

The Origin of the Name Somhairle

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It usually has been stated in modern times that Somhairle's name was Norse Somerled or Sumarlidi, meaning Summer-leader, one who led viking expeditions in the summertime. The name presumably was brought from Norse into Irish and became Somhairle, pronounced "Sorley." From this it has been inferred that Somhairle's mother, or perhaps his father, was Norse. However, the late Robert Livingston pointed out another possible source in the Irish name Suairleach. The name could have gone in the reverse direction, from Gaelic to Norse.

Only three men are known to have borne the name Sumarlidi before the great Somhairle, King of Argyll; they all lived in Orkney and western Scotland and all are obscure.

About two generations earlier was Sumarlidi Ospaksson, father of Thora who was wife of Erlend, Earl of Orkney. Erlend died about 1102. This Sumarlidi's ancestors over five or six generations had moved from Norway to Iceland and thence to Orkney.

The next earlier Sumarlidi was a son of Sigurd the Stout, Earl of Orkney. This is the Sigurd who invaded Ireland and died at the battle of Clontarf in 1014. This Sumarlidi's mother is unknown; his grandmother was Edna, daughter of an Irish king named Cearbhall; his great-grandmother was Grelaud, daughter of Donnchadh, ruler of Caithness.

The earliest Sumarlidi lived around the year 900. In the *Laxdaela Saga*, Hrapp who lived in Laxriverdale in Iceland was son of a man named Sumarlidi. This father, however, was not Norse; he was said to have been Scottish, while the mother was from the Sudreys (Hebrides). Hrapp was born about the year 900 and was raised as a Northman in the Sudreys.

The Gaelic name Suairlech was used in Ireland and perhaps in Scotland down to about the time this first Sumarlidi appeared; it was used primarily among the Dál Araidhe of what now is County Antrim. In the following list, the founders of religious institutions are listed if they have connections with the Dál Araidhe, for abbots often came from the extended families of the founders.

- In 750 died Suairlech, bishop of Fobar (Fore in Westmeath). (Robert Livingstone believed that the religious establishment at Fore was under the control of the Dál Araidhe but I have not been able to verify that.)
- In 774 died Soairleach ua Con Cuarain, abbot of Lismore, a grandson of Cu Cuaran, king of the Dál Araidhe. This abbot is claimed today for Lis Mór Mo Chutu in County Waterford, but the annals do not differentiate between that monastery and Lis Mór Moluag on the Isle of Lismore in Argyll.
- In 775 died Suairlech, Abbot of Linn, a monastery near Dundalk.
- In 783 died Suairlech, an anchorite of Lis Mór.
- Suairlech, Abbot of Achad Bo Cainnigh (in County Laoighis), died in 859. St.

Cainneach, founder of Achad Bo, was of the race of Ciar mac Fergus Roech; although the later families claiming descent from Ciar were in Kerry and Cork, Fergus himself was a legendary Ulsterman, of the same extended race as the Dál Araidhe.

- In 859 Suairlech, successor of St. Finnian, participated in a peace conference. St. Finnian, founder of Cluain Iraird or Clonard in Meath, claimed descent from the mythical Celtcar mac Uthecair, of the same people as the Dál Araidhe. Suairlech died in 870, bishop and anchorite and abbot of Cluain Iraird, the best exponent of religion in all Ireland.
- Suairlech, superior of Ard Breacán in Meath, died an aged man in 884. St. Ultan, founder of Ard Breacán, was a member of the Dál Araidhe.

Two centuries later, bishops named Ua Suairlig died in 1028 and 1079.

GilleBride, father of Somnairle the great, probably fled to Ireland with his father GilleAdamnan in 1098, as King Magnus Barelegs made his onslaught south through the Hebrides. As related in *Heimskringla*, "The people of the land fled far and wide; some into Scotland's firths, some south to Kintyre, or out to Ireland. Some received quarter and did homage." A much later tale places the family's place of refuge among their distant Airgialla kinsmen, the Maguires; but by the time that tale was recorded their more proximate kin, the Fir Lí in what now is Antrim, had been wiped out and forgotten. It is possible that GilleBride married a woman of the Dál Araidhe, and picked up his son's name Suairlech from among them. This is at least as likely, if not more likely, than that Somhairle came from a Norse name Sumarlidi.