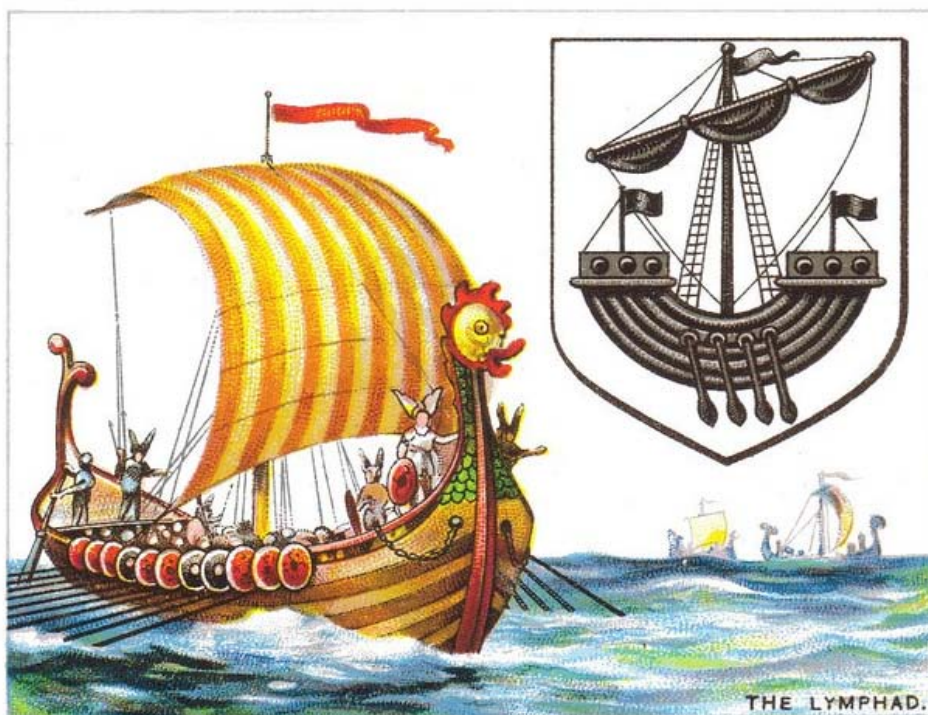


The Galley in Scottish Heraldry



In the 12th Century, Viking power over the Hebrides was waning. For 400 years their longships had prevailed along the coastlines, at first raiding and pillaging, then carrying on campaigns, gradually becoming more and more comfortable as seems inevitable with empires until they discover that their power has been usurped by a more aggressive force.

In this case, the force was Somerled, an Irish-Scots warrior with exceptional ability matched only by his ambition. Somerled is one of those characters who really add colour to history. In 1156 he and his sons, Doughall, Reginald and Angus managed to smash a fleet of 80 Viking longships off the coast of the Isle of Islay.

Within 2 years he was strong enough to assume the title of Rex Insularum, King of the Isles, claiming sovereignty over 25,000 square miles and 500 islands. Somerled was assassinated in 1164 as he prepared to battle King Malcolm of the Scots, whereupon his lands were divided between his three sons, Reginald becoming heir to the title of King or Lord of the Isles. Reginald's son Donald succeeded him and so the Clan MacDonald was founded.

The title was held by successive generations of MacDonalds until 1476 when John of Islay made an object submission to the Scottish king and was stripped of most of his lands. His son Angus, disgusted at this weakness, defeated his father in a galley battle in Bloody Bay just north of Tobermory about 5 years later. Angus' supremacy was short-lived as he was stabbed to death by a Harper in 1490. Finally John was forfeited of all his lands and titles in May 1493. The title was then bestowed upon the King of Scotland's eldest son eventually, after unification, becoming as it is today one of the titles of the Prince of Wales. The king took over the fleet then and used it to bring order among the clans divided by the warfare between father and son.

Four gallant attempts were made to regain the Lordship over the first 60 years of the 1500's but to no avail. This domination of the sea would have not been possible without Somerled's personal innovation of the 'galley'.

The original design of his fleet of ships was based upon captured Viking longships. Viking ships were narrow and long, designed for offshore voyaging, so they were slow to turn and manoeuvre. Somerled built smaller ships with 10 pairs of oars instead of the minimum 13 of the longships. The small ships were strengthened with thwart for the rowers instead of loose seats, and their design included the recent invention - the rudder. Consequently, the stern post was more vertical to facilitate the hinging of the rudder. The deck planking was nailed to the ribs not lashed as in the Viking ships giving added strength.

Some of those ideas were probably borrowed from the superb boats built in the Faroes, the 'seksaeringur' with 6 pairs of oars and the 'teinarangur' with ten.

One of Somerled's personal inventions was a portable basket work fighting-top in which men could be hoisted to the mast-head. Made in two halves it could be hauled to the top and lashed in place when necessary, stowed away when not. This predecessor to the crow's nest appears only once in any depictions of the 'galley'- that is on the Seal of Islay, made in 1176 which also shows Somerled and his three sons.

The word 'galley' covers a number of vessels as different designs for various purposes and differing conditions were developed. Largest of these designs was the 'lymphad.' This was 70 feet long by 16 feet beam with up to 17 pairs of oars. This was the closest in design to a Viking longship. Then came the 'nyvaig' with 8-14 pairs of oars. Its name in Gaelic means 'little ship' which it was in relation to the longships. It was with these 'little ships' that Somerled won his decisive victory in 1156. The smallest was the 'birlinn' with 6-9 pairs of oars. The name comes from the Old Norse 'byrdingr' meaning a small trading vessel.

Somerled's crews underwent intensive training. They learned to turn tightly and quickly while under oars, to keep station in line ahead and change at a signal to line abreast with the minimum distance between ships. They practiced forming a circle with bows pointed outwards to protect the vulnerable beam. A reliable signalling system was developed.

All these ships would have been meticulously constructed and sophisticated in design using shipwright's skills accumulated over the centuries, and constantly improving as an extra 1/2 knot speed could have made the difference between life and death. Undoubtedly the finest would have been made for the Lord of the Isles and reached their peak in the mid 16th century.

However, at about this time the English began to worry about invasion of their western coastlines by Spain or France. For their own security they had to gain control of the ocean-facing Irish and Scottish coastlines. It was meant to be a peaceful process but did not work out that way. The process took a little longer than expected. But they were just in time to prevent remnants of the Spanish Armada establishing beach-heads on the remote western coastline in 1588. The huge English 'men-o-war' with their over-whelming fire-power ended the supremacy of the 'Galley of Lorne', so called because the area of country south of Loch Linnhe, known as Lorne was the centre of Somerled's activities.

There is very little evidence of the Hebridean galleys in established archives or museums. The study has been neglected except by Alison Gunn, who has done a PhD thesis on galleys at Glasgow University. Her mentor, Mike Jarvis who is a Professor of Agricultural Chemistry and whose private passion is the galley has studied every engraving, depiction and graffiti and has succeeded in identifying 3 groups - Iona, Rodel and Kilmory, named after the locations of the best examples of their type. These are differentiated by length, height of masts, shape of rudder, angle of stern, number of shrouds etc.

Our true inheritance is the fame of the term 'Galley of Lorne' for to all Scots for it has come to have a meaning synonymous with the fierce pride and gallantry of those sea-faring men in which we in our turn can take pride.