

## Knockadoone Burial Site By Meghan C. Peck

This Manx boat burial contained extensive grave goods, including “a complete set of weapons, as well as a smith’s hammer and tongs, an Insular cloak-pin and a bridle with Insular mounts similar to those from Balladoole” (Clarke, et al. 118). Grave goods such as the ones found at Knock y Doonee provide information about what items were valued by society and in turn, what activities were practiced by society. For instance, the set of weapons at Knock y Doonee illustrates that battles were common and warriors were valued by Manx society. Furthermore, the weapons reflect the social status of the deceased as a warrior, which leads to the point that grave goods provide information about social stratification in Norse society. By investigating the sites containing these goods the modern scholar gleans information about pagan to Christian conversion in the Viking world and the evolving belief in an afterlife from Valhalla to Heaven. Therefore, grave goods and burial sites teach archaeologists and scholars a great deal about Viking life and society.

The Isle of Man is richly endowed with pagan burial sites. This island is only thirty miles by eleven and situated in the middle of the Irish Sea (Killip 11). When viewing the location of the Isle of Man its geographic importance becomes quite obvious: it is situated between Ireland and Great Britain in a bit of an inlet just above Anglesey and just beneath Galloway and Northumberland (Baker 254). The earliest farmers were Neolithic people whose pattern of living was carried through Celtic and Norse times (Killip 11). The Norse rule established on the Isle of Man in the ninth century lasted through the thirteenth, bringing Viking language, seafaring skill, and a new form of government (11-2). Norse influence on Manx culture is especially seen at the burial sites.

On the Isle there are “twenty-four possible sites...with pagan, or at least semi-pagan, Norse burials” (Clarke, et al. 116-7). Of these twenty-four possibilities are “four major Manx burials of pagan warriors, in prominent sites beneath prominent mounds...” (117). Aside from Knock y Doonee, there are three other excavated burials of pagan warriors on the Isle of Man. Of these additional three burials only Balladoole contained a ship burial like Knock y Doonee. These two boat burials are reminiscent of the ones found at Westness and Scar in Orkney and are “probably of Vikings who arrived in the first phase of the island’s settlement. The positioning of the grave mounds, usually in a prominent location in sight of the sea and overlooking good farming land, may indicate the location of the original farming settlements” (Graham-Campbell 156-7). Furthermore, all four of these pagan warrior burials on the Isle of Man were inhumations (Clarke, et al. 117). At Cronk Mooar the body had been placed in a “wood-lined grave-pit, whilst at Ballateare it was placed in a smaller pit or coffin. Before the mound over the latter had been capped, funerary sacrifices had taken place, for near the top it contained a layer of burnt animal bones together with the skeleton of a young woman” (117). The skeleton of the young woman showed evidence that the woman’s head had been sliced off and may be interpreted as a human sacrifice.

This sacrifice brings to light an interesting link between Ballateare and Balladoole, which is evidence of the rite of suttee (Graham-Campbell 157). This was known to have been practiced elsewhere in the Viking world and at Ballateare and Balladoole involved a young woman with a badly slashed skull (157). It’s quite possible that this young woman was a slave, given her state in the grave. The only definite knowledge about her burial is that she “was buried without goods in the upper part of a mound erected over her master’s grave” (157). The man at Balladoole, however, was buried with a fair amount of grave goods, including a set of “Insular (Irish Sea) horse-harness...and a shield-boss of the small conical Insular type, although he was curiously lacking in any offensive weapons. His cloak-pin is of the same variety of

Insular pin as was also present in both the Ballateare and Cronk Mooar graves” (Clarke, et al. 117). These burials at Balladoole, Ballateare, and Knock y Doonee provide a great deal of information about Norse influence on the previously Celtic influenced culture of the Manx.

The two boat burials show the intensity of Viking social impact on Manx Culture (Loyn 107). Such burials were not commonly recorded on the Isle of Man, and it has been archaeological work that has taught the modern scholar about “Viking boat-shaped long houses, with Viking graves...and Viking ornamentation in the full Ringerike and Urness styles, [which] has made the Scandinavian presence tangible and intelligible as in few parts of the British Isles” (107). Archaeology then contributes greatly to knowledge of the Viking world: “We can study the viking at home, and accompany him abroad with his distinctive personal ornaments and ship-burials” (Jones 4-5). Emphasis is placed upon the ability to gain knowledge about the Vikings through their graves because of the grave goods contained within these burial sites. The size and magnificence of the burial mounds reflect the importance of the individual buried at the site (332). Grave goods provide vital information about values in Norse society, and these values were transferred to cultures conquered by the Vikings. If a good was deemed valuable to the culture and the individual being buried, the item was placed in the grave—not a revolutionary concept, but the link between goods and graves does teach scholars about Norse values. Goods provide more solid evidence than even literary works preserved most notably by Snorri; however, the goods are not always easy to interpret (329-30). Graves occasionally have shown “intermixture of religious beliefs” and while “Christianity forbade the bestowal of grave goods save the simplest kind. Heathendom...did not” (332).

Graves ranged in type during the Viking Age. Cremation was practiced as well as earth-burial, laying the dead in mounds with or without grave goods, within symbolic boats or actual vessels, in large wooden chambers and small coffins (Jones 330-2). Some graves “laid the dead to rest...in big wooden chambers and small coffins, and sometimes in neither. There are single graves, graves for two (the one sometimes a woman slave), and communal graves” (332). In terms of grave goods, the “dead man or woman was given everything that could make the after-life as comfortable and honourable as that they knew on earth: ships, weapons, horses, wagons, adornments, utensils, toilet articles, even food” (332). With regard to ship burials, there was a great deal of symbolism: they “enabled the dead man’s spirit, not his physical frame...to transfer to the world of the dead, and inasmuch as the ship was a fertility symbol, be reborn there” (332). Even if the pagan body was not actually interred with a boat and even if the body had been cremated, a boat was still present in the form of stones arranged in “ovals, rounds, squares, and triangles. The ovals...are symbols of ships, and once they had served their immediate symbolic purpose the stones could be taken up and used for other and newer stone-settings” (334). Although there was no one notion of life after the grave (334), what modern society does learn from these burial rituals is that there was a belief in the afterlife, especially through the symbolic presence of ships at the graves.

Grave goods also provide information about social stratification in Norse society. The varying amounts of such goods support the existence of different classes, the origin of which is described in *Rigsþula*, “Song of Rig.” This poem from the first half of the tenth century describes in folktale fashion the origin of the three main classes of Viking society: the serf (thrall), free peasant (karl), and warrior-chieftain or earl (jarl), which are in order from lowest to highest level of class (Jones 67-9). Furthermore, Vikings functioned as “warriors, merchants, farmers, or smiths, depending on the circumstances” (Clarke, et al. 213). In turn, the presence of tongs used in the manufacture of weapons, such as at Knock y Doonee suggest the burial of a warrior since weapons recovered from railway cuttings on Royal Hospital land included swords, spearheads, and tongs (Clarke, et al. 213). The burial of a warrior is sometimes

accompanied by a female body, such as at Ballateare and Balladoole. The bashing of the female's skull and lack of her own grave goods suggests her role as a female slave and sacrifice for the warrior's burial. Therefore, the individuals and goods contained in these graves provide evidence of a thrall and a jarl, reflecting social stratification in Viking age culture.

Another unique site in Man is the Pagan Lady of Peel. This burial site is significant because all of the other high status burials are of pagan males (Clarke, et al. 119). Beads tend to suggest a female burial, and the burial of the Pagan Lady at Peel Castle is no exception. Included in her grave goods are exotic beads—specifically, she was found wearing a necklace “consisting of seventy-one glass, amber and jet beads, of Scandinavian, eastern or Mediterranean and English origin. She had no brooches, but a tablet-woven belt was ornamented with a couple of amber beads and an ammonite fossil. Her head was resting on a down-filled pillow.... Beneath her was an angle-backed knife...” (119). The list of goods found with her goes on, showing her importance and marking the significance of such an unusual burial site. Once again, grave goods teach the modern scholar about the social status of the buried and the importance of the individual to Norse society.

Related to the burial sites found on the Isle of Man are a number of ogham stones. Ogham script, a type of writing in which “each letter is formed by a certain number of strokes cut on the stone...developed in south-western Ireland, probably during the fourth or fifth century A.D.” (Kinvig 39). These inscriptions are not much more than the name of the buried person, but do represent the earliest forms of Gaelic spoken in Ireland (39-40). Interestingly, Irish culture influenced Man during the 5th and 6th centuries, and five ogham inscriptions are found on the Isle of Man, but the one at Knock y Doonee is the only bilingual one (40). This stone at Knock y Doonee contains “the ogham script in Irish and in Roman letters in Latin. ...bearing the inscriptions in ogham Abicatos maqi Rocatos...and in Roman letters Ammecati filius Rocati hic iacit and dating from the late fifth or early sixth century” (40). Furthermore, “the names are Irish, later Imchadh and Rochadh, but the form in which they are recorded in Roman letters shows the influence of British pronunciation.... It seems that when Irish names were written in British territory in Roman letters they also underwent adaptation to the corresponding British form,” implying the presence of speakers of the two languages living simultaneously on the Isle of Man (40). This Roman influence can be attributed to Roman penetration of Cornwall and Wales, leading to the conclusion that the Isle of Man was originally Welsh-speaking and that the Irish immigrants absorbed the previous population (40). The other four oghams on the Isle of Man have inscriptions in Gaelic only, “two of them being found in Rushen...and the others in Arbory...” (40).

Runic crosses also commemorate the melding of cultures in Manx society. The crosses suggest a multi-racial society, with the inter-marriage of Norsemen and Celts, as seen in the “Manx stones of families with Norse and Celtic names” (Page, Runes 59). Although one must be wary of using personal names as a guide to race, the Manx stones still are significant (59). Also evidence for inter-marriage is that “among the relatively numerous pagan Norse graves in Man, there is no burial of a woman with Scandinavian oval brooches. This has inevitably given rise to the hypothesis that the Norse settlement of Man was accompanied by marriage with the native Christian women...” (Clarke, et al. 118). If intermarriage is then taken as the explanation for the Christian conversion of the pagan Norse in Man, then it is implied that pagan burial was confined to the first third of the tenth century (118). All of this information and the related assumptions regarding intermarriage must be taken carefully, and not presumed to be the ultimate truth regarding conversion of the pagans in Man. Nonetheless, it does provide interesting insight into developments on the island and offers a logical explanation of Celtic and Norse names on runic crosses.

The Sutton Hoo find of Anglo-Saxon England, also can shed light upon Manx ship burials. Sutton Hoo, a great seventh century ship burial of East Anglia, is “almost identical with those from contemporary Swedish sites as the Uppland cemeteries of Valsgärde and Vendel. Though the Sutton Hoo warrior and his kinfolk were probably not Scandinavian, there seems no doubt there was a conscious association...with a Scandinavian cultural tradition” (Graham-Campbell 122). Such an association may have come from an identification with pagan beliefs amidst Christianity gaining power in England—the burial and its grave goods, especially the sixth century (most likely Swedish) helmet, may have served as “deliberate anti-Christian statements of solidarity with the older, pagan ways” (122). Furthermore, due to the grave goods it is reasonable to assume that the site was created to honor someone at the level of the aristocracy (Carver 172). The distinction between classes in East Anglia was measured by the “wergild, the amount of compensation payable by the killer in the event of unlawful killing. ...the value of grave goods, equated to, or at least reflected the level of the wergild” (171-2). At Sutton Hoo the amount equated to an average nobleman (480 oxen or 200 g of gold) is enough to furnish a typical grave at the Sutton Hoo burial mounds (172). Thus, evidence of social stratification is found at Sutton Hoo through the immense value of the grave goods. Sutton Hoo is an extreme example of how grand a burial could become, shedding light on the varying degrees of burials during these time periods.

Furthermore, the ship unearthed at Sutton Hoo in 1940 by Mr. Phillips contained grave goods, but no evidence of a body (Green 43). The layout of the goods suggested that “the ‘place of honour’ would...have been on the central line towards the west end [of the boat].... Here the buried body would be expected to lie. But neither here nor, indeed, anywhere in the chamber could the slightest trace of a body be discovered” (43). Due to these findings and later tests at the British Museum laboratory, it is generally agreed that this ship burial is a cenotaph for a man, buried elsewhere (43). The ship found at Mound 1 had not been constructed especially for the funeral; rather it was a retired working ship (Carver 170). Nonetheless, tradition and burial as a social function is seen at Sutton Hoo.

Beowulf also sheds light upon the mysteries of these graves. This text is an Anglo-Saxon epic poem, especially linking the work to Sutton Hoo. The account of Beowulf’s funeral is teeming with burial customs, not so unlike those of the Norse as seen in their sagas. After Beowulf’s death a funeral pyre is constructed by the Geat people and:

On a height they kindled the hugest of all  
funeral fires; fumes of woodsmoke  
billowed darily up, the blaze roared  
and drowned out their weeping.... (3143-6)

The comitatus and bond it created amongst these men is woven throughout Beowulf. The followers are loyal throughout most of the text; however, when the situation becomes extremely bleak with the dragon, only Wiglaf remained at Beowulf’s side. As Beowulf lay wounded, Wiglaf came to his aid and remembered the creation of their comitatus, saying that “He picked us out / from the army deliberately, honoured us and judged / fit for this action...” (2638-40). His speech serves a dual function in the text by reminding the shirkers of their responsibilities to Beowulf and the comitatus, and to show Wiglaf’s devotion to Beowulf. Humans have flaws, and these imperfections surfaced as fear of death. Nonetheless, Beowulf’s death impacts his followers, and a great funeral pyre is erected for him, followed by a funeral mound to commemorate his death:

Then twelve warriors rode around the tomb,  
chieftain's sons, champions in battle,  
all of them distraught, chanting in dirges,  
mourning his loss as a man and a king. (3169-72)

Such magnificent funerals occurred for those warriors deemed great by their followers, and Beowulf was such a warrior and leader. Furthermore, it is worth noting the Christian influence in Beowulf. Christianity and references to God abound in the text. Significant to burials is the lack of grave goods at Beowulf's funeral. He was a great warrior, loved by the Geat people, but the great pyre was only "hung with helmets, heavy war-shields / and shining armour, just as he had ordered" (3139-40). Had this pyre been for a pagan warrior there would have probably been a great deal of grave goods. However, the memorial constructed to honor Beowulf contained the treasure hoard from the dragon's dwellings:

And they buried torques in the barrow, and jewels  
and a trove of such things as trespassing men  
had once dared to drag from the hoard.  
They let the ground keep the ancestral treasure...." (3163-6)

The extensive grave goods at this second part of the funeral reflect pagan influence. Therefore, Beowulf's funeral contained Christian and pagan burial rituals. Texts of this time period and the narrative of such burials are extremely beneficial to the historian of Norse burial rituals. In the Anglo-Saxon Beowulf one sees the importance of burial customs for the death of a loved individual. Similarly, many Norse sagas relay death and burial rituals. As battle and death are common themes in Viking literature due to the combative nature of the people, when a death is actually described more than just in passing, it remains in the mind of the reader. At these moments one notes that this person must have been important if the saga recorder took the time to describe the burial. Orkneyinga Saga contains such moments amidst a great deal of going iviking and bloodshed. Chapter 5, "A poisoned tooth," educates the reader on the importance of the burial and passing of an individual because of the inspiration that death provides for the composition of verse. Earl Einar, following his victory, first made a victory offering to Odin through dedication of the victim (Halfdan Long-Leg) and then composed 3 verses, including one about Halfdan after having a burial mound built for him (30-1). Readers are led to believe that death was not taken lightly in Norse society, and just as the Greeks recognized the Gods in their victories through dedications and sacrifices, so did the Norsemen. To do otherwise could prove fatal for the mortal man by angering the gods.

Not only is pagan belief evident in the saga, but Christianity also plays a role in Norse culture. In chapter 50 of Orkneyinga Saga, "The martyrdom of St Magnus," a very moving passage describes the unjust execution of Earl Magnus in which he "prayed not only for himself and his friends but for his enemies and murderers, forgiving them with all his heart for their crimes against him" (95). The text is filled with references to Christianity, including the moment before Magnus's execution: "With that he crossed himself and stooped to receive the blow. So his soul passed away to Heaven" (95). The following chapters go on to discuss the miracles that occurred at the spot of Earl Magnus' execution, including passages reminiscent of the miracles of Christ Himself, such as the blind farmer in Shetland, Bergfinn Skatason, whose sight returned after keeping vigil at the Earl's grave (103). Because of these miracles this site of death became one of remembrance of the Holy Earl, showing Norse society's belief in God and the possibility of miracles.

Moreover, supernatural occurrences abound Miracles in Eyrbyggja Saga. The ability to come back from the death as a spirit or ghost is a miraculous event in itself and this saga is full of chapters involving a return from the dead. Chapter 63, for example, is titled “Thorolf comes back from the dead” and chapters 53 and 54 involve hauntings and ghosts. Superstition finds an easy home in this saga with omens occurring before the hauntings: “The evening the corpse-bearers came back, the people at Frodriver were sitting by the fireside when they saw a half-moon appear on the paneled wall. ...Thorir said it was a fatal moon. ‘There’ll be deaths here,’ he added” (135). Drawing from these omens and especially, manifestations of the spirit is the belief in Manx folklore that “at the moment of a person’s death a light would be seen coming out of the door of the house and moving towards the churchyard” (Killip 83). This notion has a Christian attachment, but nonetheless shows the manifestation of the spirit after death. Furthermore, such a manifestation admits belief in the existence of an afterlife—be it of pagan or Christian faith. The Norsemen were “no more willing than most to meet their end, and they have many tales that tell of life after death...” (Page, Myths 61).

Whether one worships Gods or a God, the end for each human is the same: death. These burials served as a means of preparing the dead for whatever journey was ahead of them, but one thing was certain—there would be a journey beyond the grave. If a hero was selected to reside with Odin, then his afterlife would include fighting daily battles with endless immunity from injury, feasting every evening, and a long respite from fate while awaiting the final battle, the Ragnarok, when the gods would seek each warrior’s aid (Jones 317-8). A burial site such as Knock y Doonee is illuminated by a knowledge of this faith and one begins to understand the need for such detailed burial practices as the ship burial. Belief in an afterlife allows the Norse warrior to enter battle, not fearing death, for death, to such a warrior, would not be finite. Rather, it brought the possibility of his own immortal glory through life in Valhalla and participation in the ultimate battle of Ragnarok.