

THE SONG OF THE DEATH OF SOMERLED AND THE DESTRUCTION OF GLASGOW IN 1153

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Somerled of Argyll is well known as the apical figure of a number of the largest and best known West Highland clans.¹ The MacDonalDs, MacDougalls, MacRorys and MacAlasdairs all trace their descent from him. The eponymous figures of these clans mostly flourished in the early thirteenth century (Dougall was a generation earlier), as is commonly the case with clan ‘founders’.² Since, in reality, most of the clans emerged after the wars waged by Robert Bruce (1305-1329) against his foes, foreign and domestic, the eponymous figures represented the common ancestor by which various competing aristocrats sought to link themselves into parties or leagues in that period. Somerled himself, by Bruce’s time both long dead and the common ancestor of all rivals, did not then perform a useful function in west coast politics since he was equally the possession of all the competitors. After the establishment of MacDonald hegemony over all their wider cousinage, which occurred after the wars of the Bruces were done and won, 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.³ Our certain knowledge of

¹ For recent accounts of his life and career see John Marsden’s popular *Somerled and the Emergence of Gaelic Scotland* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2000), and R. Andrew McDonald, ‘Rebels Without a Cause? The Relations of Fergus of Galloway and Somerled of Argyll With the Scottish Kings, 1153-1164’, in E. J. Cowan and R. A. McDonald (eds), *Alba: Celtic Scotland in the Medieval Era* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2000), pp. 166-186.

² R. A. McDonald, *The Kingdom of the Isles: Scotland’s Western Seaboard, c.1100-c.1336* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1997), pp. 68-102; W. D. H. Sellar, ‘Hebridean Sea Kings: The Successors of Somerled, 1164-1316’, in E.J. Cowan and R. A. McDonald (eds), *Alba: Celtic Scotland in the Medieval Era* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2000), 187-218.

³ These legends reach their apogee in the stories told in the sixteenth century by Niall MacVurich in *The Book of Clanranald*, ed. and trans. in A. Cameron, *Reliquae Celticae: Texts, Papers and Studies in Gaelic Literature and Philology*, ed. by A. McBain and J. Kennedy (Inverness: Alexander Cameron, 1894); and in the seventeenth-century Hugh MacDonald of Sleat’s *History of the Macdonalds*, in J. R. N. Macphail (ed.), *Highland Papers*, vol. 1, 1914.

the man himself, who first appears in contemporary sources in 1153 and who was slain in 1164, is limited, by and large, to what can be gleaned from a handful of passing references in Scottish and Irish chronicles, together with one allusion to him in the dating clause of a charter of King Malcolm IV.

The only extended narrative from the pen of a contemporary to survive is an extraordinary Latin poem of eighty lines preserved in the famous Corpus Christi College Cambridge MS 139 (ff. 133 r. and v.), produced before the 1160s were out.⁴ This poem is headed by the rubric, *Quomodo a paucissimis interfectus sit Sumerledus Sicebi ꝑe king cum suo immense exercitu*: ‘How, by a very few, was slain Somerled *sicebi*⁵ the king, with his immense army’. On account of this rubric, the poem is usually held to describe the events immediately leading up to the killing of Somerled at Renfrew in the course of an invasion of the region in which he led the men of Argyle, Kintyre, the Hebrides and Dublin.⁶

What I would like to suggest in what follows is that the poem covers two distinct events in Somerled’s career and that the first part of the poem allows us to retrieve more detail of the invasion of Malcolm’s kingdom which he led in 1153. This 1153 conflict is recorded in the *Chronicle of Holyrood*, which, after recording the peace accord agreed between King Stephen of England and his eventual successor Henry of Anjou goes on: *eo die apud Scotiam Sumerlede et nepotes sui, filii scilicet Malcolmi, associatis sibi plurimus, insurrexerunt in regem Malcolm, et Scotiam in magna parte*

⁴ Images of the manuscript are available via the Parker online website <http://parkerweb.stanford.edu>. The poem was printed by W. F. Skene as appendix v of his edition of John of Fordun’s *Chronica Gentis Scotorum, Historians of Scotland* vol.1, Edinburgh 1871, pp. 449-451. A transcription of this edition, with minor emendations, appears at the end of this article. The most recent translation is that by Gilbert Márkus in T. O. Clancy (ed.), *The Triumph Tree: Scotland’s Earliest Poetry, 550-1350*, Edinburgh: Canongate, 1998), pp. 212-214.

⁵ The meaning, and even the reading, of this word is uncertain. The fact the following two words appear to be English might suggest that this is the case with this word also. The appearance of English here at all is most surprising. In what part of the world might Somered have had an epithet coined in this language?

⁶ W. M. Hennessy & B. Mac Carthy, *Annala Uladh: Annals of Ulster Otherwise Annala Senait, Annals of Senat: A Chronicle of Irish Affairs from A.D. 431 to A.D. 1540*, 4 vols. (Dublin: H.M. Stationary Office, 1887-1901), vol.ii, AU 1164.4, Whitley Stokes (ed. and trans.) ‘The Annals of Tigernach’, *Revue Celtique*. Vol. 18 (1897), pp. 9–59, 150–303, AT 1164.6, J. Stevensen, *Chronica de Mailros*, Edinburgh 1835, s.a.1164.

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perturbantes inquietaverunt: “on that day in Scotland, Somerled and his *nepotes* [nephews or grandsons], that is the sons of Malcolm, having allied themselves with many others, rose against king Malcolm, and perturbed and disquieted a great part of Scotland”.⁷ This the earliest reference to Somerled in any contemporary source but we can infer from his relationship to the sons of Malcolm (who, himself, had been captured and imprisoned in Roxburgh in 1134) that his family must have been of some note by 1134, since Malcolm was alleged to have been the natural son of King Alexander I.⁸ It has usually been assumed that Somerled’s sister bore Malcolm’s children, but it is not impossible that their mother was his daughter.⁹ What we cannot be certain of, is whether Somerled himself was the head of his family at the time that the marriage was contracted, so projecting his own rulership back another twenty years or more before his first appearance in the record is not unproblematic. Indeed Somerled’s own status prior to the year of his death is very unclear. No source prior to his various death notices accord him either a title or a place of origin. At his death the *Annals of Tigernach* describe him as *rí Innse Gall ocus Cendtire*, King of the Isles and Kintyre, while the *Chronicle of Melrose* describes him as *regulus*, ‘kinglet’, of Argyle.

His control of the Isles is explained in some detail in the later thirteenth-century *Chronicle of Man* and the Isles, which explains that he was married to a daughter of King Olaf of the Isles (c.1113-53) and that, c.1156, disaffected nobles within the kingdom sent to ask for his son Dougall to be given to them as king in place of Olaf’s son Godred.¹⁰ Somerled then took control of that faction, the implication being that his son was still a minor, but was not accorded the royal title himself. One is reminded here of his Norwegian contemporary Erling Skakke who, having begotten a son upon the daughter of an earlier king, promoted him as a

⁷ *A Scottish Chronicle known as The Chronicle of Holyrood*, ed. by M. O. Anderson (Edinburgh: Scottish History Society, 1938), pp. 124-125.

⁸ This Malcolm has often been conflated with Malcolm mac Heth, Earl of Ross, who flourished between 1157 and 1168, but there is no basis for this identification. For the most coherent published discussion to date see A. Ross, ‘The Identity of the prisoner of Roxburgh; Malcolm son of Alexander or Malcolm MacHeth?’, in S. Arbuthnott and K. Hollo (ed.), *Fil súil nglais: A Grey Eye Looks Back* (Ceann Drochaid: Clan Truic, 2007), pp. 269-282.

⁹ A third possibility is that Malcolm and Somerled were uterine brothers, that is to say, that they shared a mother.

¹⁰ *Cronica Regum Manniae et Insularum: Chronilces of the Kings of Man and the Isles*, transcribe. and trans. G. Broderick (Douglas: IOM, 1996).

competitor in the Norwegian civil war from 1157.¹¹ In both cases it is tempting to see Henry of Anjou's successful succession to the English throne in 1154 as widening the horizon for uterine grandsons of kings across northern Europe.

Orkneyinga saga, probably written in the 1220s, gives us more detail but is notoriously inaccurate in its coverage of the kingdom of Scotland. It describes Somerled's family as the Dalverjar, the dwellers in the Dales, and explains that these dales are those which lie on the shores of Skotlandsfjorðr, which seems to be the Firth of Lorne.¹² This would seem to be a description of Argyll but some caution needs to be noted since it is not clear whether the term Dalverjar is being applied to Somerled's descendants or the family he himself sprang from. Since at the time of his death Somerled had some sort of hegemony of a very wide area indeed, it is far from impossible that the portion which remained in the hands of his sons and their descendants by the time the saga was written may not have been his original homeland. A further anxiety about putting too much faith in *Orkneyinga saga's* account is the fact that it claims, contrary to the contemporary chronicles, that Somerled was killed in a naval encounter prior to the death of Earl Rögnvaldr Kali, which occurred in 1158. All we can really say is that since either his sister or daughter was married to a claimant (albeit an unsuccessful one) to the Scottish throne, and he himself was married to a daughter of the king of the Isles, his kindred must have been of some note and probably held royal or quasi-royal power somewhere in the region.

Somerled's career, as far as it can be reconstructed, can be divided into three phases. The first, his adventure into Scotland with the sons of Malcolm. This expedition appears to have been an attempt to influence the succession in Scotland in favour of that Malcolm against his namesake, the child Malcolm IV, whose grandfather David I had died in that same year. The second began in late 1155 or early 1156 when the Islesmen asked him to help drive out their king, Godred Olafsson, in favour of his own son, Dougall, Godred's nephew. This conflict seems to have been effectively won by 1158 when Godred, retreated to Norway, not to return until after Somerled's death. Finally we seem him returning to attack Scotland in 1164, with the full force of the Kingdom of the Isles at his back. A charter

¹¹ For the most recent summary of Erling's career see S. Bagge, *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom: State Formation in Norway, c900-1350* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2010), pp. 44-53.

¹² *Orkneyinga saga*, ed. by Finnboði Guðmundsson (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag 1965), §§ 100-101.

issued by Malcolm IV from Perth at Christmas 1160 is dated *in natali domini proximo post concordiam regis et Somerledi*: ‘at the birth of Our Lord, next after the peace between the king and Somerled’.¹³ Since we are told elsewhere that King Malcolm had spent much of 1160 leading three campaigns into Galloway which had resulted in the defeat of his enemies, and perhaps a treaty of peace with them, we might imagine that the concordat with Somerled was part of the conclusion of this campaign.¹⁴ If this were the case it might mean either that Somerled was a kinsmen of Fergus, Lord of Galloway, who was forced to take the habit at Holyrood at the conclusion of the campaign, or that he had sided with Malcolm in the suppression of Fergus’s Lordship, which adjoined both his own lands in Man and Kintyre and those of the king. In favour of the idea that Fergus and Somerled were kinsmen are two pieces of evidence relating to personal names. Whilst Fergus’s paternity is unknown (though he had been active since 1136), his eldest son, Gillebrigte, shared his name with Somerled’s father. More tenuously the Old French “Romance of Fergus”, penned in Scotland c. 1200, whilst set in Arthurian times, names its hero as Fergus of Galloway, a son of a certain Somerled.¹⁵ Even if there is no direct connection here (and it would be pushing the limits of probably chronology to imagine the real Fergus was the son of the real Somerled) it may suggest that to the author of the romance these were well-known or perhaps stereotypical Gallovidian names. A Gallovidian link to Somerled might also be inferred from the fact that his *nepos* Donald son of Malcolm, was ‘taken’ at Whithorn in Galloway, and delivered up to the King of Scots in 1156.¹⁶ The traditional understanding of the succession of the Lordship of Galloway is that it was divided between Fergus’s sons either at his retirement, in 1160, or at his death, in 1161, but neither son is actually mentioned in our extant sources between 1160 and the death of Somerled. Whatever the detail lying behind this, which we shall probably never know, Somerled was perhaps more willing to make peace with Malcolm in return for recognition of his position in the Isles. Indeed the fact that Godred, the ousted king, had originally fled to Malcolm’s court this may have given the Scots king something to bargain with.¹⁷ Perhaps Malcolm promised Somerled that he

¹³ *Regesta Regum Scottorum I, The Acts of Malcolm IV*, ed. by G. W. S. Barrow (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1960), no. 175.

¹⁴ For a full account of Malcolm’s reign see Barrow’s introduction to *RRS I*, 1-128.

¹⁵ The romance is discussed at length in D. D. R. Owen, *William the Lion, Kingship and Culture, 1143-1214* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1997), especially pp. 114-153.

¹⁶ *Chronicle of Melrose* s.a. 1156.

¹⁷ I. Beuerman, *Man Amongst Kings and Bishops* (Oslo: Centre for Viking and Medieval Studies, 2002), p. 246.

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would abandon Godred's cause if he in his turn abandoned that of the Prisoner of Roxburgh and his sons.

This brings us back to the *Song of the Death of Somerled*, the poem in CCC 139. The poem has traditionally been seen as an account solely of Somerled's ill-fated 1164 expedition. Andrew McDonald's assessment from 2003 is fairly representative of the established reading of the poem; "[t]he document known as the *Carmen de Morte Sumerledi* relates details of Somerled's 1164 invasion of the Clyde estuary".¹⁸ What I would like to suggest is that the poem is in fact a providential exegesis of events linking the invasion of 1153 with that of 1164. The chronicle accounts give no specific details of the where the action of the 1153 incursion took place but I would argue that the poem makes it very clear that Glasgow was sacked at this time. It is my contention that the first twenty-four lines of the poem recount the destruction of Glasgow, apparently without retribution, that occurred in 1153, and that lines twenty-five and twenty-six, *nam post multum tempus ultum revocat episcopum/ut sanctorum Scotticorum deleret opprobrium* — "for after much time he [St Kentigern] at last recalled the bishop to wipe out the shame of the Scottish saints" — takes the narrative eleven years forward when Somerled once more returned to the Clyde to meet his fate at Renfrew.

In Alan Anderson's prose translation¹⁹ the first twenty-four lines read as follows:

When, by death's decree, king David had been enclosed in his coffin, the treachery of hostile Scots became at once apparent. Norsemen [*Galienses*],²⁰ and Argylesmen, supported by a host of Albanians, raged and slew the righteous with a cruel hand. The righteous hastened and appeased the fury of the wicked men who were raging and destroying cities [*urbes*] and churches. Peace was broken, violence renewed. The strong carried off²¹ the weak. The enemy slew and injured with fire and sword their miserable

¹⁸ R. A. McDonald, *Outlaws of Medieval Scotland: Challenges to the Canmore Kings, 1058-1266* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2003), p. 129.

¹⁹ A. O. Anderson, *Early Sources of Scottish History, AD 500 to 1286*, vol. ii, (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1922), rpr. Stamford, 1990, pp. 256-258. With minor modifications by myself.

²⁰ *Galienses* is problematic, clearly a Latin form based on Gaelic *Gall*, it might imply Norseman, Gallovidians or indeed the French.

²¹ *Tradunt* Anderson has 'drove out', but, bearing in mind the slaving propensities of the time and place, 'carried off' seems better.

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victims. Gardens, fields and rigs were ravaged and laid waste; barbarous hands mastered and menaced the weak. The people of Glasgow fled wounded from the sword strokes. But when the clergy dispersed, Mark remained alone, grumbling, within the hard walls of the church; and enduring hard mischance. There he wept and lamented the days of former prosperity. But though far away the modest and upright bishop Herbert was suffering and grieving along with him. He implored Kentigern to pray to the king above, for his captives hopes; and he cursed the enemy. While he was praying, and yearning for the answer to his prayers; and while his supplications were without result, as they were without cessation, he began to disparage in words, the Scottish saints, and piously rebuke the blessed Kentigern.

Here we seem to be presented with an account of a wasting of both Glasgow, its cathedral, dedicated to Kentigern, and the surrounding countryside, that went without retribution. We should also, perhaps, note the alleged involvement of Albanians, that is to say Scots from benorth the Forth, in this expedition. These details would seem to fit better with the expedition of Somerled and the sons of Malcolm in 1153 than with the events of 1164. There then followed the ‘much time’ alluded to in lines twenty-five and twenty-six at which point we come to St Kentigern finally relenting and providing Bishop Herbert (1147-64) with an opportunity for vengeance. The subsequent section of the poem then recounts the events of 1164. Herbert and his household, having been divinely inspired, head off to join the forces facing Somerled *qui repente cum ingente classium satellite / applicatur et minatur regnum totum perdere* — “who suddenly landed with an immense company of followers, and threatened to destroy the whole kingdom”.²² The explicit reference to a sudden landing makes it quite clear that this is not the immediate sequel of the events recounted in the first third of the poem.

What the poet, who identifies himself as Willelmus in the penultimate line, is seeking to do in this poem is to provide an explanation for the defeat and death of Somerled in 1164 which might to some extent restore the reputation of Glasgow’s patron saint, Kentigern. The destruction of the cathedral and the flight of the clergy described in the first part of the poem, and the apparent failure of Kentigern to answer the prayers of either

²²

LI. 37 and 38.

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the sole faithful cleric, Mark, or the absent Bishop Herbert, as explicitly highlighted in the first section of the poem, must have proved damaging to the cult of the saint and to the standing of his church. It may well be that this reading provides the context for the one other literary text which we can associate with Bishop Herbert; the so-called ‘Herbertian fragment’ of a life of Kentigern.²³ Its anonymous author tells us that ‘just as Symeon, once a monk of Durham, wove together a history of his own Saint Cuthbert, so I, a cleric of S. Kentigern, at the instance of Herbert, the venerable Bishop of Glasgow, have, as best I might, devoutly composed a sort of work, from the material found in the little book of his virtues, and from the oral communication of the faithful made to myself’.²⁴ In the light of his failure to protect cathedral and congregation Kentigern was in need of a PR offensive to restore confidence in his power and sanctity.

The destruction of Glasgow by Somerled and his allies in 1153, and the ignominious flight of the cathedral clergy will have reduced the status of both the bishop and the patron, Saint Kentigern. Both the Herbertian fragment and the ‘Song of the Death of Somerled’ would seem to have been produced in order to combat this lack of status. In this light the bishops stament that “the Scottish saints must surely be praised” in line 76 serves to emphasises that Kentigern truly deserves to be counted amongst them²⁵ and that he and his church deserve continued friendship from the Scottish royal house.

²³ For an account of this see R. Gardner, ‘Something contrary to the sound doctrine of the Catholic faith’, *Innes Review*, Vol. 49 (1998), pp. 115-126. For the text see A. P. Forbes (ed. and tr.), *The Lives of St Ninian and St Kentigern compiled in the Twelfth Century*, *Historians of Scotland* v.5 (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1874), pp. 243-252 (text) and 123-33 (translation).

²⁴ Forbes, *Lives of St Ninian*, pp. 123-124.

²⁵ The references to the Scottish Saints in lines 21 and 26 also emphasise this link. Kentigern is generally presented as British, in the sense of Welsh-speaking, and Cumbria, his diocese, including Glasgow was a relatively recent addition to *regnum Scottorum* and hot universally regarded as part of *Scotia* proper. See D. Broun, ‘The Welsh Identity of the Kingdom of Strathclyde, c. 900-1200’, *Innes Review*, Vol. 55 (2004), pp. 111-180.

Appendix

*Quomodo a paucissimis interfectus sit Sumerledus Sitebi pe king cum suo
immense exercitu*

David rege, mortis lege, clauso in sarcofago
Fraus Scottorum infestorum propalatur ilico.
Galienses, Argaidenses freti ui Albanica
Saeuebant et caedabant iustos manu impia.
Iusti ruunt atque luunt impiorum furias

5

Saevientes destruentes urbes et ecclesias.
Pace fracta ui redacta fortes trudunt debiles,
Hostes caedunt atque ledunt igne, ferro, flebiles.
Debachtantur et uastantur orti campi aratra;
Dominatur et minatur mites manus barbara.

10

Glasguensis ictus ensis laesus fugit populus.
Marcus uero sparso clero solus sistit querulus,
Infra duros templi muros casus ferens asperos;
Ibi flebat et lugebat dies olim prosperos.
Sed modestus et honestus Herbertus episcopus

15

Condolebat et moerebat secum longe positus;
Kentegernum ut supernum regem oret obsecrat,
Pro suorum captiuorum spe ac hostes execrat,
Cum oraret et spiraret precum in discrimina,
Et effectum non defectum carerent precamina,

20

Coepit sanctos Scotticanos uerbo paruipendere,
Et beatum Kentegernum pie reprehendere.
His sopitis et oblitis pene contumeliis,
Kentegernus non oblitus est clamorem praesulis ;
Nam, post multum tempus, ultimum reuocat episcopum,

25

Ut sanctorum Scotticorum deleret opprobrium.
Uenerandus et laudandus senex mox episcopus,
Iam perfecto, spreto lecto, perrexit quantocius ;
Et nocturnum et diurnum iter, quasi iuuenis,
Diligenter et libenter carpebat cum famulis ;

30

Sed cum iret, et nesciret cur tam erat audius
Ite, quia, cum Helia, inspiratur celitus ;
Quod probauit qui rogauit illum cito regredi,

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Liberare et saluare se a manu inuidi
Sumerledi, fraude foedi, hostis atrocissimi,
35

Conspirantis, anhelantis in ministros Domini ;
Qui repente, cum ingente classium satellite,
Applicatur, et minatur regnum totum perdere.
Haec cum iret et audiret, spiritu ingemuit,
Quis nunc ire, aut redire, inquiens, me arguit,
40

Salomonem at tyronem bellicosum aduocat,
Et Heliam, qui per uiam illum saepe adiuuat.
Festinemus, adiuuemus desolatos patriae,
Et oremus, et obstemus illorum miseriae.
Debet doctor atque rector pugnare pro patria.
45

Properemus, et pugnemus, nostra est uictoria ;
Quia Deus semper meus, non hasta nec gladio,
Suum gregem atque plebem tuetur in praelio.
Resistentes, audientes aduentum episcopi,
Ut dracones, et leones, fiunt audacissimi ;
50

Quamquam ille, atque mille, Sumerledus, hostium
Contra centum innocentum prompti sunt ad praelium,
Accurrerunt, et fecerunt in phalanges impetum
Perfidorum Argaidorum, infaustorum militum.
Audi mira; quia dira diris erant praelia.
55

Myriceta, et spineta, uerticem mouentia,
Thymus usta, et arbusta, rubi, atque filices,
Timebantur, et rebantur hostibus ut milites ;
In hac uita, non audita erant haec miracula.
Umbrae thymi atque fimi extant propugnacula.
60

Sed in prima belli rima, dux funestis cecidit ;
Telo laesus, ense caesus, Sumerledus obiit ;
Atque unda furibunda eius sorbet filium,
Ac multorum fugatorum uulneratos millium.
Nam hoc truce strato duce, fugam petunt impii,
65

Tam in terris, quam in aquis, trucidantur plurimi ;
Cum in undis sanguibundis naues uellent scandere,
Cateruatim, alternatim, suffocantur reumate.
Facta strage atque clade perfidorum millium,

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Nullus laesus neque caesus erat expugnantium ;

70

Sic detrusis et delusis hostium agminibus,

Kentegernum omne regnum laudat altis uocibus.

Caput ducis infelicis Sumerledi clericus

Amputauit, et donauit pontificis manibus ;

Ut sueuit, pie fleuit, uiso hostis capite,

75

Dicens Sancti Scotticani sunt laudandi utique.

Et beato Kentegerno tradidit uictoriam,

Cuius semper, et decenter, habete memoriam.

Hoc quod uidit et audiuit Willelmus composuit,

Et honori et decori Kentegerni tribuit.

80