaced the prop one, and its even said that Shakespeare himself cursed the play so that no one other than him could direct it.In reality, more actors have died in productions ofHamletthanMacbeth, and as Macbeth is an expensive play it had a habit of putting struggling theatres out of business, adding fuel to the curse. In 1849, a riot broke out during a performance and 31 people were trampled to death, and in 1942 three actors in a production died, with two others committing suicide. With such a string of disasters and mishaps, and considering the supernatural elements of the play, its no wonder that the cursed reputation of the play continues to this day.To find out the answers to other historical questions, pick up a copy of All About History now. Subscribe to All About History now for amazing savings! Two guards grabbed him tightly and dragged him down a stone corridor, his shackled legs meaning he was unable to keep up the frantic pace they had set. He was determined to show no sign of weakness and tried to concentrate on the senses around him, such as the rats scurrying by his feet, the insects crawling on the walls and the warmth on his face from the burning torches that illuminated the short path. How had things come to this? He was Robert Southwell, born into a good family and a man who devoted his life to God, being ordained a priest in 1584 in Rome. But what had been one of the best years of his life had also turned into one of the most bitter when later the same year, the Jesuits, etc Act had ordered all Roman Catholic priests to leave England. They were given 40 days grace to do so and many of his friends had hurriedly scrambled their belongings together and fled the island nation for friendlier shores. These were difficult times to be a Catholic in England. Pain ripped through his body as the guards swung him around a corner and flung open a new cell door for him. Looking at the horrible conditions his mind raced back. Damn that Henry VIII, he thought. Damn him and his desire for a male heir and his lust for Anne Boleyn that had seen him turn his back on the Catholic faith he had been brought up in. And damn that German monk Martin Luther whose actions had led the Protestant Reformation that had swept through Europe and ultimately been adopted throughout England. Southwell was levered inside the cramped, dank space. He recognised it from the descriptions of others whose fate had brought them here; it was Limbo, the most feared cell within Newgate Prison, inside a gate in the Roman London Wall. The door closed and the guards walked away. His heart beating wildly with fear, he reflected on his decision to leave Rome in 1586 to travel back to England to work as a Jesuit missionary, staying with numerous Catholic families, thus becoming a wanted man. Eventually, the door swung open and he was dragged out of his cramped cell. He could barely stand as he was taken to trial, hauled before Lord Chief Justice John Popham and indicted as a traitor. He defiantly laid out his position, admitted to being a priest and his sentence was passed. He was, Popham said, to be hanged, drawn and quartered. After being beaten on the journey through Londons streets he was forced to stand. His head was placed in a noose and he was briefly hanged. Cut down while still alive, his bowels were removed before his beating heart was dragged from his body and he was cut into four pieces. His severed head was held aloft. This was England in the late-16th century Queen Elizabeths religious compromise wasnt without its share of pain and suffering. This was the world William Shakespeare lived in as he wrote his great works. He had moved to London from Stratford-upon-Avon in 1587, leaving behind his young family to pursue a career as an actor and a playwright with the troupe Lord Stranges Men. He had married Anne Hathaway in 1582, when he was 18 and she was 26, and together they had three children, Susanna, Hamnet and Judith. But the lure of the stage had been too strong to ignore. It had not taken Shakespeare long to make a name for himself. His first play, Henry VI, Part 1, written in 1591, made its debut a year later. It was successful enough to make fellow playwrights jealous. One of them was Robert Greene, arguably the first professional author in England. Unlike Shakespeare, he was university educated and urged his friends not to give Shakespeare any work, calling him an upstart crow. Shakespeare was unmoved by such words. It would be, academics conferred later, a sign he was making his mark. By 1594, he had written more plays and seen both Venus and Adonis and The Rape of Lucrese published. He dedicated them to his patron Henry Wriothesley, the Earl of Southampton. He liked the Earl. Southampton was from a long Catholic dynasty and he appreciated poetry and theatre. When the theatres re-opened in 1594 following an outbreak of bubonic plague, he was keen to invite the Earl along. After all, Shakespeares new troupe, Lord Chamberlains Men, was becoming popular, with them even invited to perform in the royal court of Queen Elizabeth I. Shakespeare had also bought shares in Lord Chamberlains Men and was becoming a powerful and influential figure. The Reformation had changed Englands approach to religion, moving the country away from its Catholic roots and into the arms of Protestantism. But it had not been as peaceful a transition as is sometimes painted. Protest leaders who encouraged more than 30,000 priests, gentry and commoners to demand a return to Catholicism in 1536 had been executed. Two years later, reformers had banished the cult of saints, destroying shrines and banning the population of England from making pilgrimages. Riots in 1549 were repressed in the most vicious of ways the reformers would hang priests from church towers and lop off the heads of laymen who refused to obey the new order. All this affected the Bard; he wasnt writing in a bubble and nor were the actors who performed his work. Clare Asquith states in Shadowplay: the Hidden Beliefs and Coded Politics of William Shakespeare: Shakespeares family are thought to have been Catholics [] his early years would have echoed to angry discussions of the impact of fines and imprisonments, the liberties taken by the Queens commissioners, the wreckage under Edward and the wicked errors of the old King. Speaking out against the establishment was hard not least for those who wanted to keep their heads. Anyone wanting to put across another point of view had to be smart and Asquith believes the man who would go on to be Englands most celebrated poet and playwright rebelled and devised a secret code, inserting messages and double meaning into his writing. It isnt as outlandish as it may sound; cryptology had been used since ancient times and there were examples of secret codes being used in this time period. For example, it is known that Mary, Queen of Scots used a cipher secretary called Gilbert Curle to handle her secret correspondence. It wasnt entirely sophisticated, though, so her plot to overthrow Elizabeth was soon uncovered Catholic double agent Gilbert Gifford intercepted letters that had been smuggled out in casks of ale and reported them to Sir Francis Walsingham, who had created a school for espionage. For Catholics, certain words and key phrases stood out. For example, tempest or storm were used to signify Englands troubles, according to Asquith. So Shakespeare may well have been convinced he could change peoples view of the world by writing on an entertainment and political and religious level. First he had to work out exactly what message he wanted to put across. Philip II of Spain, who had married Mary I, felt Englands Catholics had been abandoned and there had long been a promise that, if the Catholics bided their time, help would come. Relations between Spain and England had declined to an all-new low. This culminated in the sailing of 122 ships from Spain in 1588 with the aim of the Spanish Armada being to overthrow Elizabeth I and replace the Protestant regime. The Armada was defeated but it had succeeded in creating further religious and political divisions, so the authorities were on even greater alert. Within this world Shakespeare got to work and, at first, kept things simple. My reading is that the early plays were light, comical, critical and oppositional, written for Lord Stranges Men, asserts Asquith. The earliest plays addressed political reunion and spiritual revival. Their plots related to divided families, parallels for an England cut in two. Asquith believes the Bard placed certain markers in his texts that signalled a second, hidden meaning. He would use opposing words such as fair and dark and high and low: fair and high being indications of Catholicism while dark and low would indicate Protestantism. Asquith takes this as reference to the black clothes worn by Puritans and to the high church services that would include mass as opposed to the low services that didnt. If this theory is true a matter of some debate then it enabled Shakespeare to get specific messages across, using characters to signify the two sides and by using words commonly associated with Catholic codes. For example, according to the theory, love is divided into human and spiritual and tempest refers to the turbulence of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation and the Bard used his own terms to disguise a message that was pro-Catholic. At the same time, Shakespeare was operating in establishment circles. He was drawn into the orbit of the court and wrote elegant pleas for toleration to Elizabeth, in the elaborate allegorical language she was used to, says Asquith. But England was becoming more violent again. Shakespeares patron, the Earl of Southampton, rebelled against Elizabeth I, becoming Robert, Earl of Essexs lieutenant in an attempt to raise the people of London against the government. The Essex faction had ordered a performance of the deposition play Richard II just before the rebellion and Shakespeares company had their work cut out afterward denying complicity. The plan ended in failure in 1601, but in that same year, Shakespeare wrote Hamlet, encouraging action against unjust rule. His more critical work supported the cause of the Earl of Essex against the [William] Cecil regime, says Asquith. If this is true, then Shakespeare really was one of the defining rebels of the period. Critics have said for decades that the writer was against populist rebellions and supported authority and the rule of law, but with the recent reassessment of the extent of dissidence at the end of Elizabeths reign, Shakespeares Elizabethan work begins to seem more oppositional, Asquith argues. What if the authority he upholds was not that of the breakaway Tudor state, but of the European church against which Henry VIII rebelled? she asks. What if he sympathised with the intellectual Puritan reformers, who felt secular monarchs like the Tudors had no business assuming spiritual authority over individual conscience? What if he, like so many contemporaries, opposed the destruction of the old English landscape, from the hostels, colleges, monasteries and hospitals to the rich iconography of churches to local roadside shrines and holy wells? It can be argued that the Bard personified England itself so that he could explore just why the ideas behind the Reformation had taken hold, presenting it as gullible and deluded, willing to turn its back on spiritual heritage, with the play Two Gentlemen Of Verona cited as evidence of this. The more elaborate plays retained the puns, wordplay and double meanings so beloved of audiences in Elizabethan times, but Asquith notes that some of Shakespeares characters came to be increasingly dramatic and allegorical; they had a hidden spiritual meaning that transcended the literal sense of the text. When King James assumed the throne in 1603, Catholics had assumed that he would lend them greater support than Elizabeth, given that his mother was a staunch Catholic. But that was not to be and Shakespeare must have been well aware of a growing political and religious resentment against the monarchy, with a feeling of rebellion growing. His plays in this period became more cynical, which some have speculated was a consequence of the world he was living in. Matters came to a head with an explosive event in 1605. Five conspirators, Guy Fawkes, Thomas Wintour, Everard Digby and Thomas Percy hired a cellar beneath the Houses of Parliament for a few weeks, spending time gathering gunpowder and storing it in their newly acquired space. Their plan was to blow the building sky high, taking parliamentarians and King James I with it. But their cover was blown and Guy Fawkes was taken away to be tortured into confession, the deadly rack being the instrument said to have broken him. He was sentenced to be hanged, drawn and quartered. At around the same time, Shakespeare wrote King Lear, Othello and Macbeth, all plays warning against unjust and persecuting rule, which many Catholics felt James I was guilty of. My own theory is that Shakespeare, though not an outright rebel, used his increasingly privileged position to address the court and the crown, both Elizabeth, and James, on the issue of religious toleration, Asquith asserts. He protested against the persecution and injustice perpetrated in the name of the monarch, and pleaded for religious toleration. Such an assessment revises the prevailing thinking that Shakespeare wrote universal plays and avoided any topicality. Some literary scholars remain hostile to the idea that the playwright was involved in the volatile religious issues of the day, but could he really have ignored what was going on around him? Its plausible that he wanted to do more than merely shake the literary world; he wanted to influence politics and religion, to affect his society. When he sat at his desk, overlooking the squalid, filthy conditions of London, William Shakespeare may have been looking out at a more enlightened nation than ever before, but is was still a city and a country where the screams of religious and political prisoners filled the corridors of cramped jail cells as torturers extracted forced confessions. This sobering reality was a stark reminder of the perils of religious divisions that continued throughout Shakespeares life. Was it a society that he rebelled against in his own way? The final and definitive answer to that, like some of the great mans work, is unfortunately lost to the ages. Originally published in All About History 84 Only 15 per cent of murders in Victorian Britain were committed by women. Females were more likely to be victims than perpetrators, and the few murders that were committedby women were mostly in self-defence against abusive partners. However, some of the grim tales of Victorian murderesses are among the most horrifying and grisly of the era.Julia Martha Thomas was known in her small community as an eccentric lady. She had amassed a decent amount of wealth from the death of two husbands and lived alone at 2 Vine Cottages, Park Road, Richmond. She believed she was a little wealthier than she was, and became somewhat obsessed with proving her elevated status. With such lofty opinions it was only right that she employ a maid. Thanks to her seemingly random travels, where she vanished for any length of time, she had trouble keeping a servant. Then in 1879, she met Kate Webster.Webster had a drastically different upbringing to her mistress. Born poor, she was accustomed to a hard life of minimum pay and minimum expectations. She was rumoured to have been married with four children, but all had died and the experience had forced her to become a strong, fierce, iron-willed woman. While Thomas was a small, frail, elderly lady, Webster was tall and well built, the two seemed polar opposites of each other. This physical difference soon manifested itself in their relationship. Thomas was known to have an excitable temperament, which meant Webster was often on the receiving end of harsh criticism. Webster said of her mistress:At first I thought her a nice old lady but I found her very trying, and she used to do many things to annoy me during my work. When I had finished my work in my rooms, she used to go over it again after me, and point out places where she said I did not clean, showing evidence of a nasty spirit towards me.But Webster was certainly no angel. According to Thomas she had a high and mighty persona, and she would often stumble home drunk and violent. Thomas admitted to friends that she didnt trust Webster, and this fear of her unpredictable maid led Thomas to ask friends to stay the night so she didnt have to be alone with her. In a society where attack from ones servant was a very legitimate fear, the nervy Thomas was right to be wary of her fiery maid. Kate Webster, the perpetrator of one of the most notorious crimes of the Victorian eraEnough was enough and Thomas finally gave Webster her notice. Her very last diary entry read: Gave Katherine warning to leave. Websters last day was supposed to be on the 28 February 1879, but she managed to persuade her mistress to let her stay three more days until 2 March. It would prove to be a fatal mistake.On 2 March Webster went out drinking. Her delayed return to the house meant that Thomas was late to a church service. Furious at her servants selfish actions, Thomas berated her and Webster flew into a mad, drunken rage. Thomas left to attend church, and returned at 9pm, but neither of the women had calmed down. Webster followed Thomas to her room and confronted her, the quarrel soon flaredinto a huge argument and, using her strength to her advantage, Webster threw her elderly boss from the top of the stairs to the ground floor.Websters rage transformed into panic. She was terrified that Thomas was going to scream and get her into trouble, as someone who had previously served time in prison she wasnt eager to return. She raced down the stairs and grabbed her throat to stop her screaming, and in a flurry of panic and anger Thomas was choked to death. Webster threw her lifeless body to the floor and rapidly began to formulate a plan.One fact was clear she needed to get rid of the evidence. The body would be too big and obvious to hide as it was, so she grasped a razor and used it to remove the head. Armed with a meat saw and a carving knife she cut up the remaining body parts into small, manageable pieces. Her next destination was the copper, usually used to wash laundry, she filled it with water and boiled it as if preparing to soak clothes. She sliced open Thomas stomach with a carving knife and boiled up as much of the contents and as many body parts as she could.The next day Webster methodically packed the cut up body parts into a box that, posing as a lady in need, she convinced a neighbour to help cast into the depths of the Thames. The mistress foot, however, was too big and Webster instead dumped it in a rubbish heap in Twickenham. The very next day the mysterious box was discovered, washed up near Barnes Bridge, the pieces were so mutilated that they were first believed to be butchers off cuts.Old Barnes Bridge where the remains of Mrs Thomaswere discovered.Rather than making a hasty escape, Webster made a very peculiar decision. She decided to take on the persona of the woman she had just brutally slaughtered. Dressed in her mistresss finest gown she posed as Thomas to visiting tradesmen, she even walked around town in her costume and attempted to pawn some of Thomas jewellery in the local shop. For the residents who had not seen Mrs. Thomas for a while, this was a very peculiar sight. However, Webster continued to push her luck and invited John Church, the proprietor of the local public house, to buy Thomas furniture.For the villagers, this was a step too far, and they finally went to the police. The authorities immediately raided the cottage, however Mrs. Thomas was nowhere to be found. Instead they made a grim discovery an axe and fragments of charred bones in the kitchen. Most peculiar of all was the scummy ring of fat around the edge of the copper.This is the point where legend intermingles with fact, the residents would later claim that Webster had made the rounds around the neighbourhood selling what they believed was dripping, but was actually the boiled fatty remains of their eccentric neighbour. One street urchin even claimed that Webster had offered him a bowl of the ghastly substance as an act of charity. Although these accounts were never proven in the trial, the chilling stories quickly swept the nation.Webster knew her number was up, she fled to Ireland, but was caught hiding in her uncles home. News of the grisly murder spread like wild fire through the British population, and there was huge interest when Webster was brought to trial at the old Bailey, even attracting royalty in the form of the crown prince of Sweden. Meanwhile, the quiet village in Richmond found itself flocked with tourists eager to glimpse the cottage where the infamous murder took place.The trial seemed an open and shut case. Madame Tussaudshad already started producing a waxwork of Webster to feature in their chamber of horrors before the verdict was issued. With a history of criminal behaviour, Webster didnt help her case by appearing stoic and emotionless in court very unbecoming of a Victorian woman who was expected to personify femininity. The newspapers leapt on this, portraying the heavily built and tall Webster as a savage beast and describing her as gaunt, repellent, and trampish-looking, the trial transcript is hardly better, where Webster is described as:Not merely savage, savage and shocking but the grimmest of grim personalities, a character so uniquely sinister and barbaric as to be hardly human.Despite how convinced everyone else was, Webster maintained her innocence the entire trial, she even blamed three guiltless men including John Church. She must have realised her situation was desperate as just before the sentence was to be declared, she proclaimed that she was pregnant. Confusion and panic spread through the courtroom and the court was forced to invoke an ancient legal device known as a court of matrons to determined if she was indeed quick with child.After examination it was declared that she was not pregnant after all and the death sentence was given. On the eve of her execution, Websters iron will finally broke. She admitted her guilt and gave a blow-by-blow account of her actions during and after the murder. Finally having confessed her sins, Webster was hung by William Marwood. As the black flag rose outside the goal, the eager crowd cheered and celebrated.Websters legend would continue for some time after her death. An auction of Thomas property the day after the hanging attracted a large crowd, even the copper used to boil down Thomas body was sold. Those unable to purchase a piece of property took pebbles and twigs from the garden as sombre souvenirs. Legends of the ghastly murder left the house where it all happened unoccupied for nearly another 20 years.The real mystery surrounding the case was what became of Thomas head. It wasnt found with the other body parts and it was presumed missing at the bottom of the Thames for more than100 years. However, in 2010, more than130 years after the sensational murder, the partly boiled remains of the skull were discovered, strangely enough, in the back garden of the English naturalist David Attenboroughs house. Webster herself was immortalised in the creepy waxwork effigy that stood in the chamber of horrors atMadame Tussaudswell into the 20th century.For moregruesome tales from the Victorian era,pick up the new issue of All About Historyor subscribe now and save 25% off the cover price.Sources:Crime and Punishment in Victorian London: A Street-Level of the Citys Underworld, Ross GilfillanUnderworld London: Crime and Punishment in the Capital City, Catherine Arnold Macbeth is one of William Shakespeares most famous works, having kept audiences spellbound with its tales of murder, betrayal and a sprinkling of the supernatural for centuries. It tells of an ambitious noble whose lust for power sees him kill his friend and king to gain the throne, spurred on by a prophecy from a trio of witches and his ruthless wife. Macbeths treachery sees his enemies come back for revenge and he dies alone and friendless at the end.We do not know a lot about the real Macbeth, who lived from 1005-1057. But what records we have suggest his rise to the throne, while quite different to Shakespeares tragedy, was no less bloody. We find a man whose ambition drove him to become ruler of the kingdom of Moray and then the whole of Scotland a feat achieved over the slain bodies of his enemies. The Bard didnt have to look hard to find drama and intrigue, but he did not tell the whole story. Macbeth was not as underhanded as his literary counterpart. He also ruled a strong and stable Scotland for almost a decade, putting it on the European map as a place of international renown.King Macbeth, in a portrait painted in 1680 long after he (and Shakespeare) had died.Scotland in the 11th century was much different to the one we know today, made up of a patchwork of loosely connected kingdoms. Alba was the largest and most central state. The seafaring Jarldom of Orkney, ruled by the Lord of the Isles, encompassed the Outer Hebrides and the northern tip of the mainland. Strathclyde made up the area running from Glasgow to Penrith. Moray, where Macbeths family ruled, included Inverness and Aberdeenshire.It is impossible to ascertain exactly how these kingdoms interacted with each other, but many historians think that each was ruled autonomously by a ruler that was subservient to an overarching king of Scotland. This system would have been similar to the Irish high kings of the same period. Ruling from his seat in Alba, Malcolm II was the high king of Scotland when Macbeth was born.Generations of war and dynastic conflict had seen Scotlands crown pass from brother to brother rather than the more familiar primogeniture, which hands the crown down from father to son. With many Scottish kings in the 10th and 11th centuries being killed by their rivals, this system ensured that someone was always ready to rule without the number of claimants to the throne growing ever larger.However, Malcolm was a powerful figure in the region. Killing his predecessor, Kenneth III in 1005, and allegedly securing his territory by defeating a Northumbrian army at the Battle of Carham (around 1016), he not only confirmed the Scottish hold over the land between the rivers Forth and Tweed but also secured Strathclyde about the same time. As savvy a politician as he was a general, Malcolm saw the Norman feudal system down south and decided to defy tradition. He would, from now on, pass the crown directly to his heir. He set about removing all the rival claimants to the throne in a very direct way by killing them. Its highly probable Macbeth was Malcolms younger cousin, so he was lucky to survive this cull. Malcolm is Medieval Scotlands only real example of a serial killer. His consolidation of power was arguably far worse than anything the real Macbeth ever did.Malcolm II in a blood red outfit fitting for the man who had so many killedA major flaw in Malcolms plan, though, was that there is no evidence of him actually fathering a son, only daughters. Instead, his grandson Duncan would inherit his crown, becoming Duncan I. This is the supposedly good king Macbeth betrays in Shakespeares play.The kingdom of Moray was ruled by a mormaer, meaning high steward, and was the position held by Macbeths father Findlaech, or Findley. This means Macbeths name was quite unusual. Mac usually means son of like Macduff would mean son of Duff but as Macbeths father was called Findley his name meant son of life. In later life, Macbeth would be known by another name, The furious Red One, presumably given for his prowess on the blood-splattered battlefield.Despite Malcolm II being the high king, Findley clearly didnt respect him as he sent a constant stream of raiding parties into his territory. This outward show of aggression was tempered by an internal feud when Findley was usurped and murdered by his nephew Gille Coemgin. The new ruler of Moray would then go on to marry a Scottish princess, Gruoch from the line of Kenneth III, who Malcolm had killed to assume power. As well as inheriting Moray, their son Lulach could make a claim for the high kingship. While this might have placed the boy in Malcolms crosshair, Macbeth got in the way. Findleys son wanted to retake Moray. In 1032, Gille Coemgin and 50 or so of his followers were locked in a hall that was set alight, roasting all those inside. While there is some ambiguity as to who ordered the killing, Macbeth stood as the one to benefit most. The fire saw Macbeths opposition die gruesomely and he now stood as uncontested ruler in Moray. Shrewdly, Macbeth also married Gillecomgins widow and took her son as his ward. This is one of the few examples of Macbeth displaying the sort of underhandedness that Shakespeare would make him synonymous with.No sooner was Macbeth king of Moray, he had to look to his northern borders to combat the growing power of Earl Thorfinn the Mighty. The Norse Orkneyinga Saga names Karl Hundason as the king of Scots and relates Thorfinns struggles with him to assert his control over the northernmost points of Scotland, namely Caithness and Sutherland. Hundason has been suggested to be Macbeth, although the reason for the ambiguity is unknown. If true, Macbeth failed to take away Thorfinns positions on the mainland, but as the Norse jarl got his nickname from his massive frame and skill in battle, he may have been out of his league.The Norse Orkneyinga Saga is a fantastic contemporary source about the history of ScotlandWhen Duncan took the crown in 1034, Macbeth may have seen a chance to extend his sphere of influence and gain the throne of all of Scotland. Duncan was seen as an ineffectual ruler, being described as a man promoted well beyond his station a far cry from the fearsome Malcolm II. Our understanding of Duncans reign as peaceful comes largely from the play, but it seems that Shakespeare cherry-picked the good aspects and left out the drudgery to better place the king as a counterpoint to Macbeths tyranny and ambition.Duncan I met his end at Macbeths hand, but the deed was not done in the dead of night in a bedchamber. The two met on the battlefield in 1040, near Elgin, and Duncan was slain. Whether it was Macbeth who did the deed is unknown, but some poetic licence can see this confrontation being a dramatic showdown.The British Isles have a history of royal usurpers and Macbeth certainly fits the category. Many of the kings before him had taken the throne by brute force. In fact, violent succession was so commonplace in Scotland at the time that Duncan Is peaceful coronation was somewhat of an oddity. Aside from having killed Duncan, Macbeth could also claim lineage to the Scottish throne through his mothers bloodline and, of course, his stepson Lulach. His claim was strong enough that he was crowned with no opposition. After his death, Duncans son another Malcolm would flee the country.Once king, Macbeth faced very little opposition for much of his reign. However, having clashed with the Jarl of Orkney as the ruler of Moray, his kingship was contested in 1045 by Duncan Is father, Crinn, abbot of Dunkeld. This powerful man could have been a real thorn in Macbeths side, but after a brief and violent struggle Crinn and 180 of his men lay dead. This was not an age of pitched battles in Scotland and many of the conflicts fought by Macbeth would have been on a much smaller scale to, say, the Battle of Hastings, which was fought in 1066 about a decade after his death.Crinns rebellion was Malcolm IIs bloodline trying to reassert itself and place the future Malcolm III on the throne. Just as in the play, Macbeth had won the crown by bloodshed, and the dead were coming back to haunt him. However, after seeing this rebellion off, Macbeth did something no other king of Scotland had ever done: he went on a pilgrimage to Rome. This journey could have taken months, so this meant he must have been confident enough in the strength and stability of his reign that he did not fear usurpation. Macbeth was invited to a papal jubilee hosted by Pope Leo IX.While in Rome, Macbeth scattered money like seed to the poor, implying he possessed great wealth. Scotland was flourishing, or at least not in financial trouble under his kingship. Macbeths visit to Rome also indicates a knowledge of the wider world and that Scotland was firmly on the European map during his kingship.Pope Leo IX welcomed Macbeth to the VaticanIn a further sign that Scotland was open to international business, Macbeths reign also saw the first mention of Normans in Scotland when he took two into his service in 1052. Having left Edward the Confessor, two knights, Osbern and Hugh, joined Macbeths military council. Unfortunately, their impact in campaigns in opposition to the Normans reputation for military prowess was negligible and they were killed at Dunsinane. This was the beginning of trouble on Macbeths southern borders.The battle, as in the play, saw a massive, well-equipped army march north from England led by Siward, the powerful Earl of Northumbria. While Birnam Wood did not uproot itself, as Shakespeare artfully put it, some 3,000 Scots and 1,500 English lay dead at the end of the day a massive butchers bill for the era. Although he survived the fight, Macbeths kingdom had a chunk taken out of it as Siward crowned Duncans exiled heir as king of Strathclyde. The death of Siward a year later must have filled Macbeth with hope, but this would be short lived.Malcolm Canmore, the future Malcolm III, was seeking revenge for his fathers death and had his eyes set on the crown. He marched into Scotland in 1057 and surprised Macbeth and his men at Lumphanan in Aberdeenshire. He may have come from Orkney as he was married to Thorfinn the Mightys widow, whose past conflicts with Moray would see no love lost between the two. Macbeths enemies were uniting against him.With his forces Malcolm cornered Macbeth at Lumphanan and after a fierce fight saw the former fall on the battlefield. It seems fitting that Macbeths death came by the sword of Duncan Is son, the child of the very man he killed to take the crown. Perhaps this overwhelming sense of poetic justice is what convinced Shakespeare to choose just this king to write his play about.Macbeths Stone in Lumphanan village is said to be where the ruthless ruler was killedBut Malcolm didnt take the throne straight away. Lulach, Macbeths stepson with the noble heritage, was taken to Scone by loyal followers and crowned king after his stepfather. However, the reign of Lulach known as the Unlucky or by less generous chroniclers, the Idiot was destined to be short-lived, as just four months later Malcolm would slay him at Essie in 1058 and take the throne as Malcolm III.However, Medieval Scottish history is murky. An alternative tale sees Lulach and Malcolm combine their forces to take vengeance on Macbeth, the man who had killed both their fathers. After his death, Malcolm may have then rounded on his ally and taken the throne for himself. Whatever the actions, Malcolm III emerged victorious and ended Macbeths line for good.Macbeths actions were not unusual for a Scottish king in this era of blood and strife, but his story is certainly made all the more famous as a result of Shakespeares dramatic attentions. While not the tyrant portrayed in the play, Macbeth claimed the throne through ruthless force, carving out a reign in a bloody and turbulent time in Scottish history.We get a feel that Macbeth was a capable ruler and a man of ambition, taking revenge against his fathers killers to rule Moray by exploiting the political stage and using his military might to take the Scottish throne. While he was able to rule with impunity for a number of years, the feuds created by his actions came back to haunt him and he died at the hands of men hellbent on revenge.This article first appeared in All About History issue 58. Buy the new issue here or subscribe now. On the hunt for the perfect gift for the history-loving people in your life? Then youve come to the right place. We have a range of books, trinkets, experiences and more to recommend you. Regardless of how deep your pockets go, youll find something here to make them smile when they unwrap their presents this year. And, of course, you could always consider a subscription to your favourite history magazine as an option Find the latest deals at MagazinesDirect.com. 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