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VIKING WOMEN IN THE ISLE OF MAN

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The gender roles of important women in the Viking controlled Isle of Man has never been studied before. This is an exceptional case as women were not normally so influential in the Middle Ages, especially in Viking controlled regions. By examining memorial stones, burial goods, and their excavated skeletal remains, certain facts about Viking women's life in Medieval Manx society can be discerned. The visual remains of the Viking period in Mann, covering the ninth to thirteenth centuries, emphasizes the influence of women, confirming their importance in the kingdom's language, society, and religion.

The Isle of Man is situated in the Irish Sea at the geographical center of the British Isles.¹ The native Manx were Gaelic speaking Celts, connected with Ireland, Dal Riata, and Wales.² In the late ninth century Vikings raided and began to settle on the island.³ Archaeological remains substantiate the assimilation of the native Manx with Viking settlers.

Graves laid out according to the pagan ritual of the first Viking settlers included a rich variety of grave goods. These burials were probably of first generation Vikings raised in Norway and practiced their burial rites. At Ballateare, on the northwest side of the island, is an isolated burial mound by Jurby.⁴ Excavation revealed a warrior's skeleton with a broken sword inlaid with silver, bronze and copper wire of Norwegian origin.⁵ The sword and a shield were purposely broken and rendered useless,⁶ which is a Viking practice. The top of the grave mound was sprinkled with the remains of a sacrificed canine.⁷ The layer below revealed a female skeleton whose skull was slashed and whose body was found in an unnatural position, indicating that she was also a sacrificial victim.⁸

1 See image 1.

2 Benjamin Hudson, *Viking Pirates and Christian Princes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 83, 182-3.

3 David M. Wilson, *The Vikings in the Isle of Man* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2008), 87-8.

4 Wilson, *The Vikings in the Isle of Man*, 28-36.

5 David M. Wilson, *The Viking Age in the Isle of Man: The Archaeological Evidence* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1974), 26; Wilson, *The Vikings in the Isle of Man*, 29-30, 34; Gerhard Bersu and David M. Wilson, *Three Viking Graves in the Isle of Man, The Society for Medieval Archaeology* (London: Society for Medieval Archaeology, 1966), 45-62, specifically 50, 52-54.

6 Wilson, *The Viking Age in the Isle of Man: The Archaeological Evidence*, 26; Wilson, *The Vikings in the Isle of Man*, 30, 34; Bersu and Wilson, *Three Viking Graves in the Isle of Man*, 47-8, 59-61.

7 Wilson, *The Vikings in the Isle of Man*, 28, 34-5.

8 Wilson, *The Viking Age in the Isle of Man: The Archaeological Evidence*, 26; Wilson, *The Vikings in the Isle of Man*, 28-9, 32-4; Bersu and Wilson, *Three Viking Graves in the Isle of Man*, 47-8, 50.

Many women were taken as slaves in Viking raids; they were definitely involved in human trafficking with Ireland and the Hebrides as a major supply source.⁹ The woman discovered at Ballateare is recognized as a sacrificed slave from the earliest Viking settlements in Mann.¹⁰

The most noticeable evidence of Viking-Manx assimilation can be seen on the many stone cross memorial slabs that are found throughout the island.¹¹ Some cross slabs have inscriptions, which include the name of the remembered dead, and often the surviving relatives. Norse names appear frequently on the stones, but many Celtic names are also found. There are twenty-three Norse names and seventeen Gaelic and Non-Norse names found on the stones.¹² This implies that the natives and the settlers lived alongside each other peacefully, and that Manx natives also held positions of power. A cross slab in Kirk Braddan was inscribed with runes reading “Thorleif Hnacki erected this cross to the memory of Fiac his son”.¹³ The father’s name is clearly Norse, while the son, Fiac, has a Celtic name,¹⁴ indicating the intermarriage and assimilation of the native Gaelic culture with the Viking settlers.

At least eight women were commemorated in runic inscription on the stones, indicating respect shown by their loved one. A couple women were mothers, one was a daughter, and another was a man’s brother’s wife.¹⁷ The foster-son, foster-mother, father all have Gaelic

9 Wilson, *The Vikings in the Isle of Man*, 33 and Mary Valante, “Women in the Viking-Age Slave Trade,” Southeastern Medieval Association Conference, (Roanoke, VA), November, 20, 2010.

10 See image 2.

11 Wilson, *The Vikings in the Isle of Man*, 57; Kermodé, *Manx Crosses*, (1907; reprint, Balgavies, Angus: Pinkfoot Press, 1994), 1; A. M. Cubbon, *The Art of the Manx Crosses*, 3rd ed. (1983; Douglas: Manx National Heritage, 1996), 3-4. These crosses can be viewed today at various parish churchyards, inside churches, covered buildings of the parish, and at the Manx Museum (I have viewed all of them at each of the various sites). See image 3.

12 Gaelic male names appear 50% less than Norse male names in runic inscriptions; the ratio of Gaelic to Norse female names is the same. Heather Rose Jones, “Early Medieval Manx Names,” (2006), <http://heatherrosejones.com/names/manx/earlymanx.html> [accessed October 7, 2010].

13 Thorleif’s Cross, Manx Museum No. 135 (Braddan 108, Kermodé). Kermodé, *Manx Crosses*, 87, 203-5; Cubbon, *The Art of the Manx Crosses*, 38; Wilson, *The Vikings in the Isle of Man*, 77. Runic inscription: Thorleif Hnacki erected this cross to the memory of Fiac his son, brother’s son to Hafr. Jesus. See picture 4.

14 Kermodé, *Manx Crosses*, 89, 90-95, 205; Cubbon, *The Art of the Manx Crosses*, 38; Wilson, *The Vikings in the Isle of Man*, 77.

15 Kermodé, *Manx Crosses*, 86-8.

16 Sandulf’s Cross, Manx Museum No. 131 (Andreas 103, Kermodé). Kermodé, *Manx Crosses*, 87, 194-5; Wilson, *The Vikings in the Isle of Man*, 77; Cubbon, *The Art of the Manx Crosses*, 22-3. See image 5.

17 Manx Museum No. 130 (Kirk Michael 104, Kermodé). Kermodé, *Manx Crosses*, 87, 195-9; Wilson, *The Vikings in the Isle of Man*, 77.

names, yet the commemorated woman was married to a man with a Norse name.¹⁸ The Norse grammar on the cross was erroneous in much of its syntax, which may have been a corruption of the language by the native relatives, since it was not their normal language. The native women may have been forced into marriage, yet this seems unlikely, especially by the second generation of settlers where the women's Gaelic Manx culture is predominant. Archaeological evidence indicates affection was shown in the relationships. Integration was reasonably attained and continued increasingly through the Viking Age..

Female burials also reveal women of high status. In the late tenth century female skeleton was excavated in 1984 on St. Patrick's Island, near Peel.¹⁹ The woman was middle-aged and must have held high status as the grave held valuable grave goods displayed in a pagan fashion. The woman was buried in a lintel grave of native Christian type.²⁰ She was dressed in a native wool dress, a woven sash, and a head covering.²¹ Feathers were discovered near the skull showing that her head rested on a pillow. Household goods were placed with her: an iron roasting spit, cooking herbs, two needles, cords, shears, a mortar and pestle made of limestone and ammonite, and three knives. Two of the knives were decorated with inlaid silver wire.²²

The grave also contained two personal items: an antler comb and a rare necklace.²³ The necklace has 73 bead of colored glass, amber for the Baltic, and Whitby jet.²⁴ Some of the beads were even 300 years old at the time this wealthy lady wore them. This is the richest Viking age female grave outside of Scandinavia. The necklace, itself, caused discussion to reevaluate the woman's role in Viking Age society. It was common for men to be buried with so many high-status goods; the fact that this lady was buried in a similar way, indicates that some women on the island held stature in the island that may have been on par with the Viking chieftains.

The grave goods clearly show a pagan style of burial, however, it lacked distinctive Viking jewelry such as brooches and she was dressed in native attire (this is the same of all Manx female burials of the time). This lady is believed to be a native Christian buried in pagan fashion by her relatives. There is good reason to believe this theory as the area was a Christian burial site for an Irish monastic site at this time, with lintel graves, lack of many grave goods, Gaelic clothing, and all graves were facing East as in Christian tradition.²⁶ The monks controlled the funeral site, but relatives held on to old traditions. In fact, none of the other burials with grave goods in this cemetery had a strong pagan influence. She was probably a member of a wealthy family in the first or second generation of settlers, of mixed ethnic origin. Scandinavian parallels show that similar burials found in churchyards were at least nominally Christian.²⁷

18 Kermode, *Manx Crosses*, 90-5; Jones, "Early Medieval Manx Names."

19 David Freke, *Excavations on St Patrick's Isle*, Peel, Isle of Man 1982-88 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2002), 66-73.

20 Wilson, *The Vikings in the Isle of Man*, 48; Freke, *Excavations on St Patrick's Isle*, 66-8.

21 Wilson, *The Vikings in the Isle of Man*, 48; Freke, *Excavations on St Patrick's Isle*, 73.

22 Wilson, *The Vikings in the Isle of Man*, 48-9; Freke, *Excavations on St Patrick's Isle*, 73.

23 Wilson, *The Vikings in the Isle of Man*, 49; Freke, *Excavations on St Patrick's Isle*, 73.

24 See image 6.

25 Wilson, *The Vikings in the Isle of Man*, 47-8. Neil S. Price, *The Viking Way: religion and war in late Iron Age Scandinavia* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2002), 160. Price suggested that this lady was a Viking seer and that the iron roasting spit was a seer's staff. There are too many grave goods that indicate a high status married woman such as all the domestic items that Price's proposal is very difficult to support.

26 Freke, *Excavations on St Patrick's Isle*, 66-8.

27 Wilson, *The Vikings in the Isle of Man*, 50.

In 1079, Godred Crovan established a Viking kingdom in the Isle of Man that lasted until 1256.²⁸ Godred brought many changes to the religious customs of Mann, shifting former traditions from a tribal Gaelic basis to the parochial and diocesan system of the Roman Church by creating the foundation of an ecclesiastical system and a diocesan episcopacy. His son, Olaf I, the second King of Man, founded a Savigniac monastery called Rushen in 1134 on the Isle of Man Olaf I.²⁹ Rushen Abbey was the burial site of the royal family,³⁰ in particular, the north transept of the abbey church.

Skeleton remains in the north transept were discovered buried in a common grave.³¹ Three female skeletons were found with the same genetic deformity on their skulls.³² An interesting point is that the three females were buried in a Cistercian church. The Cistercians did not ordinarily allow women, even dead, within their church. These women must have been the family of a considerable patron or founder to be interred there. The grave is currently thought to belong to Olaf I, the founder of Rushen, and his close family.³³ He was assassinated by his nephews,³⁴ and to secure the throne the usurpers would have tried to dispatch the entire family.

The Cistercians of Rushen were connected with the Cistercian nunnery established at Douglas, in the early thirteenth century. The sparse historical sources on the island and the dilapidated ruins make the early history of the nunnery nearly impossible to interpret. A grave stone found on the nunnery's grounds indicates the burial of a nun, named Cartesmun-da, in 1230.³⁵ The nunnery is first mentioned in literary sources in 1313, when Robert Bruce imposed upon the hospitality of the nuns at Douglas on May 18th before attacking Castle Rushen the following day.³⁶ The prioress was a baroness of the Isle, holding courts in her own name, and having considerable temporal authority in the island.³⁷ Her auhtoyty on the

28 *Chronicle of Man*, f. 32v - f. 33r, f. 50r.

29 *Chronicle of Man*, f. 35v.

30 Glyn Coppack, "The Planning of Cistercian Monasteries in the Later Middle Ages: the evidence from Fountains, Rievaulx, Sawley and Rushen," in *The Religious Orders in Pre-Reformation England*, ed. James Clark, (Rochester: Boydell and Brewer, 2002), 197-209.

31 A. M. Cubbon, *Rushen Abbey, Isle of Man: A short sketch*, (Douglas: Island Development Co., 1927), 8-14; Peter Davey, ed., *Rushen Abbey, Ballasalla, Isle of Man: First Archaeological Report* (Douglas: Centre for Manx Studies, 1999), 64-5.

32 Cubbon, *Rushen Abbey, Isle of Man: A short sketch*, 8-14; Davey, *Rushen Abbey: First Archaeological Report*, 64-5.

33 Davey, *Rushen Abbey: First Archaeological Report*, 34, 64: the remains were carbon dated to approximately 1160; King Olaf died just before in 1153.

34 *Chronicle of Man*, f. 36r - 36v. The coup did not prevail as Godred II, Olaf's son, was in Norway at the time. [Chronicle of Man, f. 36r-v.]

The monks probably collected the bodies of the slain from the Tynwald site and interred them within the north transept of the abbey church. However, it is not known whether the grave site was part of the abbey church at that time, as the abbey was enlarged in 1192. [Joseph G. Cumming, "Notes on Rushen Abbey in the Isle of Man" in *Archaeologia Cambrensis* Vol. XII, 3rd Series, no. XLVIII (1866), 434.]

35 William S. Dempsey, *The Story of the Catholic Church in the Isle of Man* (Wigan: Birchley Hall Press, 1958), 69; J. Quiggin, *Quiggin's Illustrated Guide and Visitor's Companion through the Isle of Man* (1835; reprint, Douglas: Custom House Quay, 1841), <http://www.isle-of-man.com/manxnotebook/fulltext/qg1841/p071.htm>.

36 *Chronicle of Man*, f. 50 r.

37 "Cox's Magna Britannia," in William Harrison, *The Old Historians of the Isle of Man*, Manx Society 18 (Douglas: Manx Society, 1871), 88. [From Thomas Cox, *Magna Britannia et Hibernia, antiqua et Nova*, 6 vols. (London, 1720-31).]

island increased as shown by a charter of Manx people in 1408 against the claim of Sir Stephen Lestrop to be Lord of the Island.³⁸ The charter names the most influential people on Mann, the bishop of Sodor, the abbot of Rushen, the archdeacon of Man, and the prioress of Douglas, Christina.

The prioress of Douglas was not the only woman to hold political power in the Isle of Man, but she was the most influential being a landed baroness. Other free women could, since the early Viking days, take part in Tynwald, the national assembly on Mann. Tynwald was similar to the Scandinavian thingvellir, resolving disputes and promulgating laws. The language of the Chronicle of Man makes certain that all free people, not only men, had the right to participate at Tynwald. The chronicle states on folio 40 verso *omni mannensi populo* and folio 45 recto *totius Mannensis populi*.³⁹

After the initial Viking contact in the ninth century, women gained influence on the Isle of Man. The Viking males married native Gaelic Manx women which quickly assimilated the two cultures, with the native culture of the women dominating the everyday life on the island. This is proven most by the easy conversion of Vikings to Christianity and by the continued use of Gaelic names and language. As presented, women influenced and held great positions of power during the Viking Age on the Isle of Man.

When the Viking Kingdom of the Crovan dynasty (1079-1265) was taken over alternately by the English and Scottish, Lady Affrica de Conaught as the closest direct ancestor of Magnus, the last King of Man, became the ruler of Man in 1293.⁴⁰ Thus even at the end of the second Viking age in Mann,⁴¹ women were not seen as second class citizens. The Manx people approved of a woman in control of the island then, as they still do, since Queen Elizabeth II is, now, Lord of Man.

Figures —



Figure 1. Map of UK, with red circle indicating Isle of Man.

38 John Robert Oliver, *Monumenta de Insula Manniae*, vol. 2 Manx Society 7 (Douglas: Manx Society, 1861), 247-50.

39 *Chronicle of Man*, f. 40v and f. 45r

40 Arthur W. Moore, *A History of the Isle of Man, Vol. 1* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1900), <http://www.isle-of-man.com/manxnotebook/fulltext/hist1900/index.htm>.

41 Hudson, *Viking Pirates and Christian Princes*, 4.



Figure 2. Skull of a sacrificed woman at the Jurby burial mound.



Figure 3. Stone memorial crosses in parish at Kirk Braddan.



Figure 4. Thorleif's Cross, Manx Museum No. 135.



Figure 5. Sandulf's Cross, Manx Museum No. 131.



Figure 6. "Pagan Lady's" necklace