

# Viking Myths and Rituals on the Isle of Man

Edited by Leszek Gardela  
and Carolyne Larrington



LANGUAGES, MYTHS AND FINDS

VOLUME 1

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Leszek Gardęta and Carlyne Larrington

CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF THE VIKING AGE  
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# Languages, Myths and Finds – Volume 1

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# *Introduction*

Carolyne Larrington

The dramatically beautiful Isle of Man lies in the middle of the Irish Sea, almost equidistant from Cumbria, Galloway and Ulster. Nowadays we think of water as separating communities, but for sea-faring societies, the sea unites rather than divides people. Today the Island is a few hours ferry ride away from England and Ireland; for the Scandinavians who settled on Man in the ninth century AD, it took only a day's sailing or hard rowing to journey to the mainland trading settlements on the Wirral or to reach the important new Viking town of Dublin. In the Viking Age (roughly the eighth to eleventh centuries AD), men and women, largely from Norway and Denmark, came to live in the British Isles. They settled widely across the North of England, along the Scottish, Welsh and Irish coasts, and they also emigrated to the offshore islands. On Man, the settlers' descendants inherited an extraordinary legacy, one which brought together the language, myths, social organisation and artistic traditions of their Scandinavian homelands and the existing Christian and Celtic culture of the Island. From these multiple strands a unique tapestry was woven. This booklet focuses on some of the patterns in that tapestry, picking out colours and shapes in order to highlight the contribution of those Viking-Age migrants to Man's history and to show ways in which the Viking heritage still defines and shapes Man's idea of itself today.

Scandinavians wrote themselves on the Manx landscape. Around the Island you will find many Norse place-names: the towns of Laxey and Ramsey and Ronaldsway, where the airport is. The mountains Snaefell and Barrule and many of the villages whose names end in -dale, such as Narradale, Foxdale and Orrisdale, also owe their names to Scandinavian settlers. The famous Tynwald, from the Norse Thingvoll, or 'assembly-place', originates in Scandinavian legal tradition as a place where the islanders would meet regularly to recite and amend the laws and to settle law-suits. Beyond these traditions, and the surviving archaeological sites, the Island's most important and enduring heritage from the Viking Age are its stone crosses, unparalleled in the Scandinavian world, and the wonderful objects hidden in its earth: in graves and burial-mounds. And thus, it is this realm of the dead that can tell us most about the world of the living.

This booklet is primarily about the Viking dead, and their family and friends who made their funeral arrangements and who remembered them. It's the bereaved who decide which items should be placed in the grave with the dead person, and it's very likely that the same people performed the funeral rites to honour the person they had lost. Examining the contents of Viking-Age graves, both the bones of the dead and the items that accompanied them, can tell us much about how they lived and died. Scandinavian-Manx people commissioned impressive stone crosses to commemorate their dead. On these were carved, in the Scandinavian runic alphabet, information

about the dead person, the carver of the cross and the people who had paid for the work. The crosses also show us how the mythological and legendary traditions of Scandinavia were kept alive on Man through tales told and retold over generations. The crosses show details that we can recognise from the versions which were written down in Iceland and elsewhere centuries later. These scenes depict the adventures of the dragon-slaying hero Sigurd and the birds whose speech he comes to understand, and show how the chief of the gods, Odin, is devoured by the monstrous wolf Fenrir at Ragnarok, the Norse equivalent of the End of the World. Yet they were carved on Christian crosses, alongside images of angels, the Crucifixion, or the Christian symbol of the fish, suggesting that no one thought it was wrong to bring non-Christian and Christian artistic motifs together.

This booklet therefore focuses on the sites, sculpture, myths and rituals of the Isle of Man in the Viking Age. It begins with a suggested Viking Trail which will take you to see the most important sites and objects left behind by the Scandinavian settlers and their descendants. The second chapter explains some of the misunderstandings which people in the twenty-first century still have about the Vikings. The third chapter introduces the stones and crosses kept in the churches of Man, which you'll see on the Viking Trail. The fourth chapter explains the mythological and legendary background to the motifs on the carvings. In the final chapter, the archaeologist Leszek Gardeła explains how we can interpret the Island's burials and suggests how these can give us insight into the world-view of the Viking settlers.

This booklet is one of the results of a project funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council in 2013-2014. The project was called 'Languages, Myths and Finds' and it investigated the Scandinavian heritage of five regions in the British Isles. The project enabled the authors of this booklet to visit Man and to discover how Man's unique identity could inform their own research interests. That academic knowledge and their experiences on Man have enabled them to write this short introduction to the Viking-Age remains of the Island. We hope that in reading it, you will come to enjoy learning about Man's Viking heritage as much as we did.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## CHAPTER 1

# *The Isle of Man Viking Trail*

Aya van Renterghem and Heidi Stoner

This chapter invites you to follow the Vikings around the Isle of Man, using your own transport. We have selected twelve places that have a special significance in the Viking past of the Island, display contemporary objects, or preserve remains from that time. We have numbered these points of interest and indicated them on the map. For every number we give some directions to the location, a short factual summary and suggest the most important objects to see. You can usually find further information at the sites themselves: at most churches signs or guides are provided, and Manx National Heritage provides extra information at the archaeological sites (and also online). Many of the objects and sites you will see on the trail are discussed in the chapters which follow this one. The site reference numbers are used throughout the text. The places are numbered starting from the Manx Museum in a clock-wise direction. But you can of course start and end the trail wherever you like!

The Island's unique heritage of Viking-Age stone crosses can only be seen in the churches where they are still cherished by the local communities. Sometimes the carvings are difficult to see; taking a torch can help you pick out the details. The Island's churches rely on donations from visitors for support. Funds help to keep the churches in good repair, to update and improve the information about the crosses, and, most importantly, to keep the churches open. It isn't always possible to see the crosses if a service is going on; please respect this and remember that the churches are a place of prayer.

Some sites, such as (3) Braaid and (4) Balladoole, are reached by paths which can be muddy and slippery, so make sure you've got the right footwear.



## 1. Manx National Heritage Museum

The Manx Museum can be found in Douglas, on Kingswood Grove, and is the starting point of our Viking Trail. Like many other sites mentioned in this brochure, it is run by Manx National Heritage and it contains many of the Isle of Man's historic treasures that date from prehistory to modern times. We recommend that you visit the museum's different galleries, but especially that you seek out the permanent Viking exhibition, which displays many of the spectacular objects found in Viking burials, silver hoards and replicas of the carved crosses which are among Man's greatest cultural treasures and which still remain in the Island's churches. Additionally, the museum has a Natural History Gallery and a National Art Gallery. The Manx Museum is open Monday to Saturday 10 am – 5 pm, and admission is free.

## 2. Braddan (Old Kirk)

Old Kirk Braddan was the parish church in Braddan till 1876, and can be found on the left-hand side of the A1 road to Peel, just after the roundabout. There is a layby in front of it. This church is charmingly picturesque, and contains 12 beautiful, well-preserved sculptured crosses, most of which contain runic inscriptions. A sword fragment has been found in the churchyard, and one of the largest and most famous of Manx hoards, that from Ballaquayle (deposited in the 970s) was discovered in Braddan parish. (*fig. 1 and fig. 2*)

## 3. Braaid

The Braaid in Marown can be found midway between Douglas and Foxdale, off the A24 to the right. The site is clearly marked with a green sign posted on the main road and can be accessed via a well-laid out path. You will need to climb over two stiles. The Braaid shows the remnants of a Norse farmstead, which are exceptionally well-preserved. It is a remarkable and beautiful site, with a striking view across the valley and a small stream which must have supplied water to the people who lived there. The site shows the continuity between pre-Viking inhabitants and Viking settlement: a Celtic roundhouse can be found next to two rectangular buildings of Viking origin.

## 4. Balladoole

The Balladoole burial site is located approximately 1 km before the village itself. To find it, follow the A5 from Castletown along the south coast and take the left-hand side turning, signposted Pool Varish Quarry, towards Bay ny Carrickey. The track to the site is about 400 metres from the turning on the right and there's a space to park near the gate to it. It's a few minutes walk up to Chapel Hill; take the first left turn off the main bridle path. Chapel Hill is an important site where a famous Viking boat grave



*Fig. 1. Braddan 135.  
Photo by Heidi Stoner.*



*Fig. 2. Braddan 112.  
Photo by Heidi Stoner.*



dating to the 9<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> century was found. The boat was originally around 11m long and contained the body of an adult man accompanied by a wide array of high-status objects (see Chapter 5 for further details). Many of these splendid finds can be seen in the Manx Museum, but the actual site of the burial is well worth visiting as it lies on top of Chapel Hill, occupying a prominent position in the landscape and offering a magnificent view of the Irish Sea coast. Today the exact location of the boat grave has been outlined by stones. Visitors to the site can also see other archaeological features, such as the remains of a Celtic rampart and an early Christian chapel. (*fig. 3*)



*Fig. 3. The Balladoole grave.*  
*Photo by Leszek Gardela.*

## 5. House of Manannan and Peel Castle

The House of Manannan is a heritage centre, run by Manx National Heritage and located on Peel Quayside. At the House of Manannan, you will be guided through reconstructed houses and display spaces from the early medieval period by the voice of the island's mythical sea god Manannan. The display includes a Viking longhouse, and you will also be able to hear some of the languages spoken by the Vikings and learn about their daily lives and their dealings with the people they encountered on the Isle of Man. The House of Manannan is open daily from 10-5, for up-to-date admission prices see the Manx National Heritage website: <http://www.manxnationalheritage.im>



*Fig. 4. Ballaugh 106.  
Photo by Heidi Stoner.*

Peel Castle is located on St Patrick's Isle, connected to the town of Peel by a causeway. The castle was originally a place of worship before Magnus Barefoot, who was king of Man during the 11<sup>th</sup> century, turned it into a fort. The buildings within the castle are now mostly ruined, but the outer walls remain intact and you can walk round the castle beneath them. The cemetery at Peel Castle was also the resting place of the famous 'Pagan Lady', whose grave included a magnificent necklace and many other intriguing objects (see Chapter 5 for more about her). The castle is open daily 10-4/5, for up-to-date times and admission prices see the Manx National Heritage website: <http://www.manxnationalheritage.im>

## **6. Royal Chapel of St John the Baptist, Tynwald Hill**

For the Royal Chapel of St John the Baptist, follow the A1 from Peel back towards Douglas. Tynwald and the Chapel are on the left-hand side of the road and there is parking nearby. St John's church is east of the famous Tynwald site; both places are connected via a path. The Tynwald is the Manx parliament, which has Norse origins and dates from the 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century; there's an interesting video about the ceremonies held there at the Manx Museum. The church itself dates from before the 16<sup>th</sup> century. A sculptured stone with a runic inscription can be seen in the front portal. The church is open daily 9-6.

## **7. Kirk Michael, Church of St Michael and All the Angels**

Approximately 10 minutes drive north from Peel on the A3, you can find the village of Kirk Michael. On the A3 from Peel, the church is on your right-hand side and can easily be spotted as it has an eye-catching wooden arched gate. The church is home to an amazing collection of sculptured stones, many of which contain runic inscriptions. Look for the depiction of the hero Sigurd on the stones, and try and locate the runes on stone 110, (see Chapter 4 for more about Sigurd's legend).

## **8. Ballaugh, St Mary's Old Church**

The Old Church at Ballaugh can be found on Station Road (A10), on the right-hand side in the middle of the village. Ballaugh again displays some impressive stonework. Only one rune-stone has been found in this parish, but it is likely that it comes from the churchyard of the Old Church itself. A grave containing a sword and a spear has also been found at Ballaugh. (*fig. 4*)

## **9. Jurby, St Patrick's Church**

St Patrick's church in Jurby can be found just off the west coast road (A10). Turn left towards the coast onto Ballavarran Road, which ends at the church. St Patrick's

graveyard, which has excellent views of the sea, has a probable Viking-Age burial mound, which has not been excavated. The church itself is kept locked, but accessible in the church porch are several crosses and carved stones. Be sure to find the depiction of Sigurd on stone 119 and Heimdall on stone 127, (see Chapter 4 for more about Sigurd and the Norse gods).

## **10. Kirk Andreas, St Andrew's Church**

Kirk Andreas (St Andrew's Church) is in the village of Andreas; and the main church entrance is just off the A9; it's also visible from the B14. Inside the church are eleven carved stone fragments with Viking decorative motifs, runic inscriptions as well as depictions of carved figures. The hero Sigurd can be seen on stone 121 roasting the heart of the dragon Fafnir while the other side depicts Sigurd's brother-in-law Gunnar, bound in a snake pit. The Norse god Odin can be seen on one side of the stone 128, alongside one of his ravens, being swallowed by the wolf Fenrir at Ragnarok (the Norse end of the world).

## **11. Bride, St Bridget's Church**

St Bridget's Church in Bride (another name for Bridget) can be found along the A10 about 12 minutes north of Ramsey, in the centre of the village. The church itself is open in the mornings and closed in the evenings, so it's worth checking the times online. Inside the church are several carved stones. The most elaborate, sometimes called the Thor Cross (124), has several different scenes in a dense network of decoration. The scenes are very difficult to interpret today, and it has been suggested that they may include a hunting scene, the god Thor fishing with an ox-head in order to catch the mighty Midgard-serpent who encircles the earth, Thor wrestling with the Midgard-serpent, the cock of the resurrection, Romulus and Remus, and one of Thor's opponents, the giant Hrungrir.

## **12. Maughold Parish Church**

Maughold Parish church is located approximately eight minutes drive south of Ramsey along Maughold Road (A15). As you drive into the village there is a car park on the left hand side, and the church is a short three minute walk from there. The shelter containing the crosses is in the churchyard on the right hand side of the church. The shelter (or cross-house) contains 45 fragments of stone crosses dating from the Celtic to Viking periods. Amongst these crosses are the Hethinn stone (142) with possible Viking graffiti, a hunting scene (98) and a distinctive boar figure (133). Also found within the churchyard are the ruins of three early medieval keeills (the Manx Gaelic term for early medieval chapels that are square in plan).

We hope that you have enjoyed following the Viking Trail through Man's beautiful scenery. Now you can read more about the sites, crosses, stories, beliefs and practices of the Manx Scandinavians in the chapters that follow.

## CHAPTER 2

# *The Vikings: Myths and Misconceptions*

Brian McMahon

*Never before has such terror appeared in Britain as we have now suffered from a pagan race... The heathens poured out the blood of saints around the altar, and trampled on the bodies of saints in the temple of God, like dung in the streets.*

These words were written in 793AD by the Northumbrian scholar Alcuin of York after an attack by Scandinavian raiders on the monastery at Lindisfarne. They give some sense of the dramatic first impression the Vikings made on the peoples of Europe at the onset of the so-called 'Viking Age'. Iconic and romanticised depictions of these medieval pirates have been a staple of Western literature, art and cinema ever since, from Wagnerian operas to Hollywood action films. Like Alcuin, later writers have been at pains to emphasise the destructive barbarism of these raiders, but how fair are these depictions? And do they tell the whole story?

In the first place, the word 'Viking' as it is now used is something of a misnomer. The term derives from the Old Norse language, and originally referred specifically to those men who adventured overseas to raid and plunder (*vik* means bay or creek – as in *Reykjavik* in Iceland, where Scandinavian emigrants first settled around the year 870AD). In the Middle Ages these feared raiders were known as 'Ashmen' by the Germans, 'Norsemen' by the Gaels and collectively as 'the Danes' in Anglo-Saxon England. To 'go Viking' was something a man might do in his youth to accrue



honour and the spoils of war, but it was rare for any man to take part in foreign raids continuously throughout his life. The career Viking is largely the creation of a later age, and the true history of medieval Scandinavian society, and of the colonies founded in Iceland, Ireland, England, Greenland, the Faeroe Islands and on the Isle of Man, is far more complex than this stereotype suggests. Having passed from literature into legend, the Vikings are now perhaps more often misremembered and misrepresented than members of any other historical culture, and the number of unsubstantiated myths concerning them continues to grow.

The Viking Age dates roughly from the raid on Lindisfarne in 793 to the unsuccessful attempt by the Norwegians to conquer England in 1066. In the early part of this period, the peoples of Northern Europe were, indeed, 'a pagan race'. However one common misconception, encouraged by Wagner's operas and films like *The Vikings* (1958) and *The 13<sup>th</sup> Warrior* (1999), is that there was a single, uniform religion practised by all Vikings. In reality, there were many variations on the theme of Norse cosmology. Gods like Odin, Thor, Tyr, Heimdall and Freyr were accorded different significance and status across the disparate Viking world. The Norse religion had no name among the peoples who followed it, except perhaps the 'old custom' when contrasted with the 'new religion' of Christianity. Ultimately both Denmark and Norway formally converted to the new faith, although many continued such practices as ancestor worship and a belief in supernatural spirits of the land (*landvaettir*) long after.

From Alcuin's description of the sack of Lindisfarne, when holy Christian relics were looted by Viking raiders, we might be tempted to imagine a time of intense hostility between pagans and Christians. Surprisingly, this was not always the case, and in some places it appears that Christians and pagans were even able to co-exist in relative peace. We can see evidence of this on the Isle of Man in the stone carvings which show Christian motifs alongside scenes from pagan mythology. It has been suggested that pagan stories were adapted by Christian believers to help explain the new religion to recent converts. Archaeologists have identified several finds which support this view of a 'gradual' conversion, including a smith's mould from Trend in Jutland with spaces for the fashioning of a Thor's hammer amulet alongside two Christian crosses. A number of hammers featuring Christian ornamentation have also been discovered. Most remarkably in Iceland, around the year 1000 AD, mass Christianisation took place as the result of a vote held by the chieftains at the national meeting place, the *Althing*. This was the site of annual gatherings similar to the Tynwald ceremonies practised on the Isle of Man. Indeed, the name 'Tynwald' ('Tinvaal' in Manx Gaelic) is derived from the Old Norse word for a meeting or assembly, and it may be that on Man, as in Iceland, assemblies of this kind facilitated and helped to encourage the conversion of the Norse settlers.

Warlike they may have been, but the Vikings could also be prudent and diplomatic, and they understood the advantages of peaceful co-existence wherever they planned to settle or to trade. Fortified Viking settlements began to appear on the Isle of

Man in the ninth century, and remnants of two tenth-century longhouses still exist at the Braaid. The remains of smaller farmhouses have also been discovered at Doarlish Castle near Dalby, and at Cronk ny Merriu. Settlers farmed the land and engaged in trade with local people. Scandinavian merchants especially prized purchases of silver, gold, and glass beads, but also dealt in amber, fur, wax and salt. It is not clear how significant a role the Isle of Man played in trading such commodities, but its proximity to Britain made it relatively accessible for traders from Denmark and Norway who had settled there. Goods were bartered or exchanged for silver and gold (sometimes broken down into smaller fragments known as ‘hacksilver’ or ‘hackgold’). Throughout Europe, the Vikings were also heavily involved in the slave trade, often capturing hostages, including monks, women and children during their raids, and then selling them on or retaining them to work the land and serve in their settlements.

One of the most well-known misconceptions about the Viking warriors who carried out these raids is the nineteenth-century idea that they wore horned helmets to terrify their enemies in battle. Although some horned figures do exist in Nordic art (notably on the Oseberg tapestry discovered in Norway in 1904), they are usually interpreted by scholars as representing gods or monsters (or possibly priests), rather than mortal warriors. No horned helmet has been discovered from the period, and such headgear would, in any case, have been hugely impractical for the lightly-armoured Viking warrior. Even if horns could have been affixed to a metallic or leather cap, they would have caught enemy blades rather than deflecting them. Drinking horns, however, were widely used, and are depicted in poetry, on picture stones, and among other archaeological finds. The Icelandic *Prose Edda*, an important compendium of Old Norse mythology, tells the story of Thor being tricked by a giant into drinking from a horn which contained all the water in the oceans of the world – a task which ultimately defeated even the mighty thunder god. Toasts would be drunk from horns during feasts and to seal alliances. The claim that the ritual of clinking drinking horns to allow drink to spill from one to another as a deterrent to poisoners is, however, apocryphal. The colourful, somewhat macabre suggestion that Vikings regularly drank from the skulls of their defeated enemies is similarly unsupported by the archaeological evidence, and is most likely a later invention.

The widespread belief that Vikings couldn’t read or write is another misconception. Although it is generally true that literacy was a by-product of Christianisation, runic and Irish ogham alphabets were in use, as may be seen on several of the stone crosses found on Man. Most runic inscriptions were very brief and simply contained a memorial like those still used today on gravestones. The carving of runes into stone was a labour-intensive process and was often used for the commemoration of especially rich or successful warrior chieftains.

That ‘the Vikings never bathed’ is another popular myth. The Icelandic family sagas contain references to women washing men’s hair as a sign of affection, and the Icelandic lawbook *Gragas* (Grey-geese) demands severe penalties for any man who dirtied another to disgrace him. When the Danes first settled in the North East

of England (a region then known as the Danelaw) the Anglo-Saxons were actually struck by the high hygienic standards of these newcomers. This was said to make them especially attractive to Anglo-Saxon women! Archaeologists have found various grooming implements at Viking burial sites, including a small pestle and mortar discovered when excavating the grave of the so-called ‘Pagan Lady’ at Peel Castle on the west coast of Man. Not all contemporary observers were impressed, however. In a distant part of Europe, the Arabic traveller Ahmad ibn Fadlān, wrote about his time with a group of Vikings known as the *Rus*. These were Norse traders who travelled east across the Baltic and settled in parts of present-day Russia and Ukraine. In 921AD, Ibn Fadlān described them as,

*...The filthiest of all Allah's creatures: they do not clean themselves after excreting or urinating or when in a state of ritual impurity (i.e. after coitus) and do not <even> wash their hands after food. Indeed they are like asses that roam <in the fields>.*

It is important to remember that, as a devout Muslim, Ibn Fadlān set great store by a particular form of ritual washing, and also that he has repeatedly been accused by some scholars of exaggeration. Nevertheless it is clear that Viking hygiene was not consistent from one place to another, much like the Vikings themselves. While some were indeed ‘filthy’, as the modern stereotype suggests, others were so vain that not only the women but even the men may have worn make-up!

It would also be wrong to imagine that the Vikings were all remarkably tall, blonde and blue-eyed, as they were frequently portrayed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While some undoubtedly fitted this description, the more widely the Vikings travelled the more diverse their culture became, assimilating many different ethnic groups. The average Viking male was about 5'8" (173cm) in height – not especially tall for the time – and was often genetically indebted to generations of non-Scandinavian ancestors including the original inhabitants of what are now Russia, Ireland, Spain and France.

Following the conversion to Christianity in Iceland, the mythology and heroic legends of the Vikings began to be written down, providing the most complete record of the old beliefs available today. The stone crosses testify to the same stories having been known on the Isle of Man (perhaps in slightly different forms), but no contemporary manuscripts are known to have been made on the Island. Those textual records we do have were not produced until the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and because they were authored by Christians, there is some doubt as to how accurate a picture they present of pre-Christian traditions. Some scholars have seen evidence of ‘tampering’ with the oral source material to make it more palatable to a God-fearing readership. It may be, then, that we will never know the whole truth about the Vikings. What we can say with certainty is that, while Alcuin’s bloodcurdling account of them was disturbingly accurate, neither he nor the Romantics of the nineteenth century nor the film makers of the twentieth told the whole story.

## CHAPTER 3

# *Viking-Age Stones and Crosses*

Heidi Stoner and Aya van Renterghem

While following the Viking Trail, you will come across a great number of Viking-Age stones and crosses. These are some of the most detailed and intriguing remnants of that time and can be found in various places on the Island. In this chapter you will find out more about the monuments, their makers, the inscriptions they carry and the significance of their decorations. There are different ways of referring to these stones and crosses, and we have adopted the numbering of Manx National Heritage. In most cases, this number can be found on a small metal disc attached to the stone. The location of the monuments is indicated, followed by their Viking Trail number printed in bold between brackets.

The carved stone Viking monuments that populate the Isle of Man, most frequently found in parish churches, take the form of standing cross slabs. They are mostly dated to the tenth and eleventh centuries. The monuments are carved on at least two sides with the broad faces usually taking the form of a decorated cross, with images, patterns such as knot-work, interlace or ring chains. Runic writing is sometimes incorporated into this decoration. These monuments, while not unique to Man in form, do have a unique decorative scheme that separates the Manx corpus from other Viking stone sculpture found in such places as the North of England and Ireland. In form, the monuments clearly derive from earlier traditions of stone carving such as the High Crosses found in Irish monastic sites or the traditions of sculpture found in England. While incised stone inscriptions are found in Scandinavia, the sculpting of monumental forms in stone was a tradition unique to the early medieval world of the British Isles.

Some of the earliest carvings found on the Isle of Man are from Celtic religious sites, and bear ogham inscriptions. Ogham is an early medieval script mostly used for writing in Early Irish, predominantly found in Ireland and Western Britain.



*Fig. 5. Andreas 111.  
Photo by Heidi Stoner.*



Examples of this can be seen in the Manx National Heritage Museum (1), as well as a Celtic style of decoration (e.g. Braddan 72, 2). It is possible that the independent style which developed on the Island began with these early cross slab types, and was then influenced by new decorative styles and taste. The runic inscriptions are also more fully incorporated as a feature of the cross, in some cases being given an equal visual weight to the ornamentation.

Not all of the decorated cross slabs contain runes, however. So far we have discovered runic inscriptions on thirty-five stones. These runic crosses show two different styles: type A has a sculptured cross on the face and back of the stone, and the runic message is cut on the edge of the slab, usually running from the base to the top; type B also has a cross on both sides, but the inscription is on the face, along the side of the cross. The stone at Ballaugh (8), for instance, is a type B, which means that on the face of the cross the inscription is placed down the left hand side of the cross while on the right, there is a decorative interlaced pattern, that differs from the contrasting design of the cross itself.

Runes or the runic alphabet is a script which probably originated in the first century in Scandinavia, and was likely derived from the Roman alphabet. Runes appear all over Europe in various forms, and are used for writing different languages. The most common runes are epigraphical, which means that they are found carved in stone, wood, metal, bone and other solid materials. All inscriptions on the Isle of Man are found on stone, and the majority are carved using Scandinavian runes. The Scandinavian runic alphabet, also called *futhork* after its first six letters, changed much over time, which is why we distinguish between the older *futhork*, the younger *futhork*, and medieval runes. The younger *futhork* was mostly used by the Vikings and shows up in two variants: the short-twig, and the long-branch variant. The Manx stones show that short-twig Viking runes were clearly favoured on the Island. There is one stone, Kirk Michael 130 (7) written in the other variant, one in Maughold (142, 12) which contains a mix of both, and one containing cryptic runes which as yet have not been deciphered (Andreas 111, 10). Additionally, there are two stones at Maughold which have inscriptions in Old English instead of the commonly used Old Norse, and the carver accordingly used Anglo-Saxon runes (42 and 43, 12). (fig. 5)

The importance of the runic inscriptions is not just that they are direct evidence for Viking presence and influence on the Isle of Man, they can also tell us more about who raised or carved a particular stone and for what reason. The majority of the Manx rune-stones contain so-called memorial inscriptions. These usually tell us the name of the person who raised the cross, who the cross is for (the deceased), and their relationship. Sometimes the name of the rune-carver or cross-maker (the inscriptions often say 'maker', which is rather ambiguous), or the reason for raising the stone are also mentioned. The inscriptions usually display formulaic language which is similar to the Scandinavian memorial inscriptions. Two clear examples of this are Andreas 131 (10), and Michael 101 (7): the first inscription reads:

**ṣaṅt:ulf:hin:suarti:raisti:krus:þana:aftir:arin:biaurk.kuinu:sina**, which translates as ‘Sondulf the Black raised this cross in memory of Arinbiorg, his wife’. The second inscription also tells us the name of the maker: **mail:brikti:sunr:apakans:smiþ:raist i:krus:pana:fur:salu:sina:sin:brukuin:kaut|kirþi:þana:auk|ala:imaun**, ‘Mælbrigde, son of Athakan, the smith, raised this cross for his soul (to be saved from?) sin, but Gaut made it and all in Man’.

The other stones simply show some runic graffiti, or less formal messages, such as Maughold 145 (12), which reads **iuan+brist+raisti+þasir+runur+|(f) uþarkhniastbml+**, ‘Ióan the priest carved these runes’, followed by the runic alphabet (the last section, which begins with **fupark**). The two Anglo-Saxon inscriptions both convey personal names, one of which, we think, is the common Old English name ‘Blaecmon’ (Maughold 42, 12).

The runes are of course not the only interesting elements on the stones. The decorations have their own significance and are equally telling about Manx society during the Viking period. Figural decoration on the Isle of Man is often divided into two categories: pagan or Christian. The motif of beasts or dragons, which is found throughout the British Isles and Scandinavia, suggests a pagan background, particularly on Viking-Age stone carving. These beasts can appear in scenes (e.g. Jurby 93, 9) or else are independently carved as a decorative motif (e.g. Braddan 135 and 136, 2). While the styles of carving may differ and change over time, there is a clear preference for interlaced and intertwined beasts, ranging from the single knotted serpent found on Maughold 91 (12), to the footed beast intertwined with tendrils found on Braddan 135 (2). However, we do not know whether the Scandinavian Manx understood them as representing the Midgard Serpent (the mighty World-Serpent who will kill the god Thor at the end of the world) or the Beasts of Hell, a popular early Christian motif found elsewhere in the British Isles, although both show that supernatural dangers were thought to be ever present and that they were both feared and revered.

The distinction between pagan and Christian is thus not always helpful, also since it does not account for all sculptured scenes, for instance the ‘Hart and Hound’ scenes found on Man (e.g. Michael 105, 7). However, as all of the figural decoration is carved on monuments that take the form of the cross, any depiction of figures from outside the biblical canon must be understood within a broader visual framework of Christianity. Put quite simply, these are Christian monuments, as many of the inscriptions state explicitly: this *cross* was raised. So our interpretation of scenes must be primarily focused through a Christian lens.

At the point when these crosses were erected, the individuals raising them, and those they commemorated, appear to have been fully Christianized. Some of the images demonstrate this world view clearly, such as the Christian figures on crosses like Michael 100 or the depiction of the Crucifixion on Michael 129 cross slab (7). This Crucifixion scene is one of a relatively small number of early medieval crucifixions (less than twenty carvings have been counted across the early medieval British Isles). It is,

however, in keeping with the early medieval tradition of depicting the figure of Christ in a triumphant manner. Above the ring-headed cross a cock is carved, symbol of the resurrection, and also a winged angel. There are many figures, however, which cannot be identified, sometimes due to fragmentation or damage to the sculptures. Sometimes we cannot interpret the meaning of a figure because there is too little information; an example of this can be found on Michael 123, where the female figure is sometimes, but inconclusively, identified as the giant-girl Gerd, a figure from Old Norse legend, standing by a tethered horse. Some of the scenes can be understood when considered in a mythological context, such as Sigurd (Andreas 121, 10) or Heimdall (Jurby 127, 9).

Gaut's Cross, found at Kirk Michael (101), is often said to be the 'earliest' Viking cross on the Isle of Man. While this is impossible to ascertain, the Cross presents a very interesting case for looking at the patterning and decorations of Viking monuments on Man. On the side bearing the runic inscription (see above), the central cross shaft is carved with a Borre-style ring-chain motif, which was popular throughout the Viking world. This motif, dated in Scandinavia to c. 890-960, began to lead a life of its own in the Viking world in the British Isles. It was likely imported independently from Scandinavia into the various regions of the Viking world, but occurs with the most frequency on the Isle of Man (e.g. Andreas 131, Ballaugh). It is found here so often that it is sometimes, within the context of stone carving, called the 'Manx Pattern'. The Manx style for this motif is distinct: it is always carved with the tongue pointing downwards, whereas in England, for instance, the tongue usually points up. Along the right and left of the ring-chain cross shaft are two different interlace motifs. On the right is a tendril motif, which again has parallels in England, but is much more common on the Isle of Man. The Borre-style ring-chain can be seen at Ballaugh; here it is developed with tendrils and pellets. This shows the flexibility of these patterns, which were changed, adapted and hybridized on the Isle of Man. This is evidence that the sculptors of Man were not simply importing Scandinavian styles to use on Manx-made sculptures, they were developing their own distinct regional style that spoke to the tastes and preferences of the Manx Vikings.

One image of particular interest to the Viking Age comes in the form of graffiti: lines scratched into the surface of a monument, preserving what may have been an individual's fleeting thought, rather than a carefully designed and complex programme, expertly carved. This is the image of a ship scratched into the surface of Maughold 142 (12), which recalls a thirteenth-century carved stick found in Bergen, Norway. This image, which since it is a *grafitto* is impossible to date and may originate from well beyond the Viking Age, shows neither a pagan nor a Christian scene, but rather depicts an important aspect of life central to living on the Isle of Man, in the heart of the Irish Sea. (*fig. 6*)

Manx society was hybrid in nature, as the sculpture shows. This fact is underlined by its runic inscriptions. As noted earlier, only a portion of the wealth of Man's stone carvings is runic, and within that small group there are different alphabets and

languages. Further, a number of stones contain ogham inscriptions suggesting a Celtic background. Another script frequently used for inscriptions is the Roman alphabet, which we still use today. This is an impressive linguistic mix, even though scholars often complain it also led to bad grammar. Particularly intriguing examples of this linguistic diversity are Maughold 145 (12) and Kirk Michael 130 (7), which show both runic and ogham inscriptions. A rune-stone (118) and a small group of sculptured stones with graffiti in a Roman script common in manuscripts from the British Isles were found in Bride church (11). This then also gives us a clue about the kinds of people who carved (and carved on) these stones: in this case, people with a knowledge of ecclesiastical Latin, likely clergymen. Of course, this also confirms a Christian context.

The language of the inscription does not always accurately represent the cultural background of the deceased and/or the person raising the stone. For instance, Michael 130, a stone whose ogham inscription already demonstrated a Celtic influence, also has Celtic names in the memorial inscription, written in the Old Norse language. Indeed, there is a rather high proportion of Celtic names on the crosses, even though they are mostly inscribed in Scandinavian runes and in the Norse language.

The cultural richness of these stones and their inscriptions is unique to the Isle of Man, and are some of the many reasons that make the Island well worth studying and exploring.



*Fig. 6. Maughold 142.  
Photo by Heidi Stoner.*

## CHAPTER 4

# *Mythological and Heroic Motifs in Manx Stone Sculpture*

Timothy J.S. Bourns

The Vikings began to settle on the Isle of Man in the ninth century. Little is known about the conversion of the Norse settlers to Christianity, but a change in burial rites indicates that a religious shift took place at the beginning of the tenth century. The Norse incomers started to bury their deceased in existing Christian cemeteries and to commission stone crosses as memorial grave-markers for the dead. Manx memorial sculpture is important physical evidence of the Scandinavian conversion to Christianity.

The stone crosses display elaborate scenes featuring human and animal figures that must have had symbolic significance. The Christian symbolism in these scenes is clearly discernible, but many images can be linked to ancient Scandinavian myths and legends that the settlers brought with them and kept alive through oral tradition. Early scholarship was overly ambitious in interpreting many of the pictorial scenes from Manx sculpture as representing the Norse myths; today scholars are much more cautious. While various interpretations have been offered, the symbolism of many scenes cannot now be identified. This chapter outlines some of the clearest parallels between the images on Manx memorial crosses and pre-Christian Norse mythology, including possible depictions of the gods Odin, Thor, and Heimdall; seeresses, valkyries, or fate-figures (norns); the trickster god Loki; and the legendary hero Sigurd who slew the dragon Fafnir.

Most written sources for Norse mythology and heroic legend come from medieval Iceland, a country first settled in roughly 870 AD, and which officially converted to



Christianity in 999/1000 AD. In the 13<sup>th</sup>- and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, the ‘Icelandic miracle’ took place: an explosion of literary production on this remote island. Three written sources are of particular relevance: the *Poetic Edda*, the *Prose Edda*, and *The Saga of the Volsungs*. The *Poetic Edda* refers to a collection of Old Norse poems preserved in a single manuscript, which was written in roughly 1270 AD, though much of its source material was certainly composed at an earlier date. The text consists of twenty-nine anonymous poems, dealing with mythological material and with ancient Scandinavian and Germanic heroes such as Sigurd. The *Prose Edda* was composed around 1220 AD by Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241), the Icelandic historian, scholar, poet, and law-speaker. It was intended to tell Icelandic readers and would-be poets about the myths that underlie poetic compositions; many of Snorri’s stories about the exploits of the gods and giants are found nowhere else. *The Saga of the Volsungs* was composed around 1250 AD by an unknown author. It elaborates the heroic poems of the *Poetic Edda* into a full prose account of the life of Sigurd and the rise and fall of his family, the Volsungs, who traced their lineage back to the god Odin.

Below I discuss some of the clearest parallels between the images found on Isle of Man stone sculpture and the mythological and heroic literature of medieval Iceland.

## Andreas 128 – Odin

Also known as ‘Thorwald’s Cross’, this stone fragment clearly depicts a male figure with a bird on his shoulder, with a spear close by, and a wolf below him. The wolf is biting or trying to swallow him (his right foot and ankle are in the wolf’s mouth). The figure is widely thought to represent the Norse god Odin: on his shoulder sits one of his two ravens and we know that the monstrous wolf Fenrir will devour him at Ragnarok (the great battle at the end of the mythical present when many gods will perish in war against Loki and the giants). The Norse myths tell us that Odin is the head of the pantheon, the most ancient and All-Father of the gods, and the ruler of Asgard, the realm of the gods. He is the god of wisdom, war, poetry, magic, and death. His two ravens are named Hugin and Munin; their names are connected with the idea of ‘mind’. They are often translated as ‘Thought’ and ‘Memory’.

If the raven that sits on the figure’s shoulder is one of Odin’s ravens, then the wolf underneath is surely Fenrir, the son of Loki and the giantess Angrboda. In Snorri’s account the monstrous wolf is bound by the gods because he is considered too dangerous, is growing too large, and prophecies foretold that he would bring harm to them. The god Tyr was the only one who dared approach the wolf and feed him. After Fenrir broke two ordinary fetters, the gods devised a third using magic. The wolf refused to be bound again unless one of the gods placed his hand in its mouth as a pledge that no trickery was involved. Tyr was the only one brave enough to make this sacrifice. When Fenrir realised he was trapped, he bit off Tyr’s hand. Moreover, at Ragnarok – Odin is swallowed up by Fenrir, though he will be avenged by his son

Vidar who survives the apocalypse. The spear may represent Gungnir, the magical spear of Odin.

On the other side of the stone fragment is an image of a Christian figure—possibly Christ or a priest – holding a book (perhaps the Bible) and a cross with a fish nearby and a defeated serpent below. While Ragnarok represents the end of an era and the demise of most of the Norse gods, the other side is filled with Christian symbolism, representing the transition from paganism to Christianity.

### **Kirk Bride 129– Thor**

This is also known as ‘Thor’s Cross’; some researchers have seen various myths involving the god Thor in its ornamentation. On one side of the cross, below the circle to the right, a man with a beard and a belt is depicted who might be Thor, the red-bearded god. Thor is the son of Odin and Jord (Earth), the guardian of the gods, and



*Fig. 7. Jurby 127.  
Photo by Heidi Stoner.*

he is associated with thunder and lightning, strength and seafaring. Almost all of his stories tell of giant-slaying and he is the strongest of gods and men. He also possesses the powerful belt of strength and when he buckles it on his divine power doubles.

This figure is also holding what could be an ox-head in his left hand, echoing a tale of Thor's struggle against the Midgard-serpent. One of the children of Loki and a sibling of Fenrir, this mighty beast lies in the deep sea and encircles the earth, biting its own tail. According to Snorri, Thor went fishing with the giant Hymir and insisted on going further and further out to sea. He brought the head of Hymir's biggest ox with him as bait. The Midgard-serpent took the bait and a great battle ensued. Just as Thor raised his powerful hammer Mjollnir to strike, Hymir, who had grown immensely afraid, cut Thor's line so that the serpent sank back into the sea. Thor punched Hymir so that he fell overboard. Thor and the Midgard-serpent will meet again at Ragnarok, where they will kill each other. The serpent might be represented by the band of ring-chain on the left and right sides of the cross, forming a border, and its head is carved close to the figure of Thor on the right side.

On the opposite side of the cross, on the left side below the circle, is a large figure with outspread legs. This might be the giant Hrungrnir, the strongest of the giants, whom Thor defeated in an epic duel. While these interpretations are certainly plausible, they cannot ultimately be proven.

## Jurby 127 – Heimdall

On the top of this broken slab is a figure of a bearded man wearing a tunic and a short pointed sword. Originally there was a bird flying above him that is now broken off. His left hand is on his sword and his right hand is holding a long horn to his mouth. He is thought to be the god Heimdall, described as the watchman of the gods. He sits at the edge of heaven guarding the rainbow bridge Bifrost against the giants. Significantly, 'He has a trumpet called Gjallarhorn and its blast can be heard in all worlds', and it is this horn that Heimdall will blow to signal the beginning of Ragnarok. Then Loki and Heimdall fight one another. (*fig. 7*)

## Female figures

**Michael 123** depicts a female figure in a trailing dress holding what might be a staff or wand. She may represent a seeress: a prophetess who knows the past and can see the future. Archaeologists have uncovered a number of rich female graves containing iron staffs (see Chapter 5) and in medieval Icelandic sagas, these characters are often depicted wearing a cloak and wielding a staff. In *Eric the Red's saga* Thorbjorg 'the little seeress' is said to wear a blue or black cloak and to carry a staff. (*fig. 8*)

A woman with a trailing dress, carrying a staff, also appears on **Jurby 127**; and a woman with a trailing dress but without a staff can be found on **Jurby 125**. These figures, however, could also represent 'valkyries': female figures that choose which warriors are



*Fig. 8. Michael 123.  
Photo by Leszek Gardela.*



going to die in battle and bring them to Valhalla, the hall of the slain, ruled over by Odin. In the eddic poem *Volund's poem*, three valkyries are said to have swan-garments that allow them to fly and they sit on a lake-shore to spin linen. A third possibility is that these images represent figures of fate, sometimes called norns: female beings who established the laws and chose people's fates.



*Fig. 9. Andreas 121.  
Photo by Heidi Stoner.*



## Sigurd the Dragon Slayer

The hero Sigurd is said to have slain the dragon Fafnir. Scenes from the legend can also be found on wood and stone carvings from Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and England, and there are four Manx picture-stones that depict various episodes from the legend. While there clearly existed numerous different, yet parallel, versions of the story, the theme of the dragon-slaying is consistent, and is clearly identifiable from the details on the stones. The legend as told in medieval Iceland can be summarised as follows:

There was a man named Hreidmar who had three sons: Fafnir, Otter, and Regin. One day Otter, in otter-form, caught a salmon; Loki threw a stone at the otter and killed him. Hreidmar demanded recompense; and Loki paid him in gold that he took from a dwarf by force. The dwarf cursed the gold as he handed it over and the curse seems to have followed the treasure. Fafnir killed his father for the gold, hid the body, and kept the treasure for himself. As a result he turned into an evil dragon.

Regin became the foster-father of the young hero Sigurd and made him a sword called Gram with which to kill Fafnir. Earlier in the tale, Sigurd was guided by Odin to find the greatest horse alive: Grani, a descendant of Odin's own eight-legged steed Sleipnir. Armed with the sword and riding Grani, Sigurd rode to Gnita-heath to slay the dragon. Sigurd slays the serpent by digging a deep pit and stabbing his sword upwards. He escapes the dragon's poisonous blood by digging multiple pits to drain it away, at the advice of an old and bearded man: Odin in disguise.

Before Fafnir dies he warns Sigurd that Regin will betray him. Regin then cuts out the dragon's heart, drinks its blood, and asks Sigurd to roast the heart over the fire. And as written in the saga, 'Sigurd went and roasted it on a spit. And when the juice sputtered out he touched it with his finger to see whether it was done. He jerked his finger to his mouth, and when the blood from the dragon's heart touched his tongue he could understand the language of birds'.

The birds warn Sigurd of Regin's intended deceit and suggest that he kill him and take the gold for himself. Sigurd cuts off Regin's head, eats Fafnir's heart and drinks his blood. The birds suggest that he journey to the mountain Hindarfjall to find the valkyrie Sigrdrifa (named Brynhild in the saga). There he acquires wisdom through knowledge of runes, charms and good advice which she teaches him. Sigurd rides to Fafnir's lair and loads the gold and other treasures onto Grani's back.

## Maughold 122

The base of this carving probably shows a scene from the Sigurd story that is not found elsewhere in pictorial form: Loki shying stones at an otter. The horse Grani can also be seen above with the gold-hoard won by Sigurd upon his back.

## Andreas 121

This remarkable stone sculpture shows Sigurd slaying the dragon Fafnir on the left-hand panel, and above he is depicted roasting the dragon's heart on a spit over a fire, with his burnt fingers on his mouth. His horse Grani appears over his shoulder and his ear seems to be cocked, presumably to hear the birds chirping nearby. In the centre of the stone's other face can be seen Gunnar, Sigurd's sworn-brother and brother-in-law who took the treasure after Sigurd's death. There are interlaced bands tying his ankles and wrists and coiled serpents surround him. In Norse tradition, Gunnar meets his end when he is thrown into a pit filled with snakes by his sister's husband, Atli (Attila the Hun) who wants to get his hands on the dragon-hoard. (*fig. 9*)

## Jurby 119

The right side of this stone clearly shows Sigurd stabbing the dragon Fafnir. Below this, Sigurd can faintly be seen roasting the dragon's heart and tasting its blood. Even further below, at one side of a tree, a horse that might be Grani is depicted, while a bird that might be one of those that speak to Sigurd can be seen on the other side.

## Malew 120

While the scenes on this stone are extremely faded, elements from the Sigurd story can still be detected: on the right-hand side of the lower panel, Sigurd is seen slaying the dragon from below with the sword Gram. In the upper panel he is shown roasting Fafnir's heart on a spit and tasting its blood. Above and on the left, there is a horse that is probably Grani.

## Conclusions

The parallels between picture-stones on the Isle of Man and later medieval Icelandic prose and poetry suggests that the tales of Old Norse myth and legend were more similar across time and space than one might expect from an oral-based tradition.

When pagan Scandinavians settled the Isle of Man they established themselves in a community that was already Christian. They quickly embraced local burial practices and erected these wonderful stone crosses with their elaborate ornamentation. Did this change mean they had completely converted to Christianity, altering their lives, behaviour, and beliefs? We do not really know for sure. One thing is certain: the Manx stone sculpture not only depicts scenes of Christian significance, but also tales of the Norse gods and pre-Christian heroes, suggesting a period of religious syncretism – the merging of different beliefs – when the old faith met the new.

## CHAPTER 5

# *Viking Death Rituals on the Isle of Man*

Leszek Gardela

Surviving written accounts tell us very little about Viking-Age Scandinavians on the Isle of Man. We don't know if they came here with hostile intentions or whether they wanted peaceful dealings with the local population and to find new land to settle. Some short runic inscriptions survive (see Chapter 3), but otherwise all we have to tell us about how the Vikings on the Isle of Man lived are the many exciting archaeological discoveries made over the last two centuries. Archaeological finds offer a unique opportunity to explore different aspects of the past. Among other things, they tell us where the Vikings settled and how they managed to live. They show us their craftwork, in metal, stone and in other kinds of design. We can reconstruct their ships and work out where else they went in the Irish Sea region. But we also find out about less tangible things – their worldviews and beliefs. The mental universe of the Scandinavian immigrants on the Isle of Man (and in many other places in the vast Viking world) can often be explored through the evidence from their burials. It is through death that we learn about their lives and their understanding of the world around them. This chapter gives a brief account of a number of intriguing graves found on the Isle of Man, of the elaborate rituals that took place at Norse funerals and will explore what these can tell us about the ways that the Scandinavians here thought and felt about life and death.

### **Viking Funerals on the Isle of Man**

Viking Age Scandinavians had very diverse ways of dealing with the dead. Wherever we discover their burials, in Scandinavia or elsewhere in the Viking world, we find that the bodies were treated in a range of different ways and various rituals were

performed before, during and after the funeral. The same is true of the Viking way of death on the Isle of Man. Most of the Viking graves excavated so far on Man contain the remains of men. And although each of the graves differs in important ways, they do share some similarities.

One of the earliest discoveries from the late 1920s is a burial mound at Knock y Doonee, in the northern part of the island. This contained a series of clench nails implying that the dead man was buried in a boat. Also in the grave were a broad range of objects: a sword, a spearhead, a shield (though only its hemispherical shield-boss remained), and a knife. In addition, there were also smith's tools – metal tongs and a hammer – a lead fishing weight, and lavishly decorated horse tack. All these things suggest a long and quite elaborate funeral ceremony. Judging by the number and quality of the finds, the dead man must have belonged to the upper stratum of society.

Another intriguing boat grave was discovered in the 1940s at Balladoole (4) in the southern parish of Arbory (*fig. 3*). This boat seems to have been clinker-built and was around 11m in length. Once again the dead man was accompanied by a range of objects, including a shield with a conical boss and two or three knives. The man also had a whetstone for sharpening his weapons and a flint strike-a-light – these may have been hanging from a leather belt. Only a buckle and a strap-end from the belt were preserved. Among other things, the Balladoole grave also included the remains of a splendidly decorated horse-bridle and stirrups. Somewhat surprisingly, given the wealth of this burial, no weapons (apart from the shield) were found. As in Knock y Doonee, the contents and form of this grave hint at an elaborate funeral ceremony for an important man.

The grave from Cronk Moar, near the northwest coast, also deserves mention. Its internal construction is quite different from the two boat-graves discussed above. Here it looks as if the dead man was buried in a kind of underground room or house, a so-called 'chamber-grave', as some fragments of wood have survived. He was wearing a shaggy, woollen cloak fastened with a bronze ringed-pin and he had a number of weapons, including a sword in a beautifully decorated scabbard of moulded leather and a spear. A conical boss was also found, implying that a shield was placed in the grave.

## The Man from Ballateare

Among all the richly furnished Viking-Age graves on the Isle of Man, there is one which attracts particular attention, not only because of the exceptionally good preservation of its contents, but also due to the bloodcurdling rituals that must have taken place at the funeral. This grave was excavated in 1946 at Ballateare, on the west coast in Jurby parish and it offers an exciting insight into the complex belief-systems of the Vikings on Man.

First of all a relatively deep grave-pit was dug. This was to hold a wooden coffin, with the body of a man whose age at death was between 18 and 30. Apart from the

man's body, the coffin also contained a wide array of objects, including a sword in a wooden scabbard with a baldric (a diagonal strap), a spear, a knife and a bronze ringed-pin.

The ringed-pin lay at the dead man's left shoulder suggesting that he may have been dressed in a cloak, fastened by the pin. When the grave was excavated, the knife was lying on the man's chest, but originally it may have been suspended round his neck. By the man's right leg lay the sheathed sword, broken in several places. The spear that lay by the dead man's left leg might also have been broken in order to fit it into the relatively short coffin. On the iron shield-boss, discovered outside the coffin, we can see clear marks of two parallel blows.

Why were the Ballateare weapons damaged like this? The blows and breakages may not have happened in battle, but could have been a ritual act performed at the funeral. The intention may have been to ceremonially and symbolically 'kill' the weapons so that they could not be used by anyone else. Another explanation for this deliberate destruction at the graveside may have been to deter potential robbers by making the valuable weapons useless.

We can't be sure whether the objects were put in the coffin before it was lowered into the grave-pit or when it was already inside the pit, but the former seems more likely. There probably wouldn't have been enough space to reach down into the coffin if it had already been lowered; the mourners would have had to throw the various items down into the coffin from the graveside above. The next stage of the funeral procedure involved sealing the coffin with a wooden lid and placing on top of it two small stones and two spears whose tips pointed towards the foot-end of the grave. The pit was then filled with fine, white sand. Once the pit had been filled in, strips of turf were brought to the site and the construction of the mound began. It seems that the turf was cut somewhere quite a long way from the burial site, perhaps coming from the land owned by the dead man?

Other ritual acts that took place at Ballateare were both puzzling and violent. When the mound was excavated, one of the first things archaeologists found in its upper levels was the body of an adult woman aged between 20-30 at death. Her arms were raised and the back of her skull had been sliced off by something sharp, probably a sword. This suggests that she may have been sacrificed. Medieval textual sources mention ritual executions as accompanying Viking funerals, and there is more evidence of such killings from a number of archaeological sites in Scandinavia and elsewhere in Europe. It's quite possible that this is also what happened at Ballateare, and that the woman, perhaps one of the dead man's slaves, was killed to accompany her master into the afterlife.

The final stages of this elaborate funeral involved scattering cremated animal bones: those of a dog, a horse, an ox and sheep, in the uppermost layer of the mound. Traces of a post-hole were also found, so perhaps there was an upright wooden post as



a grave-marker. Unfortunately, nothing of the actual post remained, so we don't know whether it was carved or had some runic writing on it.

The reconstruction drawing by Mirosław Kuźma shows the contents of the coffin as it lay in the grave-pit (for this purpose the coffin is shown without a lid). The dead man's skeletal remains were very poorly preserved and so, apart from determining the man's age, we can't say much about his actual appearance. But, from the placement of the objects – the ringed-pin at the left shoulder, the sword and shield by his right side and the spear by his left – it could be argued that the man was left-handed. The sword scabbard-mounts, however, might contradict this. Their positioning suggests that the Ballateare sword-scabbard could only have been worn by the left side and therefore would have been used by someone who was right-handed. One striking find in the Ballateare grave is the shield, whose painted board remains were unusually well preserved; normally it's only the metal shield-boss that survives. We can see black and white bands on the shield, with red dots on the black bands. Our reconstruction tries to show how it may originally have appeared, and it registers the traces of two parallel blows inflicted upon the shield-boss. We've also shown the intentional damage to the other weapons – the sword and spear shaft – probably caused as part of the funeral ceremony. (*fig. 10*)

## The 'Pagan Lady'

These intriguing rituals took place during men's funerals, but it is also worth taking a closer look at how important women were treated after their deaths.

One of the most interesting female graves found on the Isle of Man is that of the so-called 'Pagan Lady'. It was discovered at a cemetery in St Patrick's Isle at Peel and dates to the tenth century. This middle-aged woman was buried in what is known as a lintel-grave, essentially a grave-pit whose sides were lined with stone slabs. She was laid on her back with her arms by her sides and her head resting on a feather-filled pillow. Remains of organic materials (including 'sprang', a kind of textile resembling a net) found near her head strongly suggest that she may have worn some sort of head-covering.

A wide range of objects was found in the grave. The most elaborate was a magnificent necklace consisting of over 70 beads, each of a different type. Interestingly, some of the amber beads probably came from the Baltic area. On her chest the woman probably had a pouch or bag containing some tiny metal utensils. At her waist were two knives (one of which may have been hanging from a belt) and by her right leg lay iron shears and a comb. Both the shears and the comb may have hung from a tablet-woven braided belt. Nearby was a small 'pestle and mortar', the pestle being a rod-shaped flint and the mortar, a cup-shaped mudstone with a hole bored into it. These may have been used to prepare medicines or cosmetics. She also had an ammonite fossil and an amber pendant, which may have functioned as charms.



*Fig. 10. Artistic reconstruction of the Ballateare grave. Drawing by Mirosław Kuźma.  
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*Fig. 11. Artistic reconstruction of the 'Pagan Lady' grave. Drawing by Mirosław Kuźma.  
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A truly puzzling object discovered by the woman's right side was an iron rod, about a centimetre thick and originally about a metre in length. The rod was covered with several types of textile, remains of feathers (probably from a goose-wing) and seeds. It may have been used as a poker or a roasting spit, but there is also an alternative possibility. Similar iron rods have been found in various Viking-Age graves in Sweden, Norway and Denmark, predominantly in richly equipped women's graves. It's been argued that some (or all) of these objects may have played a significant role in performing a kind of Norse magic known as *seid*. The rods, or 'staffs of sorcery' as they are sometimes called, seem to have meant something significant and the fact that they looked like everyday objects such as roasting spits or distaffs for spinning may have been deliberate. The staffs would recall the symbolism of fire, and of spinning. They may have symbolised a supernatural basis for the kinds of activities women performed in their daily lives. Although the peculiar rod found in the Pagan Lady's grave has no direct parallels in the British Isles (apart from one puzzling object from Kilmainham in Dublin), there is a carved stone from Kirk Michael (123) on the Isle of Man which seems to illustrate a staff-bearing figure. This figure may perhaps represent a woman who practises rituals or a mythical sorceress. We find images of almost exactly the same kind of staffs (with 'split terminals', branching like a plant) elsewhere: in Denmark (on a metal harness-part) and in Norway (on small golden foil plates, known as *guldgubber*). This grave is unique, not only on the Isle of Man, but also in the wider Viking world, for the large number of intriguing items of evidently 'pagan' nature which it contains. Clearly the woman must have had significant standing and quite possibly she had a connection with the supernatural.

Our reconstruction drawing captures just how unique the grave was and shows how it may have looked just before it was sealed with two layers of stone slabs laid on top. Although numerous textile remains were found inside it, we don't know exactly what the woman was wearing, so we've suggested a relatively simple dress in order to avoid over-interpreting the evidence. The textile net (*sprang*) remains near her head imply that she may have had a head-covering and so this detail has been included.

Finally, it is worth noting that the woman suffered from the disease *osteomalacia* (also known as rickets). This often results from vitamin D deficiency and leads to body pains, muscle weakness and bone fragility. It's been suggested that the disease may have been caused by lack of sunlight, a diet lacking oily fish and food rich in vitamin D, or by multiple pregnancies. Her markedly bowed leg-bones would have given her serious problems with walking. Some medieval texts and folklore beliefs suggest that people who could not walk normally were often regarded as being special and as associated with the supernatural. The disease of the 'Pagan Lady', painful and disabling as it may have been, could thus have predestined her to play an exceptional role in her society. (fig. 11)

## Performance and Remembrance

As we've seen, at Viking funerals the mourners celebrated and commemorated the lives of their dead in all sorts of ways. Some parts of these ceremonies would have been rather violent while others must have been more peaceful, without the ritual killing of animals or the execution of other humans. The Viking graves from the Isle of Man show that funerals must have been complex ceremonies, requiring significant amounts of effort and time. They must have certainly followed some ritual scenario, though there were probably also opportunities to improvise. The placement of objects in the graves shows considerable care for the dead, ensuring they are sent off to the Otherworld(s) in a proper way. We don't know who was responsible for orchestrating and leading such ceremonies. It might have been a single individual (a man or a woman) or a group of people; perhaps the family or close friends of the deceased were in charge. Funerals must have been intended to strengthen and (re)create the memories of the dead for the living and the objects within the particular graves may have alluded to the roles they had filled in life. The men buried with weapons in Ballateare and Cronk Moar may have lived as warriors. Some of the tools found in Knock y Doonee could imply that the dead man was involved in metalwork, perhaps working as a smith. The 'Pagan Lady', with her vast array of unique paraphernalia, is likely to have been a prominent figure in her society. Maybe she was a sorceress, or at least someone familiar with the supernatural. But all these grave-finds have symbolic overtones, and we can imagine that they may have reflected sophisticated concepts of the afterlife, or refer to tales of the gods or to heroes, known from myths and legends which were told and retold over generations. The graves of the Vikings on the Isle of Man are shrouded in mystery and today we can only speculate who these people really were. However, when we think about them, not only do we acknowledge their deaths, but once again we commemorate their lives.



*Fig. 12. Replica of the Ballateare ringed-pin by Grzegorz 'Greg' Pilarczyk and Kamil Stachowiak. Commissioned by Leszek Gardela. Photo by Kamil Stachowiak.*



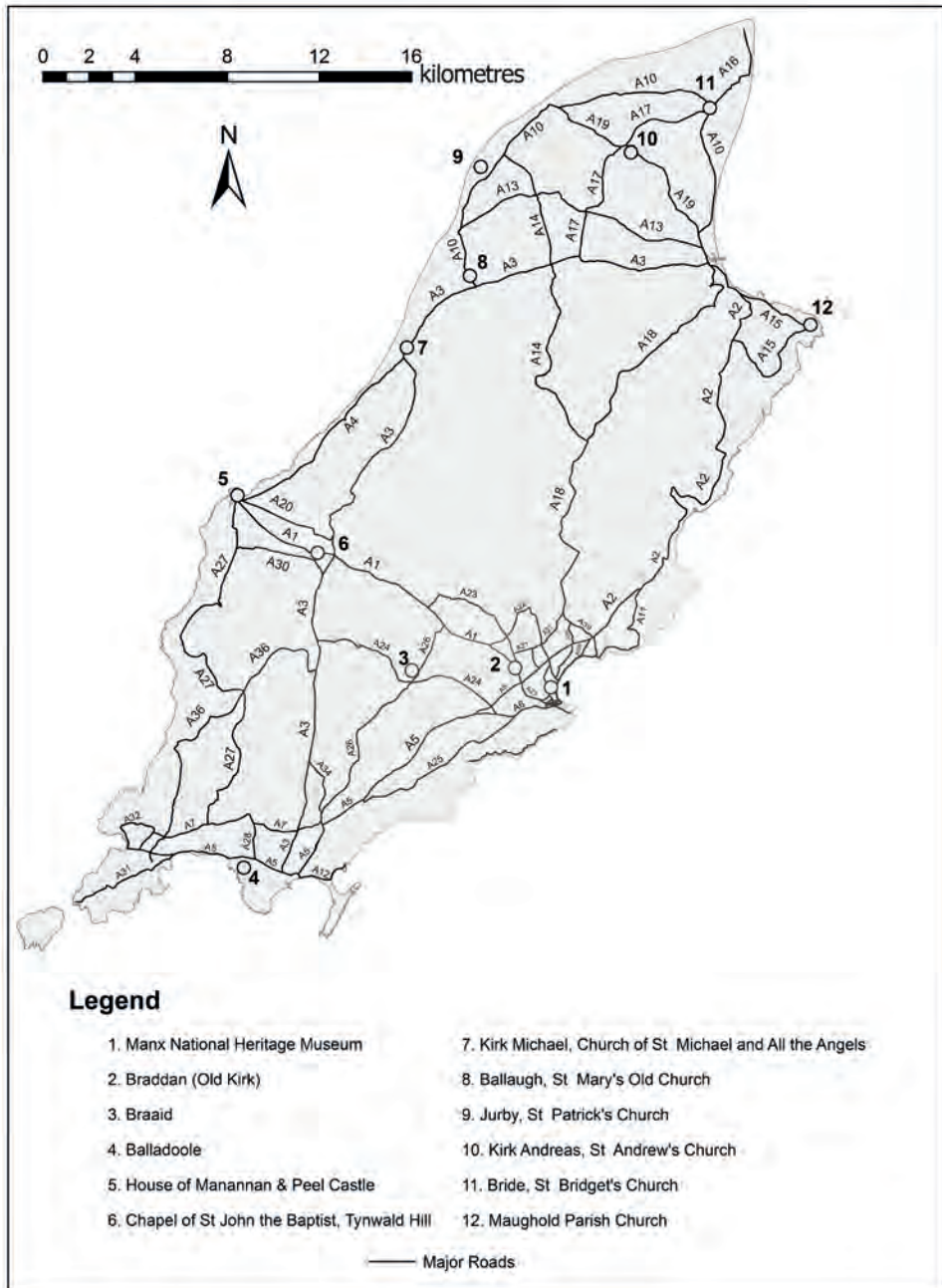
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*Map of the Viking Trail.  
Designed by the authors.*

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# Languages, Myths and Finds

## Translating Norse and Viking Cultures for the Twenty-First Century

The *Languages, Myths and Finds* project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, ran in the years 2013-14, coinciding with the British Museum's international exhibition *Vikings: Life and Legend*. The aim of the project was to encourage conversations between specialist university academics and advanced research students in Old Norse and Viking Studies, and local communities around Britain and Ireland who were interested in knowing more about their Viking heritage. The communities chosen for the project were Cleveland, Dublin, Isle of Lewis, Isle of Man and Munster. Five small teams of academics and students were chosen to work with each community by developing and researching topics most suited to that locality, as identified in dialogue with the community. These booklets are the products of the research done by those teams together with the local partners, especially during field trips to the localities in the spring of 2014. The full set of five booklets can be viewed on the project website, <http://languagesmythsfinds.ac.uk>, where there is also further information about the project.

Professor Judith Jesch  
Project Coordinator

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