



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY CIC

# SOMERLED, LORD OF THE ISLES

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# Somerled, Lord of the Isles

## Introduction

**Somerled, Lord of the Isles - The Gaelic-Norseman who broke the power of the vikings in western Scotland and the Western Isles**

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### Somerled



Somerled Lord of the Isles.

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### 1113 AD

Born sometime about 1113 AD, in either Morven or what is now Northern Ireland he was a mixture of Hiberno-Norse and Gael whose family had been connected to the Pictish dynasty of the McAlpin's, who had been instrumental in eventually uniting the Scots of Dalriada with the Pictish people of Pictavia.

There had been seven Pictish Kingdoms, namely Cait (Caithness and Sutherland), Ce (Modern day Buchan and Mar), Circin (Angus and Kincardineshire), Fib (Fife), Fidach (Believed to be around the area of Inverness), Fotla (Athol) and Fortriu (The area around Moray).

Somerled's Grandfather was one Gilledomman, Lord of the Isles, who had been driven from the western Isles by the Norsemen. His family and retainers fled with him to Ireland where they lived in exile for several years.

### Gilledommen

Determined to regain his lands, Gilledommen raised an army of just 500 men and attacked the Norse at Morvern but it was a failure and Gilledommen and most of his followers were killed.

Somerled remained in Ireland until he was old and mature enough to claim the title amongst his people as being the legitimate Lord of the Isles. He attacked the Norse and defeated them at Morvern in about 1135 and he then drove them out of Lochaber and the northern parts of Argyle. He received the title 'Thane of Argyle' from the King of Scotland, namely David 1<sup>st</sup>.

Scotland, during this period, did not control its current landmass and Viking enclaves, especially on the western coasts, posed a constant threat to the Scots.

## 1140

In 1140, Somerled married the daughter of a powerful Norse chieftain. Her name was Ragnhild and she was the daughter of Olaf the Red, also known as Olaf 1<sup>st</sup>, King of Man and the Hebrides. Somerled would have three sons from his marriage to Ragnhild, namely Dughall, Ragnald and Anoghus. He also had another son from a previous marriage, and he was called Gillecillum.

## 1143

In 1143, Olaf the Red was murdered by his nephews, the sons of his brother, Harald. The throne of Man was taken up by one Ochraidh Godred, known as Black Olafson. The new King of Man was a ruthless and hard leader and he became deeply unpopular. He was both hated and feared. He was also the brother-in-law of Somerled and it appears that Somerled distrusted him as in 1155, there was a rebellion against Black Olafson and Somerled supported it.

Somerled led a fleet of galleys from the western isles and clashed with Black Olafson's fleet at the battle of Epiphany off the coast of Islay. New technology, meant that the fleet of the Hebridean longships had been fitted with rudders which made them much more manoeuvrable.



Hebridean galley. Circa mid-12<sup>th</sup> century.

Somerled was victorious and in January 1156, he declared himself as 'Ri Innse Gall', King of the Isles. This provoked great anger between the Kingdoms of Scotland and Norway, both of whom claimed the Hebrides. Somerled's title was ancient but all the previous holders of it had acknowledge the King of Norway as their overlord. Somerled did not recognise either the Norwegian or Scottish Kings as such. The Western Isles were now an Independent Kingdom.

The Scots reacted first. The armies of King Malcolm IV and Somerled clashed in a battle fought somewhere in Argyle. It was indecisive, but in 1164, after a period of uneasy peace, Somerled challenged the Scottish King again.

His fleet of 164 longships, landed at Greenock and an army of 15000 Hebridean warriors disembarked. At a place called Inchinnan, where Glasgow airport now stands, his army was confronted by the Scottish army, led by the High Steward of Scotland, Sir Walter Fitzalan. Little detail is known about the battle and some historians think that the armies never engaged, but we do know that Somerled was betrayed by his nephew who was being paid by the Scottish King. Somerled, in any event died, whether by assassination or in battle. His Kingdom was initially divided between his three sons whom he had had with Ragnhild and they would go on to form three clans. Dughall formed Clan MacDougall, Aonghus formed Clan McRory whilst Ragnald became known as Donald Mor McRanald formed Clan Donald, whose chieftain to this day, retains the title Lord of the Isles.

## 1155

The Scottish King obviously wanted the Hebrides and the west coast to become part of his Kingdom, but the fall of Somerled had destabilised the region. The Kings of Norway laid claim to the area and the Isle of Man was re-taken by Black Olafson, who had been in exile in Ireland following his defeat off the coast of Islay in 1155.

The issues of ownership of the Western Isles were not concluded until 1263, when a Norwegian army of King Haakon of Norway tried to reassert control over the western seaboard of Scotland. The Scottish army defeated the Norwegians at the battle of Largs and 500 years of Norse invasions finally came to an end.



Battle of Largs 1263 Monument.

## 1266

In 1266, the treaty of Perth was agreed and Scotland purchased the Isle of Man and the Hebrides from Norway. Though Christian at this time, the Norwegians were still Vikings in the eyes of the other European nations and this finally brought an end to their activities in Scotland.



The insignia of the Lord of the Isles. Created in 875 AD.

## The Orkney Island

The Orkney Islands and Shetland were ceded to Scotland on the 20<sup>th</sup> of February 1472.

Scotland would now become a unified nation. Scots from Ireland had absorbed the Picts and the Britons of Strathclyde by the late tenth century. The English of Lothian had also become Scots as had the Norse from the far north and the western seaboard. As with most nations, the modern Scots are a mixture of all the mentioned peoples.



The Kingdom of the Lord of the Isles.