

Somerled, King of the Isles and Man

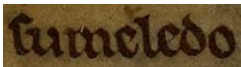


For hundreds of years, scholars, antiquarians, and clan historians have debated as to whether or not Somerled was Norse, Celtic, or a mixture of the two. DNA testing for clans known to have descended from Somerled—the MacDonalds, MacDougals, MacDonnells, MacRorys, and MacAllisters—show that Somerled’s DNA was, in fact, Scandinavian.[\[1\]](#)

This has been a bitter pill for some to swallow—including me, as I have long identified with Scotland by way of my Scottish mother—but I think a Clan Donald writer has come to the proper conclusion: “No genetic discovery, or conclusions drawn from [the DNA study], can change the millennia of our ancestors’ Celtic culture” [emphasis mine].[\[2\]](#)

That said, my purpose here is not so much to look at genetics or culture, but simply to look at Somerled from a historical and genealogical point of view, since the man does show up on my family tree. I must, however, remain humble about the presence of the great hero on my tree, since Professor Bryan Sykes, who did the DNA study, states that the “Genghis Khan effect” may be at play in Scotland’s genetic history. Just as “a staggering 16 million” men alive today in Asia carry the Y-chromosome of the ancient Mongol emperor,[\[3\]](#) Somerled’s Y-chromosome is also shared by *many millions* of Scotsmen and their kin who have migrated around the globe.

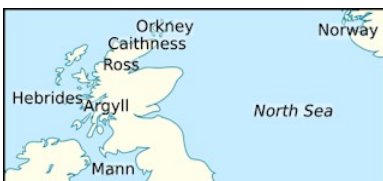
I feel compelled to comment on Somerled’s name, as it also has been the subject of much dispute. Before DNA testing came along, those who argued about Somerled’s ancestry would ground their debate on the proper understanding of his name—especially in view of the fact that the writers of ancient chronicles, sagas, and Latin histories have left a tangled and confused mess for the rest of us.



Somerled's name in a Latin manuscript

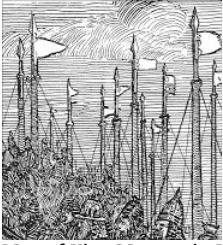
The Clan Donald writer explains that the Gaelic spelling of the sea king’s name was *Somhairlidh*, which, on the basis of spelling alone, was romanized to *Somerledo* by the Latin writers of the Middle Ages. He explains the pronunciation of the Gaelic name *Somhairlidh* would more correctly be rendered in the Roman alphabet as *Sorley* and further insists that both the spelling and the principles of Gaelic pronunciation prove that the name is clearly Celtic, not Norse. Indeed, some today do write the man’s name as *Somhairle*, to account for this pronunciation of the last syllable.

On the other hand, in 1912, someone writing for those with Scandinavian interests asserted unequivocally, “The name Somerled is Norse. Sumarliði [in Old Norse, Sumarliði] means “summer slider”—i.e., Viking but from a nickname; it had become a regular personal name at least a hundred years before our hero was born.”[\[4\]](#) Each of us must decide, I suppose, which interpretation to embrace.



Since this story involves a lot of Norwegians and Celts roaming around and fighting in the northern seas, a quick look at a map of the region is in order. The Isle of Man is located in the Irish Sea between England and Ireland, while the Hebrides are located to the north of Ireland and to the west of Scotland. The Orkney Isles are located north of Scotland and west of Norway. Imagine yourself sailing west from Norway in a Viking longboat on a somewhat gamma-shaped route (Г). This sea path would lead you westward between the Orkneys and Scotland until you turned south and sailed down the west coast of Scotland past the Hebrides to Ireland and the Isle of Man. It is this route that was the major conduit for Norse adventurers in the Early Middle Ages.

The Hebrides first became an object of Norse ambition in 794 with the Viking raids on Iona and Skye. Then, in 872, Harald Fairhair, who had been warring with other Scandinavians, managed to take control of all Norway. This may have made Harald happy, but his Scandinavian enemies were forced to flee to the west, where they settled in Scotland and the isles. When these folks later took to raiding their old stomping grounds, Harald Fairhair tried to put a stop to their high jinx by taking control of Orkney and the Hebrides himself.



Men of King Magnus in Ireland

His mistake was in returning to Norway, allowing his enemies to re-gain their foothold there. Harald then sent a fellow known by the colorful name of Kettil Flatnose to hold the islands on his behalf, though whether Kettil had lasting control is a matter of debate.

About a century later, in 1098, Norway's King Magnus III also responded to the siren call of power in the western islands in the Irish Sea. After subduing them, he took Orkney on his way back to Norway. These victories ultimately forced King Edgar of Scotland to recognize Magnus as King of the Isles, officially ceding Scotland's claim to the islands to Norway at long last.

This brings us close to the time of Somerled's birth, which scholars believe was in 1113 or thereabouts. Constant warfare had long plagued the Hebrides, and at the time Somerled came to manhood, things were no different.

Somerled's father, Gillebride, is traditionally considered by the Scots to be a valorous Gael working tirelessly to throw off the rule of the Norse in the Isles. Before Somerled's birth, however, Gillebride had fled to the mainland, seeking refuge from the Norse on Morvern, a peninsula in Argyll. Since Gillebride's name comes down to us as *Gillebride na h-uaimh* (Gillebride of the Caves), he is naturally considered to have been hiding out in the caves that abound in the area, in much the same way as St. Columba had once inhabited the Keil Caves in the same region.



Keil Cave

At this time in his life, Somerled was yet untroubled by the life of a warrior king. As an ancient chronicle put it, he was “a well-tempered man in body, shapely, of a fair and piercing eye, of middle stature and quick discernment. . . . His looking glass was the stream; his drinking cup the heel of his shoe; he would rather spear a salmon than spear a foe; he cared more to caress the skins of seals and otters than the shining hair of women. At present, he was as peaceful as a torch or beacon unlit. The hour was coming when he would be changed, when he would blaze like a burnished torch or a beacon on a hilltop against which the wind is blowing.”^[5]

The hour the chronicler predicted arrived in 1153. Few details are known regarding how Somerled was roused from his halcyon days, but the *Chronicle of Holyrood* records that on November 6 of that year, “Sumerled [*sic*], and his nephew, that is to say, the sons of Malcolm, having taken to themselves many associates, rebelled against king Malcolm, and caused grievous disturbances over the greater part of Scotland.”^[6]

So, what was that all about?

Scotland's king, David I, had naturally considered that his son Henry, Earl of Northumberland, would become the next king of Scots. However, Henry died about a year before his father, causing David to name his grandson as his successor, and this lad took the throne as Malcolm IV at age twelve in 1153. This is the “king Malcolm” named in the chronicle.



David I and Malcolm IV

So, who was the other Malcolm, and what were his sons up to?

The other Malcolm was Malcolm MacEth, an illegitimate son of King Alexander I (b. 1097). He had married a sister of Somerled, which, of course, made the two brothers-in-law. Now, as the son of Alexander I, he was the nephew of King David I (c. 1083-1153), and David had never taken kindly to his illegitimate nephew. Someone with royal blood was always a potential threat to the ruling monarch in the Middle Ages. Malcolm MacEth, though illegitimate, would naturally have thought himself the rightful heir to the throne upon Alexander's death, while David, viewing Malcolm through the cold eyes of the law, considered himself the rightful and *legitimate* heir of his brother Alexander. In 1134, David captured Malcolm MacEth and imprisoned him at Roxburgh Castle.



Reconstruction of Roxburgh Castle (15th century) by Andrew Spratt

As often happened amongst claimants to a medieval throne, Malcolm's son, Donald MacEth, saw his opportunity for revenge when King David died and a boy-king came to the throne. This Donald was the nephew of Somerled referenced in the *Chronicle of Holyrood*. He and Somerled rose up against King Malcolm late in 1153, as the Chronicle states, and continued their campaign until 1156, when Somerled was embroiled in the affairs of the Isles. Donald was captured and imprisoned with his father around this time, though 1157 found them all friends again when King Malcolm released both of the MacEths from prison and made Malcolm MacEth the first Earl (or Moramaer) of Ross.

So, what was going on in the Isles at this time?



Lewis chessman

1153 was not only the year when King David died; it was also the year that Olaf Godredsson, King of the Isles, was killed. Olaf was the youngest son of Godred Crovan, founder of the Crovan dynasty which held sway as Norse kings of Man and the Isles from late in the eleventh century to about the middle of the thirteenth century. Olaf had two colorful nicknames: to the Scots, he was known as Olaf the Red; to the Norwegians, Olaf Bitling (or, as they might put it on the rodeo circuit, Olaf Little Bit—apparently he was short).

Despite these affectionate names, he was not able to forestall an uprising on the part of his own nephews. The *Chronicle of Man* narrates the tale:

Three sons of Harold, the brother of Olave [Olaf], who had been brought up in Dublin, assembling a large body of men, and among them all the refugees from the dominions of Godred, came to Man, and demanded from the king one half of the whole kingdom of the Isles for themselves. The king having heard their application, and being desirous to pacify them, answered that he would take advice on the subject. When the day and place for holding a meeting had been agreed upon, these most wicked men spent the interval in planning the death of the king. On the appointed day both parties met at

the port called Ramsey, and sat down in order, the king and his followers on one side, and they with theirs on the other. Reginald, the second brother, who was to give the fatal blow, stood apart, speaking to one of the chiefs of the country. On being summoned to approach the king, turning to him as if in the act of saluting, he raised his gleaming battleaxe on high, and at a blow cut off the king's head. As soon as this atrocious act was perpetrated they divided the country between them. [7]



Reconstruction of a Danish longboat from this period

But this was not an end to the story. Vengeance was on the horizon, as it almost always was among the warlords of the time. The chronicler continues:

In the following autumn Godred, his son, came from Norway with five ships, and put in at the Orkneys. All the chiefs of the Isles were rejoiced when they heard of his arrival, and assembling together, unanimously elected him for their king. Godred then came to Man, seized the three sons of Harold, and, to avenge his father's murder, awarded them the death they deserved. Another story is that he put out the eyes of two of them, and put the third to death.

While ruling as King of Man and the Isles, Godred was asked by the Dublin men to come to be their king, which did not at all please Murrough, King of Ireland. Godred was able to triumph over Murrough, then returned to Man, where, the chroniclers say, he grew rather full of himself:

When he now found himself secure on his throne, and that no one could oppose him, he began to act tyrannically towards his chiefs, depriving some of their inheritances, and others of their dignities. Of these, one named Thorfinn, son of Oter, more powerful than the rest, went to Somerled, and begged for his son Dugald, that he might make him king over the Isles. Somerled, highly gratified by the application, put Dugald under the direction of Thorfinn, who received and led him through all the islands, subjecting them all to him, and taking hostages from each.

Once Godred got wind of Somerled's scheme, the fight was on. A naval battle was prepared and fought, but matters came to a draw apparently, as after only one day, Somerled and Godred agreed to divide the islands among them. Now, the *Chronicle of Man*, which serves as historians' main source of information about the history of the isles, was written by monks at Rushen Abbey, whose founder was Godred's father. Therefore, we can hardly be surprised that the monk who wrote the account, perhaps a hundred years later, clinched his narrative with this jab: "Thus was the kingdom of the Isles ruined from the time the sons of Somerled got possession of it."



Rushen Abbey

Ruined, indeed, for two short years later, Somerled broke his truce with Godred, who fled to Norway, leaving Somerled the undisputed King of Man and the Isles.

The next we hear of Somerled in the chronicles is the narrative of his death. The *Chronicle of Melrose* reports, under the year 1164:

"Sumerled, the under-king of Eregeithel [i.e., Argyll], who had been in a state of wicked rebellion for twelve years against his natural lord, Malcolm, king of Scotland, landed at Renfrieu [Renfrew], with a large army which he had collected together in Ireland and various other places." [8]

As before, we see that the monks don't have much favorable to say about Somerled. It isn't that the man was a pagan or an atheist. There was church building and support for monasteries in his regions, notably Saddell Abbey, a Cistercian center in Argyll (built probably by Somerled's son Ranald, though some say by Somerled himself). Moreover, his daughter Bethoc (Beatrix) was prioress of Iona, no small honor. Someone probably needs to undertake a study of Somerled's religious leanings by comparing the places he supported with the places that seemed not to like the man at all.



Ruins of Saddell Abbey

At any rate, the story of Somerled's demise was written down in poetic form in "The Song of the Death of Somerled," a Latin poem written by a monk who identifies himself as William at the end of the work. The poem is an account of the Battle of Renfrew, which occurred in 1164, not far from Glasgow. Alex Woolf of the University of St. Andrews has written a persuasive article which suggests that the first twenty-four lines of the poem are actually a narrative of Somerled's 1153 invasion, depicting an attack on Glasgow in which Kentigern, the patron saint of the city, is dishonored by the Isleman's sack of the place.^[9] If so, then we see the latter half of the poem as St. Kentigern's long-awaited vindication.

The poem tells how Herbert, bishop of Glasgow, "venerable and praiseworthy," hearing of Somerled's return, "at once spurned his bed, and set out immediately on a journey, night and day, as if a young man . . . to free and save himself from the hand of hateful Somerled, repulsive with fraud, most savage of enemies. . . ."^[10]



Reproduction of Walter FitzAlan's Seal

It is known that Somerled had arrived with an army of 15,000 in a flotilla of 160 Hebridean birlinns. King Malcolm's army was led by Walter FitzAlan, High Steward of Scotland, with Scoto-Norman knights and men-at-arms. In the poem, however, Somerled is engaged by Bishop Herbert and his "innocent one hundred." Somerled falls "in the first crack of battle . . . wounded by a spear, felled by a sword." With him falls his son, Gillecillum. Though William's statement that "none of those fighting against them was killed or wounded" stretches credulity, Somerled's army did scatter once their leader's death was known. But William tells the ending best:

*And so with the troops of the enemy driven off and mocked,
the whole kingdom praised Kentigern with loud voices.
The cleric cut off the head of unhappy Somerled, and
gave it into the hands of the bishop:
as he was accustomed, he wept piously, when he saw
the head of his enemy, saying that the Scottish saints should surely be praised.
And he delivered the victory to blessed Kentigern:
Hold his memory always, and fittingly.*

With Somerled's head in Herbert's hand, the balance of the universe had been restored, at least in the mind of the bishop and his beloved Glaswegians.

It was a vicious age, and men both won their kingdoms and lost them through conquest. The Norse eventually re-established themselves in Somerled's territories, wresting control from his son Dugald, but the history of Scotland became, in large part, the history of Somerled as so many of Scotland's great men have had their origins in him. Perhaps the great Scottish author Sir Walter Scott conveys Scotland's memory of Somerled best in his poem, "Lord of the Isles," set 150 years after the fall of Somerled in the days of Robert the Bruce when Somerled's descendant, Ronald, is to be wed:

*The heir of mighty Somerled!
Ronald from many a hero sprung,
The fair, the valiant, and the young,*

LORD OF THE ISLES, whose lofty name
A thousand bards have given to fame,
The mate of monarchs, and allied
On equal terms with England's pride.—
From chieftain's tower to bondsman's cot,
Who hears the tale and triumphs not?^[11]

[1] *Saxons, Vikings, and Celts: The Genetic Roots of Britain and Ireland*. New York: Norton, 2006. 126. Web. 18 Jan. 2016.

[2] "It Began with Somerled: Origins (Part 3)." *Clan Donald Heritage*. n.d. Web. 18 Jan. 2016.

[3] *Saxons*. 126.

[4] R. L. B. "Somerled of the Hebrides." *American Scandinavian*. Mar. 1912. 5.143. Web. 18 Jan. 2016.

[5] James Henry Lee. *History of the Clan Donald, the Families of MacDonald, McDonald and McDonnell*. New York: Polk, 1920. 15. *Google Books*. n.d. Web. 19 Jan. 2016.

[6] *The Chronicle of Holyrood* in *The Church Historians of England*. Trans. Joseph Stevenson. London: Seeleys, 1853. 73. *Internet Archive*. 24 July 2006. Web. 19 Jan. 2016.

[7] *The Chronicle of Man and the Sudreys*. Ed. P. A. Munch. Trans. Alexander Goss. Douglas: Manx Society, 1874. Web. 20 Jan. 2016. (Note: Some of the dates in the chronicle were placed at 15 years or so before the actual date.)

[8] *The Chronicle of Melrose* in *The Church Historians of England*. Trans. Joseph Stevenson. London: Seeleys, 1853. 130. *Internet Archive*. 24 July 2006. Web. 30 Jan. 2016.

[9] "The Song of the Death of Somerled and the Destruction of Glasgow in 1153." *Academia*. n.d. Web. 30 Jan. 2016.

[10] "Song of the Death of Somerled." Trans. Helen Foxfall Forbes. *Academia*. n. d. Web. 30 Jan. 2016.

[11] *The Poems and Plays of Sir Walter Scott*. Ed. Ernest Rhys. London: Dent, n.d. 2.297. 2 Apr. 2009. Web. 30 Jan. 2016.