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Impressions of a Twelfth-Century Maritime Ruler - Somerled: Viking Warrior, Clan Chieftain or Traitor to the Scottish King?

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SCANDINAVIAN SCOTLAND in the Viking Age and the central Middle Ages has provoked much interest from scholars and the general public alike. Our picture of this region and the precise nature of cultural interaction is rather murky and debated, due to the lack of detailed contemporary sources; this perhaps makes it all the more tempting to latch onto specific individuals and stories.

The death of the warrior and ruler Somerled in 1164 at the Battle of Renfrew puts him outside most definitions of the Viking Age.[1] The eleventh to thirteenth centuries have been termed the 'Second Scandinavian Period' by A W Moore and they have also been dubbed the Late Norse period. As R A McDonald puts it, 'Too late for students of the Viking Age, and too marginal for mainstream histories of England, Scotland, Ireland and Scandinavia this is a period which has long been neglected by scholars'.[2] This paper examines how different sources have viewed the character and career of one figure from this period who was active in Scotland and in the Insular Viking zone: Somerled.[3] It discusses Somerled's appearances in *Cronica regum Mannie et*

1 The end of the Viking Age has been traditionally (and rather Anglo-centrically) been dated to 1066: the death of the Norwegian king Haraldr *harðráði* ('Harsh ruler') at the Battle of Stamford Bridge and the advent of Norman rule of England following the Battle of Hastings

2 McDonald 2015, 334.

3 Finding the 'Irish Sea region' and similar terms too restrictive, Etchingham prefers the 'Insular Viking zone' for the area of Scandinavian activity and influence within the Insular world, as it also includes the Western and Northern Isles (2001, 145). Somerled or Sorley is an anglicisation of the Gaelic 'Somhairle' or Norse 'Sumarliði'; the name's origins are discussed below.

Insularum ('The Chronicle of the Kings of Man and the Isles'), the Irish annals, *Orkneyinga saga*, the Book of Clanranald, the Chronicle of Melrose, and *Carmen de morte Sumerledi* ('Song on the Death of Somerled') – sources which are seldom integrated. His legacy was utilised for political and dynastic ends, from justifying the claims of his descendants to being vilified as a traitorous rebel. As a result of competing impressions of Somerled in these sources, in the modern imagination he is seen as a heroic remnant of the 'Viking Age' or as a Gaelic defender against viking forces.

First, a brief overview of Somerled's career is necessary to provide context and comparison for the various textual portrayals. He began as ruler of Argyll, which at this stage extended to the borders of Ross in the north, but he was able to expand his power over the years through a mixture of opportunism, alliances and military success. Somerled had allied himself with the Manx ruling dynasty by marrying Ragnhild, daughter of King Olaf of Man and the Isles. But it seems that Somerled's expansion into the Western Isles was curtailed until after the death of Olaf in 1153 and the succession of his unpopular son Godfred. *Cronica regum Mannie et Insularum*, which was completed at Rushen Abbey on Man in 1257 with later additions, records that the people, particularly the nobility, of Man and the Hebrides asked for Somerled to supply his son to be their king:

> One of them called Thorfinn, son of Ottar, more powerful than the rest, went to Somerled and requested from him his son Dougal, that he should make him king over the Isles. Somerled was very much pleased to hear this request and handed his son Dougal over to him, who took and conducted him through all the Isles. He subjected them all to his sway and received hostages from each island.[4]

This voluntary request for assistance was perhaps a more agreeable version of events to the Manx than what might in reality have been something closer to intimidation or conquest. The fact that the people of Man requested – or were more content to be nominally ruled by – his son rather than Somerled himself was presumably due to Dugald's descent from Ragnhild, daughter

4 Cronica Regum Manniae et Insularum (f.37v ed. and trans. Broderick). Turning to Somerled for leadership, rather than to Ireland, may be seen as part of a reaction against the increasing influence of Muirchertach mac Lochlainn of Cenél nEógain in Dublin and the Isles. Somerled was perhaps 'the one man with the power and ambition to challenge Muirchertach for domination of the western seas' (Oram 2011, 120).

of Olaf, which gave him a more legitimate claim to the Manx throne.[5] Irish sources refer to Somerled rather than his son as *ri Innse Gall* ('king of the Isles of the Foreigners'), referring to Man and the Hebrides, which suggests that he was seen as the figure of authority. It was not an uncommon practice for a king in this period to give a male relative a particular province as an appanage. [6]

It was Somerled who led a large naval force against his brother-in-law Godred in 1156, which resulted in the division of the kingdom:

> In the year 1156 a naval battle was fought on the night of the Epiphany (6 January; Friday) between Godred and Somerled and there was much slaughter on both sides. When day dawned they made peace and divided the kingdom of the Isles between them. The kingdom has existed in two parts from that day up until the present time, and this was the cause of the break-up of the kingdom from the time the sons of Somerled got possession of it.[7]

The *Cronica* is clearly unhappy with this situation, which continued after Somerled's death, and suggests that the blame lies with his descendants. In general this source supports the descendants of the ousted Godred Olafsson (or Guðrøðr Óláfsson), favouring them over the rival dynastic segment Clann Somhairle (Somerled's descendants), whose claim to the kingship of Man and the Isles derived from their descent from Ragnhild, daughter of Olaf.[8] Alex Woolf notes that the core of the *Cronica* was 'effectively the official history of that Gofraid's [Godred's] branch of the dynasty'.[9] It is therefore no surprise that its presentation of Somerled would not be favourable. This is unfortunate

5 This request for a ruler is reminiscent of Chronicle's similar account of the events following the death of Lagmann in 1095 (s.a. 1075) after which 'all the noblemen of the Isles' asked Muirchertach Ua Briain, the most powerful king in Ireland at the time, to send 'some active man of royal stock to act as regent' and he supplied them with Domnall mac Taidc (ed. and transl., Broderick, f.33v, pp. 11–12). Domnall was Muirchertach's nephew, but perhaps more pertinently Muirchertach's brother Tadc had married a daughter of Echmharcach mac Ragnaill, so their sons also had a more direct, hereditary claim to rule in Man and the Isles than the more powerful Muirchertach. This dynastic aspect provides another parallel to the installation of Dugald. For discussion of this earlier episode and Uí Briain involvement in the region, see Duffy 1992, 109.

6 For example, Edgar, king of Scots, bequeathed his brother an appanage, which was referred to as Cumbria, in southern Scotland, including the territory of the former kingdom of Strathclyde, to help aid his succession as future David I of Scotland (see Duncan 2000, 134).

7 Cronica Regum Manniae et Insularum (f.37v ed. and trans. Broderick). Godred was later forced into exile in Norway and did not return until after the death of Somerled.

8 Indeed, further, it supports the family of Godred, and more particularly favours the descendants of Olaf Dubh over those of his brother Reginald, since it was compiled in the reign of Magnus Olafsson.

9 Woolf 2005, 211.

since it is our only historical source covering the region in detail, with the history of Argyll and Scotland's western seaboard even less well documented.

Unsurprisingly given the insufficient source material, Somerled's own origins are quite obscure. The name 'Somerled', originally 'Sumarliði' in Old Norse, which was rendered 'Somhairle' in Gaelic, means 'summer traveller' or 'summer warrior'. It is a kenning, that is a poetic circumlocution, for a 'viking', since raiding expeditions usually happened in the summer months due to sea voyages being more hazardous in winter weather conditions. It was therefore not originally a personal name but it had become so by the end of the tenth century.[10] Interestingly Sumarliði is not found as a personal name in mainland Scandinavia itself but appears to have been restricted to Scandinavian settlements in Britain, Ireland and the North Atlantic.[11] Presumably these are the areas where summer expeditions were more common or whose communities had begun as raiders.

Scholars are agreed that Somerled's father was Gillebrigte, a clearly Gaelic name, who was lord of Argyll but whose own origins are also obscure. The Annals of Ulster refer to Somerled as 'Somharlidh Mac Gilla-Adhamhnain', which means 'son of Adamnán's servant'.[12] Sellar suggests that this is a lineage name rather than a patronymic; Gilla Adamnáin, in variant spellings, is given as Somerled's grandfather in genealogies, including the Great Book of Lecan and 'The Ó Cianáin Miscellany'.[13] *Gilla* names generally seem to have been popular among Gaelic-Scandinavians.[14] Most of the other names

10 Sellar 1996, 124.

11 Probably the earliest recorded example of its usage as a personal name is associated with the Danelaw, in the witness list of a charter issued in 958 (see Abrams 2008, 183–184). The name Sumarliði is also attested in Iceland, presumably having been brought there from Britain and Ireland, or perhaps more specifically from the Irish Sea region, by settlers. For example, in *Laxdæla saga* the disruptive character Hrappr is called the son of Sumarliði and said to be Scottish on his father's side and Hebridean on his mother's; his own son, perhaps born in Iceland, is also named Sumarliði (ch. 10, ed. ÍF, 19). In the later tenth century, there was an Icelandic poet called Vetrliði Sumarliðason ('Winter warrior son of Summer warrior'), perhaps a play on words, rather than someone who went against received wisdom by raiding and voyaging in the winter. The English and Icelandic examples create a wider distribution than that of Lagmann from Lögmaðr ('lawman'), which is unknown in Scandinavia as a personal name but attested in the Northern and Western Isles from the tenth century, with one twelfth-century northern Irish example, but particularly associated with the descendants of Godred Crovan, king of Man and the Isles (see Ó Corráin 1999, 308). It is interesting, nevertheless, that both Somerled and Lagmann are professional descriptions in Norse which became personal names in areas of Scandinavian settlement outwith Scandinavia itself.

12 For example AU 1164.4.

13 Woolf 2005, 202.

14 See Abrams 2010, 5. Edmonds argues that the Gaelic name Gillepatraic was popular in the former Cumbrian kingdom and originated amongst settlers of Hiberno-Scandinavian extraction (2009).

given in Somerled's genealogy are unusual but acceptable medieval Gaelic names but 'none is clearly identifiable as a historical personage'.[15] There is no contemporary genealogy for Somerled and those genealogies that do exist, from MacDonald family historians, are confused and show clear signs of manipulation, for example being several generations too short.

Whatever the precise details of Somerled's ancestry it is likely that it involved a mixture of Norse and Gaelic heritage given the location, which was not necessarily a clear distinction on Scotland's western seaboard during this period due to continual contact. Despite this, if Somerled's ancestors apparently possessed Gaelic names, why might he have had a Norse name? His mother might have been Norse. It is also possible that his naming was a deliberate conscious choice of dynastic self-representation. Most kings of Man had Scandinavian personal names and in fact the range of names they were given was quite limited: Rögnvaldr, Guðrøðr, Haraldr, Óláfr, Lögmaðr and Magnús.[16] Perhaps Somerled's dynasty was becoming more active in this sphere of Scandinavian settlements and a Norse name seemed more prudent given the Norse names of Manx and Orcadian leaders. There had been an earl of Orkney named Sumarliði: the short-lived Sumarliði Sigurðarson who died in the 1010s. When vying with other dynasties with a greater Scandinavian profile, it might have been useful to take on some aspects of a Scandinavian identity and to project a warrior image.

It is instructive to also consider Somerled's lateral as well as linear family connections, namely the marriage alliances he forged. For instance, his marriage to the daughter of Olaf of Man and the marriage of his niece to Haraldr Maddaðarson, earl of Orkney, may be seen as a means of reinforcing the Norse character of the dynasty. It seems that Somerled identified himself with the Gaelic-Scandinavian *milieu* of Scotland's western seaboard. These alliances made by Somerled can be seen as part of the wider trend for Celtic-speaking peoples, perceived as being on the 'fringes' or periphery, to strengthen their ties. In northern and western (but not southern and eastern) Scotland this is especially apparent, as leaders and groups there forged their most significant alliances between themselves, including dynastic marriages, or renewed what Barrow describes as 'old links with Ireland', or turned to Man and the Irish Sea, rather than to the central/lowland Scottish kingdom and to the Anglo-Normans.[17]

The picture that emerges is thus of a hybrid figure, but that is not how Somerled has been remembered. In the popular imagination, he is seen as being

15 Woolf 2005, 202.
16 McDonald 2015, 338.
17 See Barrow 1981, 107; McDonald 2012, 170.

an archetypal viking or an archetypal Gaelic clansman. The viking image has been encouraged by the record of him fighting naval battles, for example that in 1156 between Somerled and Godred Olafsson discussed above. Somerled is also said to have sailed 160 ships up the Clyde in AD 1164, suggestive of his perceived naval capabilities and resources.[18] Such maritime activity and piratical raiding has become synonymous with Scandinavian viking activity but this, of course, does not preclude the involvement of more hybrid or even straightforwardly non-Scandinavian parties in these activities. The fraught political milieu and the practicalities of the geography of the western seaboard and islands would demand some naval capabilities. This was true even after the traditional end of the 'Viking Age'. James Barrett observes that 'these mediaeval military societies' should be understood 'in their own terms, as normalised outcomes of a long history of analogous activity *and* creations of the new *realpolitik* … rather than anachronistic survivals of a Viking Age past'.[19] Somerled's naval engagements reveal nothing about his ethnic origins and his cultural allegiances.

Somerled does apparently feature in Norse literature, making a brief appearance in *Orkneyinga saga*, the history of the earls of Orkney.[20] The text refers to 'that chieftain, who was called Sumarliði the yeoman; he had power in the valleys in Scotland's fjords'.[21] Scotland's fjords might well refer to the region of the Argyll. The saga might not be referring to the famous Somerled as it relates that Sumarliði was killed in a battle against the Orcadian Sveinn Ásleifarson, presumably in the mid 1150s judging from the text's internal chronology, in contrast to the rest of the historical record of the battle of Renfrew in 1164.[22] However, *Orkneyinga saga* does often get details and dating wrong and it correctly identifies Sumarliði's wife as Ragnhild daughter of Olaf of Man. A little earlier in the saga, a presumably different Sumarliði is

18 Cronica Regum Manniae et Insularum (f.39r ed. and trans. Broderick).

19 Barrett 2015, 6.

20 No general scholarly consensus has been achieved about whether the first version of *Orkneyinga saga*, possibly compiled in the 1190s, was compiled by an Orcadian or an Icelander and whether the compiling took place in Orkney or in Iceland (Beuermann 2011, 110). Compilation at this time may have been associated with the canonisation of Rǫgnvaldr *kali* (Bonté 2015, 80). If the compiler were Icelandic he was at least very well-informed about Orkney, having perhaps spent time there (Berman 1985, 118–119; Jesch 2005, 14).

21 *Orkneyinga saga* ch. 100 (ed. ÍF, 274; my trans.). The word *hǫldr* (here translated as 'yeoman') denotes a middling rank and implies that the land owned was inherited not given by a lord (Cleasby/Vigfusson 1874, 309; also discussed by Taylor 1939, 353).

22 McDonald suggests that the story either 'relates to a different Somerled or it should be considered a fabrication' and posits that it might instead be connected to Sveinn's conjectured presence during the battles between Somerled and Godred of Man in 1156–8 (2012).

mentioned, as a friend of Sveinn Ásleifarson, with whom he stays one Easter.[23] Whether or not these two anecdotes were originally about the Somerled in question, the (possibly later) association of at least one of them with him indicates that his reputation had spread well beyond Argyll. In another Norse saga, *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, Sumarliði is mentioned as the ancestor of the kings of the Hebrides (who are said to be unfaithful to Hákon, king of Norway), so must refer to our Somerled.[24]

In contrast to this viking image of Somerled as part of the Norse world, he is sometimes seen as a Celtic defender against viking forces. Indeed, this view retains some currency: a recent book entitled *Somerled: Hammer of the Norse* depicts the titular hero as regaining territory from Scandinavian incomers.[25] Clan historians portrayed Clann Somhairle as Gaelic nationalists staving off Scandinavian involvement in western Scotland. This reached its height in the stories in the seventeenth-century Book of Clanranald by Niall MacMhuirich, whose family of poet-historians had served Clan MacDonald since the thirteenth century.[26] For example in one episode Somerled and his band encounter 'a large force of Danes and Norwegians' and prove victorious:

> … they were defeated by Somerled and his party, and he did not halt in the pursuit til he drove them northward across the river Sheil, and a part escaped with their king to the Isles; and he did not cease from that work till he cleared the western side of Scotland of the Danes, except the islands of the Norwegians, called Innisgall.[27]

Somerled was portrayed as anti-Norse and Gaelic in this way because it was useful to his descendants. Somerled's pedigree in the Clan MacDonald genealogies even goes back to Fergus son of Erc, the legendary founder of Dál

23 *Orkneyinga saga* ch. 97 (ed. ÍF, 268). Power initially implies that the two Sumarliðis are separate but also notes that 'Both episodes may refer to the Hebridean chieftain of that name' (1990, 16). Taylor suggested that the Sumarliði visited by Sveinn was the Somerled of Argyll (1938, 414) but that the Sumarliði that Sveinn killed was a different figure (402).

24 *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* ch. 177 (ed. ÍF vol. II, 8): the text also correctly identifies his son Dugall and grandsons. In contrast to *Orkneyinga saga*, the composition of *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* is well established: it was commissioned by Hákon's son Magnús *lagabœtir* and written by the Icelandic chieftain Sturla Þórðarson (for further discussion see Bagge 1996, 91–93; Neijmann 2006, 120–121; Ármann Jakobsson 2017).

25 McPhee 2013.

26 There are two manuscripts of the Book of Clanranald: the older Red Book by Niall MacMhuirich and the later Black Book which has been somewhat adapted and is likely to have been associated with the Antrim branch of the MacDonalds. For further discussion of this text see Gillies 2000, 315–318 and for its sources 330 and its purpose 332–333.

27 Book of Clanranald (ed. and trans. Reliquae Celticae II, 154–155). This edition is based on the Black Book.

Riata (the Scottish kingdom). This suggests to Alex Woolf that 'at some stage the kindred, or perhaps an antiquarian genealogist, had wished to present the Clann [Somhairle] as close kin to, or of equal nobility with, the kings of the Scots'.[28] It became common in the thirteenth century for some of the kindreds descended from Somerled to give their eldest sons names used by Scottish kings like Alexander, rather than Gaelic or Norse ones.[29] These two developments seem to have been connected, and part of the same phenomenon. In 1266 under the Treaty of Perth the king of Norway sold Man and the Isles to the king of Scots, detaching them more firmly from the Scandinavian sphere. Earlier it was noted that the matrimonial patterns around Somerled reflected an Insular Viking zone orientation and in general shied away from the core of Scotland, but his descendants reversed this pattern. Around 1268 Ewen of Argyll married his daughter to the earl of Strathearn (located in southern Perthshire); her first marriage had been to Magnus, the king of Man who died in 1265, so this change in matrimonial policy reflects the altered political situation after 1266.[30] This shifting of marriage alliance tactics, evident in all branches of the MacSorleys, also reflects 'their new-found position within the community of the realm', as R. A. McDonald notes, since they became 'barons of the realm of Scotland' in 1284.[31] These political developments influenced the portrayal of their ancestors.

The most prominent of the dynasties which traced their lineage back to Somerled, and which survived the Scottish Wars of Independence in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century, were the MacDonalds. When the MacDonalds had monopolised their hold over the Lordship of the Isles, in the words of Alex Woolf 'Somerled was retrieved from the attic of ancestral memory and reshaped into a folkloric figure who could bind the Lordship of the Isles together through more or less credible legends':[32] this culminated in the Book of Clanranald (Clanranald being a branch of MacDonald). In their society the MacDonalds would have been viewed as having royal status and they challenged the position of the Stewart dynasty during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.[33] This threat was not removed until 1494 when John MacDonald II, Lord of the Isles, had his titles and land confiscated by James IV of Scotland upon discovering that John had plotted with Edward IV of England to conquer Scotland. The emphasis on Somerled's Gaelic roots makes

28 Woolf 2005, 203.
29 McDonald 1999, 185–187.
30 McDonald 1999, 187.
31 McDonald 1999,187.
32 Woolf 2013, 1.
33 Caldwell 2015, 350.

sense in this context; his descendants would have wanted to emphasise their credentials as possible kings of Scotland.

This development is somewhat surprising given the variable relationship of Somerled himself with contemporary kings of Scots.[34] This aspect is emphasised by one of our other available sources for Scotland in this period, the Chronicle of Melrose, which was in all likelihood compiled at Melrose Abbey.[35] The Chronicle often appears to be better informed about events in England and the Continent, particularly relating to the papacy, than about events in the Isles, or at least pays more attention to them. It does, though, contain a brief account of Somerled's death in 1164:

> Sumerled, the under-king of Eregeithel [Argyll], who had been in a state of wicked rebellion for twelve years against his natural lord, Malcolm, king of Scotland, landed at Renfriu, with a large army which he had collected together in Ireland and various other places; but at length God's vengeance overtook him, and he and his son, and countless number of his followers, were there slain by a few of the people of the district.[36]

Such accounts are coloured by a wider trend for Anglo-Norman writers to portray 'Celtic' peoples as barbarians, particularly evident in their descriptions of Scottish and Galwegian forces at the Battle of the Standard.[37] Furthermore, in the Irish annals Somerled is styled *ri Innse Gall*, 'king of the Isles of the Foreigners' but in the Chronicle of Melrose he has been downgraded to a mere *regulus* ('ruler', 'under-king' or 'kinglet').

It also seems unlikely that Somerled would have viewed the king of Scots as his 'natural lord'.[38] The kingdom of Scotland had been gradually emerging in the preceding centuries, and it might not have been readily apparent that Argyll would indeed be part of it. There is little reason to suppose that he would have viewed a king of Scots as any more his overlord than a king of Norway. However, expansion under the Scottish Canmore dynasty was bound to cause problems with areas which had been culturally and politically distinct. It seems that Somerled, regarding himself as an independent ruler,

34 It should not be assumed that Somerled was constantly opposed to the kings of Scots, though; in particular, there is no evidence of direct conflict between him and David I.

35 For detailed discussion of the Chronicle see Broun and Harrison 2007.

36 Chronicle of Melrose (trans. Joseph Stevenson, *Church Historians of England. Volume IV: part 1*, 130).

37 See Ellis 2018, 145–147, 151–152 and references therein.

38 Chronicle of Melrose (trans. Joseph Stevenson, *Church Historians of England. Volume IV: part 1*, 130).

resented attempts at interference and would have been threatened by the implantation of Anglo-Norman nobles along his borders (a policy whereby friends of the Scottish king were positioned to act as a buffer zone against the problematic western seaboard). Contrary to the propagandist portrayal of the Chronicle of Melrose, Somerled's target was not King Malcolm himself but these Anglo-Norman settlers. Clearly it was no accident that Somerled targeted Renfrew, the *caput* of Strathclyde fiefs held by Walter fitz Alan, who was the king's steward and can be viewed as founder of the Stewart dynasty which would later rule Scotland and indeed England.

Like the Chronicle of Melrose, the *Carmen de morte Sumerledi* also implies that Somerled was a traitorous rebel against his Scottish master, referring to 'multitudes of treacherous men of Argyle'.[39] Somerled himself is described as 'repulsive with fraud, most savage of enemies, / plotting and puffing against the ministers of the Lord'.[40] The poem was written by the Glaswegian clergyman William, who attributes Somerled's death to the intervention of St Kentigern, the patron saint of Glasgow, and even has a cleric hack off Somerled's head. This memorialisation clearly seeks to glorify Glasgow's saint and clergy.[41]

To return to the Book of Clanranald, associated with Scotland's descendants, it responds to the perception of Somerled rebelling against the king of Scots in 1164 by trying to defend him against such accusations: 'His own people assert that it was not to make war against the king that he went on that expedition, but to obtain peace, for he did more in subduing the king's enemies than any war he waged against him'.[42] This appears to plead that Somerled did more good than harm for Scotland. This somewhat defensive tone is evident elsewhere in the text, particularly in its account of the Lordship of the Isles.[43]

39 Carmen de morte Sumerledi (ed. and trans. Helen Foxhall Forbes, published online), lines 53–4.

40 Carmen de morte Sumerledi (ed. and trans. Helen Foxhall Forbes, published online), lines 35–6.

41 It has been traditionally assumed that this poem is an account of the expedition of 1164, although it claims that Somerled's target was not Renfrew but Glasgow Cathedral. Alex Woolf, however, argues that the poem in fact mainly concerns Somerled's incursion of 1153, in association with his nephews, not given a precise location in chronicle accounts, and thus provides evidence for the sack of Glasgow; the poem then portrays Somerled's death eleven years later as delayed retribution, redeeming Kentigern as a saintly protector (Woolf 2013, 6–7). If this were the case, this situation would have created an institutional grudge resulting from their destroyed cathedral and tarnished reputation of Kentigern, providing extra impetus to portray Somerled as a savage aggressor.

42 Book of Clanranald (ed. and trans. Reliquae Celticae II, pp. 154–155).

43 This defensive tone is also found, for example, in the description of the sixteenth-century John of Moydart (see Gillies 2000, 324–325).

Conclusions

This paper has shown that many of the available sources, particularly the more discursive ones, are markedly hostile to Somerled; it is interesting to consider how the modern perception of him may have been altered if there was a more favourable early source extant, particularly a biography such as that which serves the posthumous reputation of another figure of the Insular Viking zone, Gruffudd ap Cynan.[44] While Somerled's origins remain obscure, it seems only natural, considering the cultural *milieu* into which he emerged, that his ancestry contained both Gaelic and Norse elements. The genealogical tracts and clan histories leave much to be desired as sources and reflect the later medieval concerns of their patrons rather than reality.

The lack of evidence has allowed various parties to project different concerns and preoccupations onto Somerled: his mystery perhaps contributes to his appeal and has also allowed him to be moulded to suit different purposes at different times. Deciding how much of a viking Somerled was is hampered by the nebulous concept of what a viking is and the problematic and debated issue of definition. He was not the last viking, and should not be dismissed as an anachronistic survival of a supposedly bygone age, but he was also not the Gaelic lord opposed to Scandinavians and loyal to Scotland that his descendants hoped for. Sources from the mainland core of the Scottish kingdom, in contrast, are disparaging of Somerled's status, relegating him to a rebel rather than a ruler in his own right.

As a successful thalassocratic ruler and warrior in a culturally hybrid zone during a time of transition, Somerled must in reality have been a complex multi-dimensional figure, rather than the one-dimensional archetype he has often been reduced to. Overall, the varying impressions of Somerled result from patchy memories and partisan portrayals.

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44 See Russell 2005.

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