

This book, *The Pagan Lady of Peel*, by Barbara Holgate was published in 1987  
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# Peel Castle Excavations

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# Introduction

In 1982 the late Peter Gelling of Birmingham University and David Freke of Liverpool University's Archaeological Services were invited by Marshall Cubbon, then Director of the Manx Museum, to carry out exploratory excavations on St Patrick's Isle, Peel, Isle of Man. The site is a complex monument to over a thousand years of history, with more than a score of standing ruins, including the Cathedral of St German, the parish church of St Patrick and its associated Irish-style round bell-tower, the domestic apartments of the Lords of Man, and several garrison structures, all contained within an intact curtain wall. The importance of the site to the church, the military and the administration of the Isle of Man is very apparent, but until the 1982 excavations very little could be said about St Patrick's Isle before the building of the 11th-century parish church and tower. It was reasonable, though, to suggest that the site was as strategically important then as it was subsequently, and that it may also have had a religious character even before the Cathedral, parish church, chapel and bell-tower were built.

In the 1982 excavations, evidence was found to support these suggestions, with the discovery of a hoard of 11th-century silver coins, near a sophisticated 12th-century building, and two cemeteries, one being early Christian period in date and the other probably of the 14th-15th century.

The potential revealed in 1982 was so exciting that in 1983 the *St Patrick's Isle (I.o.M.) Archaeological Trust* was established, with a Five-Year Programme of work. Excavation continued in 1983, with Roger White from Liverpool University completing the work on the Half Moon Battery which Peter Gelling's untimely death had left unfinished, and David Freke exploring further the area north of the Cathedral begun in 1982. The excavations brought to light more of the extensive early Christian cemetery and several medieval buildings buried under the foundations of the standing ruins. But a gap remained in the archaeological record; we had evidence for the periods before and after the Vikings but for most of the Viking age itself, from about 800 AD to 1000 AD, there was no evidence. Yet it seemed unthinkable that the Vikings, who certainly left their mark on much of Manx culture, should not have recognised the strategic value of St Patrick's Isle, commanding as it does the entrance to the best harbour in the Isle of Man.

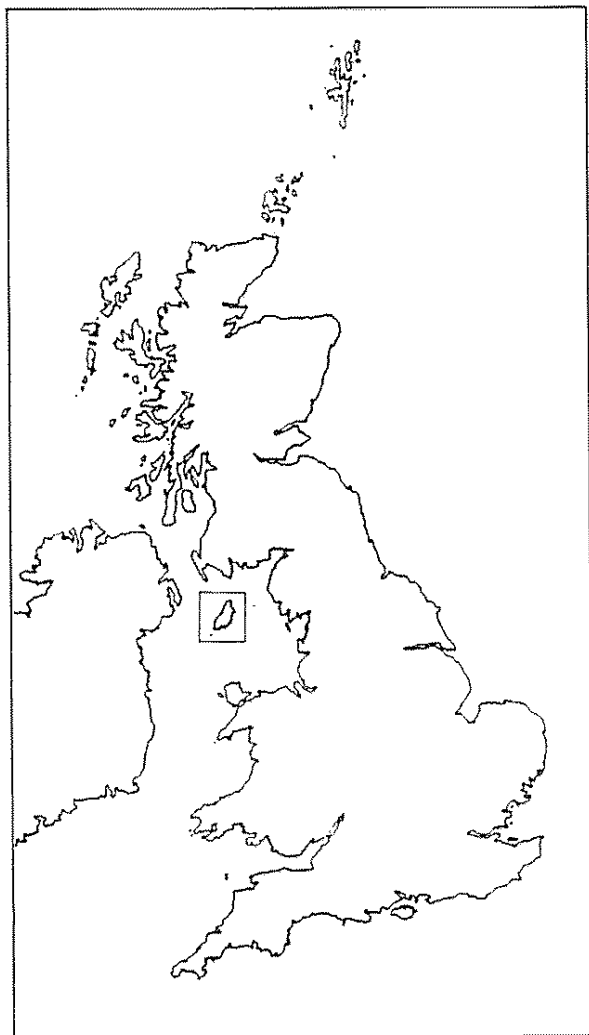


Fig. 1. Location of Isle of Man in the Irish Sea.

In the 1984 excavation the Vikings were revealed. In the area north of the north transept of the Cathedral of St German, excavation into a large rise uncovered a densely packed cemetery dating from the early Christian period to about the 13th or 14th century, with a scatter of pagan burials of the 9th or 10th century among them. More were discovered in 1985, bringing the total number to date of pagan burials to six, out of several hundred Christian interments. Four of these six burials contained rich grave goods, most particularly that which has become known as the “Pagan Lady”, the richest Viking period woman’s grave in Britain and Ireland and the first such woman’s grave on the Isle of Man. These discoveries have given rise to many questions about the Vikings in the Isle of Man, including the role of women, and the status of the church.

The work on site and subsequently in the laboratory to analyse the finds and the records has been carried out by the Archaeological Services section of Liverpool University's Environmental Advisory Unit, for St Patrick's Isle Archaeological Trust. Liverpool University's Extension Studies Department and the Isle of Man Board of Education have run annual teaching digs in collaboration with Archaeological Services. The original invitation to excavate the site was extended by the Manx Museum and National Trust, who have continued to grant permission for work whilst also making substantial grants towards the costs each year. Funds have also come from Tynwald, who made a grant to the dig in 1983 and voted it a proportion of the Isle of Man Lottery profits in 1984. Other funding has been provided by the Friends of Peel Castle, who have raised money through events and appeals for commercial and personal sponsorship. Shannon Kneale and Company, Northern Bank (IoM) Ltd and Rea Brothers (IoM) sponsored the weeks of the excavation in 1984 when the "Pagan Lady" was excavated. All the sponsors of the dig, without whom it could not have taken place, are listed at the front of this booklet.



Fig. 2. Visitors to the excavations and sponsors, 1984. Photo: D. Frecke.

# The Christian Cemetery

In 1984, as already described, work continued to the north of the Cathedral in the group of domestic buildings known as the Lord's House, in an effort to understand more fully the sequence of occupation and building phases from pre-Christian times. These excavations revealed as many as eight building phases underneath which were the remains of a cemetery probably dating back to the 6th or 7th century AD.

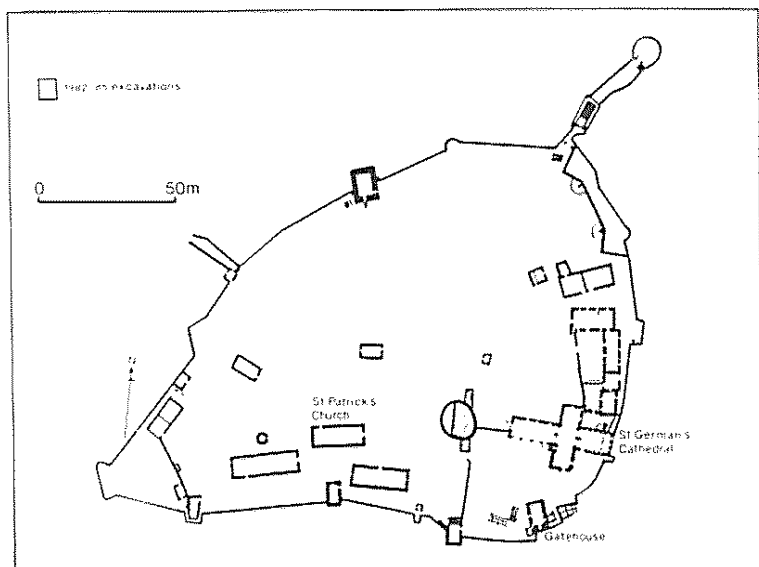


Fig. 3. Peel Castle showing location of excavated areas.

In addition, a trench was excavated to investigate the structure and function of a bank situated just north of the Cathedral transept. It proved to be a continuation of the early Christian cemetery found immediately north of the Cathedral chancel and under the Lord's House, with later burials of medieval date superimposed. These later graves were probably associated with the 12th- and 13th-century Cathedral. At the lower levels the cemetery became extremely complex with many graves cutting into each other. This suggests that the cemetery was used over a long period of time and that the area it covered may have been fairly confined. Lintel graves (or stone slab coffins) found in parts of the cemetery are characteristic of early Christian and Norse sites elsewhere on the Isle of Man. At least one lintel grave at Peel was cut by the Cathedral transept. It was also significant that many of the graves at the lower levels, including the lintel graves, were on a slightly different alignment (of southeast-northwest) to the later graves above them which were on a more or less east-west orientation.

The alignment of the graves at the lower levels may have been associated with an earlier church or cathedral built on a different alignment from the present 12th- and 13th-century Cathedral. Traditionally, Christian graves are aligned more or less east-west, in order that they should face east on the Day of Judgement, but two of the graves in the very low levels were aligned almost north-south, which could suggest that these were non-Christian.

# The Pagan Cemetery

The excavation of the bank in 1984 brought to light at least four graves in the southeast-northwest alignment, that contained objects or "grave goods". It is usually assumed that graves found with objects are non-Christian or pagan. Some Christian burials have objects in them but usually only in the form of finger rings or small ornamental crucifixes. These four graves, however, contained such objects as iron knives, a ring-headed pin, decorated bronze buckles, silver baubles, pins, a gilt decorated strap-end, bronze bells and glass beads. These objects can be paralleled by similar objects found in Scotland, Ireland, England, the Isle of Man, and some of the Scandinavian countries, in archaeological contexts dating to the late Celtic, Christian, Saxon or Viking periods. This covers the five centuries from the 7th to the 12th century AD. The Viking raiders first arrived in the British Isles in the late 8th century. Many of them still worshipped pagan gods. It was not until the 10th century that they were sufficiently integrated with the existing community in the Isle of Man that they followed the Christian faith. As well as many other things this meant burying their dead in the Christian way without grave goods. It is possible therefore to recognise pagan Viking graves of the 9th and early 10th centuries through the grave goods they contain.



Fig. 4. View of Area L excavations, location of the "Pagan Lady" grave. Photo: Anna Finegold.



The four graves containing objects so far excavated in the Peel Castle cemetery can thus be recognised as pagan Viking graves probably dating from the 9th- to the late 10th-century period, not only from their stratigraphy but also from their associated artefacts.

It is more significant that at least three of the pagan graves disturbed Christian burials when they were originally interred, thus suggesting that they were buried in an earlier Celtic Christian cemetery. The extent and location suggests that the Peel Castle cemetery was fairly significant in the pre-Norse period according to the archaeological evidence. It may not be merely coincidence that the pagan graves were placed there, more or less conforming to the Christian alignment.

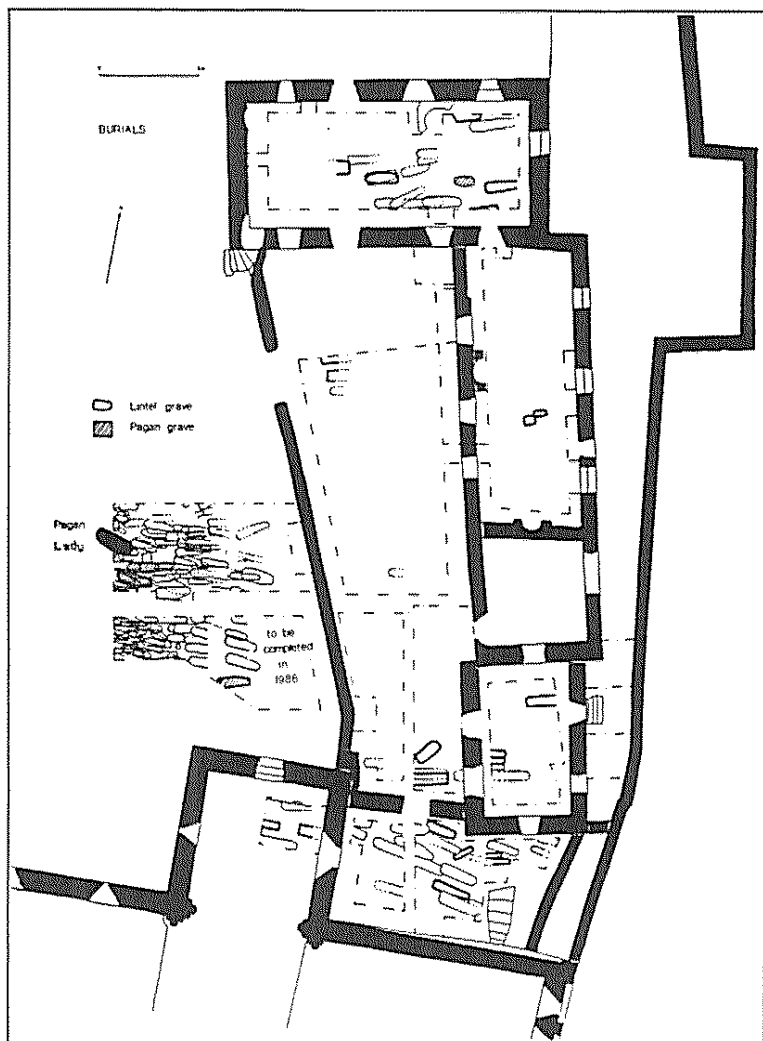


Fig. 5. Plan of burials north of St. German's Cathedral.

## The Pagan Lady

Within the cemetery there were two adjacent graves which appeared to be very grand in comparison to the rest. Both were lintel graves (or stone-lined graves), very well-constructed with large slabs of slate and sandstone. They were aligned more or less northwest-southeast and were cut into the naturally-deposited sand that covers the slate rock on the east side of St Patrick's Isle. One grave, that of an adult male, lacked grave goods and is assumed to be Christian. The other grave, that of an adult female, was accompanied by many objects and is thus of great interest for understanding the archaeology of the Viking settlement of the Isle of Man.



Fig. 6. *View into grave in process of excavation.* Photo: D. Freke.

The construction of the woman's grave was in itself exceptional, for it was well-made from large slate and sandstone slabs covered with a double layer of slabs or lintels to form the lid of the stone coffin. Uniquely, there were no upright end stones to the grave. Upon excavation there was still a cavity within the grave, whereas in every other case the lintels had collapsed to some extent and the cavity filled with earth. The cavity within this grave could have contributed to the relatively good preservation of the objects, compared with others found in the cemetery. The skeletal remains of the woman, though very decomposed, allowed one to deduce that she had been buried lying on her back, with her head at the west end. In common with most of the early burials in this cemetery, her bones were very fragmentary, and in such delicate condition that careful handling was essential during excavation to prevent them from crumbling away. They consisted of the following: part of the skull (cranium) and lower jaw (mandible), the right shoulder-blade (scapula), and collarbone (clavicle), the lower arm bones (the right humerus and part of the right ulna and radius), most of the left side of the pelvic bones (ilium, pelvic girdle, ischium), the thigh bones (femurs), though both had broken with decay, parts of the lower leg bones (tibia and fibula) and the right kneecap (patella). The ribs, hands, spine and feet had decayed. The remains of the right leg were in a very fragmentary condition because one of the grave lintels had collapsed onto it. Why the left arm should be missing while the other survives is puzzling, but might be the result of localised decay caused by greater acidity in the soil in that area. Pathological study of this skeleton has shown that she was an adult female of middle age approximately 5 feet 6 inches tall.

The X-rays of the thigh bones show that the woman was bow-legged, the result of vitamin D deficiency, leading to adult rickets. Vitamin D is obtained from the sun, and from such foods as fish. The climate of the Isle of Man might have reduced the vitamin D intake due to the sun, but it is hard to believe that large amounts of fish were not consumed. At Peel we know that fish was eaten in great quantity, mainly because of the large number of fish bones that have been found in the Viking and later levels. Adult rickets or osteomalacia, as it is called, can also occur among women who have given birth to many children and this may be a more likely explanation for this disease occurring in the lady from Peel.

As the skeletal remains were so fragmentary, and only one tooth was found in the grave, it is almost impossible to comment further on the physical health of this woman, or on what kind of diet she would have had.

Apart from the body, the grave also contained the remains of many objects. No pagan Viking-age burial in Great Britain and Ireland has produced so many objects of such high quality. They ranged from a cooking spit, knives, shears and a comb to smaller items such as beads, needles and an ammonite fossil. Their presence led to the conclusion that it was the grave of a very wealthy pagan Viking woman.

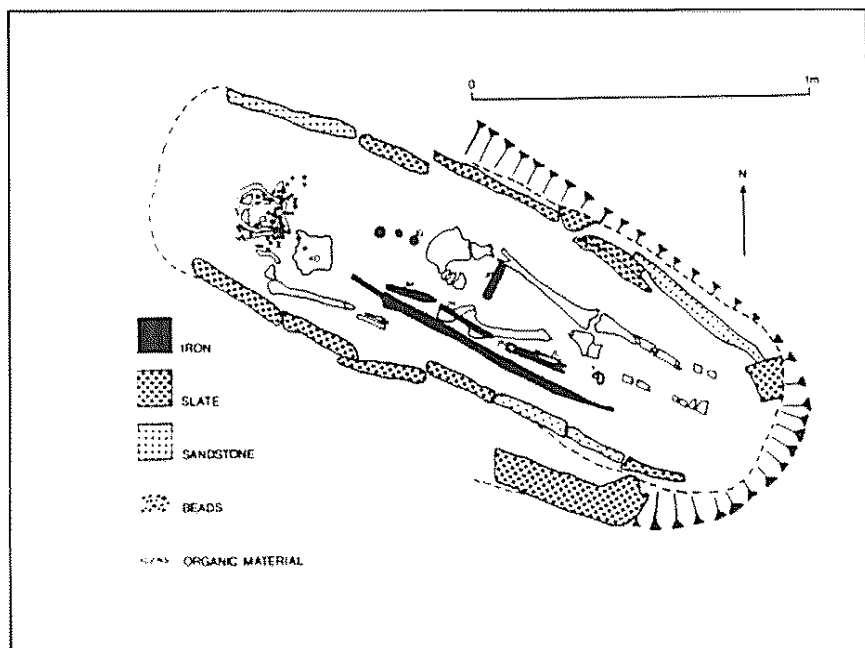


Fig. 7. Plan of "Pagan Lady" grave.

The grave was excavated by Stephen Robinson, a volunteer from Liverpool, under the supervision of Martin Connell, using small tools (trowels and plasterers' leaves), with all the items in the grave being plotted, photographed and drawn to a scale of 1:10 at every stage. Once lifted, the metal objects were immediately flown to the British Museum in London for conservation by Peter Winsor in the Conservation Department. The other items were processed by the post-excavation team from Archaeological Services in Liverpool. The human remains are being studied by the pathologist Stanley Rubin, along with all the other skeletons from the cemetery. All the objects will be returned to the Manx Museum in the Isle of Man.

# The Grave Goods

The contents of the "Pagan Lady's" grave are of great interest, not only as a group but also individually. They comprise the following:

A *cooking spit* made of iron, much encrusted with corrosion. It did not appear to have any decoration when X-rayed. The spit was wrapped in cloth which only remains as impressions in the rust corrosion. On close inspection at least four types of woollen cloth can be identified from their different weaves and amongst its folds were the remains of feathers, possibly goose feathers. The spit was found lying next to the skeleton, along the inside of her right arm to a point just below her right knee.

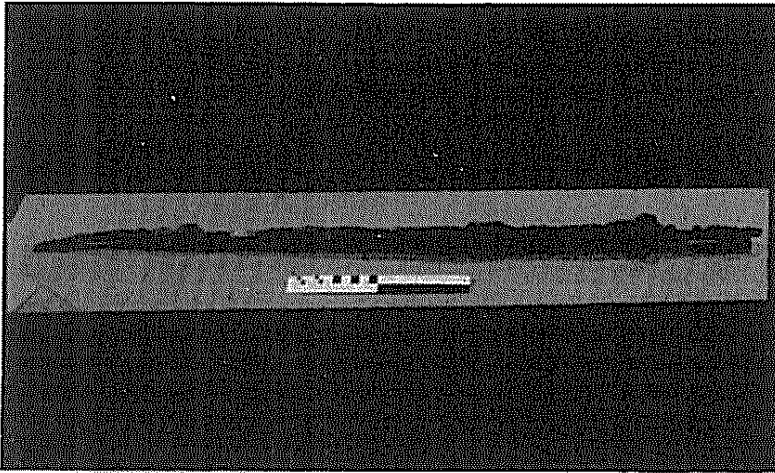


Fig. 8. *Cooking spit from grave.* Photo: D. Freke.

A *knife* made of iron, with a decorated wooden handle. This knife is complete except that the top of its pommel is broken. The iron blade is very heavily corroded and encrusted with rust and appears to have the remains of a leather sheath. The wooden handle is broken at the end but still has the remains of its decoration in the form of two twisted silver wires wound around the wood. This silver is very heavily mineralised and in some parts only remains as an impression; there are also the remains of silver wires running along the length of the handle. The knife was found lying between the cooking spit and the woman's right side on the floor of the grave.

Another *iron knife* much more corroded than the first, and broken at the tip of its blade. In cross-section the blade is a broad triangular shape, with a handle almost twice its length, suggesting that this was a specialised tool of some kind. There was a

small amount of unidentified bone attached to the blade by corrosion. The knife hilt was of wood decayed to the extent that it revealed the flattened tip of the iron tang running through its centre. This knife was found lying on top of the decayed remains of the woman's right hip joint running parallel to the spit. The bone attached to the blade was probably part of the pelvis.

*A knife hilt.* This is complete though badly damaged through decay, with no trace of the blade remaining. The hilt appears to be made of wood; its inner layers have been badly stained by the corrosion of the iron tang. At the pommel end there is evidence of a covering disc, possibly made of leather, over the top of the tang and hilt. The hilt was decorated with three bands of twisted silver wires set into grooves cut into the wooden grip. Where the silver is no longer present it has left impressions in the wood. The hilt was found lying at right angles to the cooking spit, between the legs almost within the pelvis area. It was probably originally placed under the body.

*A pair of shears* made of iron. These are complete though very much covered in corrosion. On one side of the shears, and between its blades, are the remains of cloth. On close examination three types of textile and some cord could be discerned. Attached with rust to the blade end of the shears was an *antler comb*, which had decayed faster than the metal objects found in the grave and so only small fragments were left. However it has been possible to deduce that the comb was made of two back-plates rivetted together with tooth-plates between them. On the back, between the three surviving iron rivets, were the traces of some simple incised decoration. The shears and attached comb were found next to the body between the right leg and the cooking spit just above the right knee.

*A leather and bronze pouch* found as small pieces and dust within the grave. This organic mass was impossible to identify specifically, but the discovery with it of two lengths of bronze that are not unlike a buckle pin, or parts of a purse mount, as well as the presence of two bronze needles in the mass, suggest that it might represent the remains of some kind of pouch or leather purse. This was found lying just below the remains of the skull in a position over the right shoulder.

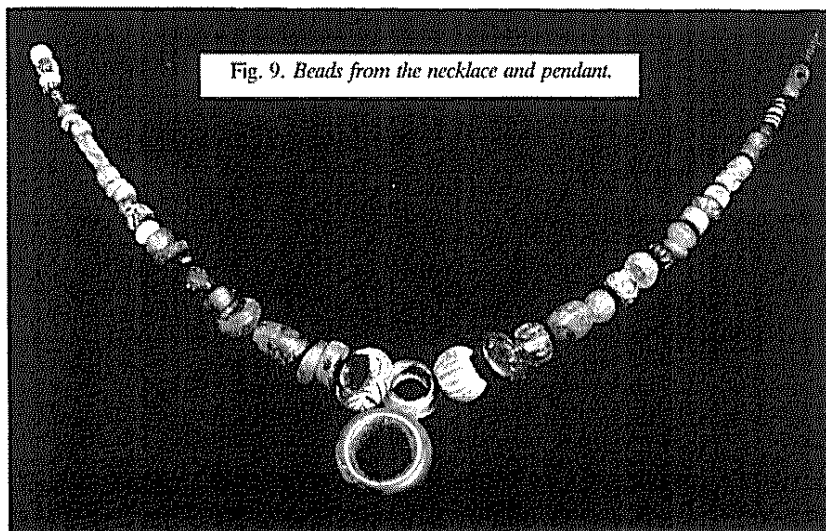


Fig. 9. Beads from the necklace and pendant.

Seventy-three *beads* were found in the grave, all different and made of a variety of materials: white, plain, green, yellow, orange, red and blue glass; glass decorated with inlaid patterns of different colours; amber; and jet. Most of the beads were in a reasonable state of preservation and only eight were found to be broken. The beads varied in shape and size, ranging from round to oval, grooved, “melon”-shaped, spiralled, square and rectangular, flower-shaped, oblong and knobbled. The largest bead, made of amber, was 3.3cm in diameter and the smallest of blue glass was no more than 0.3cm in diameter.

Most of the beads were found clustered around the head area, and were grouped in no obvious pattern. It seems that these had formed one long necklace and had fallen in disarray around the head when their string decayed.

The two largest beads, made of amber, were found together in the waist area of the skeleton. With them was a small *ammonite fossil* in very poor condition and broken in three places. When reconstructed it measured no more than 3.5cm across at the widest point, with a hole cut through its centre. It is more likely that these three items were part of a belt or pendant rather than a necklace.

Also within the grave, at a point near the right knee of the skeleton, was found a strange object made of soft limestone. It resembles a small *pestle and mortar* fashioned out of natural stone with the bowl of the mortar being only just big enough to take the pestle. The “pestle” is 4.5cm long and 0.9cm in diameter, it has a small area of metal encrustation on one side. The “mortar” is approximately 3.3cm x 2.7cm x 2.2cm. The bowl has several holes in the bottom, but the limestone is a very soft substance which would not have stood up to great use and they might even be a natural occurrence in the weathering process of this material. The fact that this stone is not natural to St Patrick’s Isle may be significant in itself so it could be a symbolic item – a token pestle and mortar, representative of some activity undertaken by the buried women. Its uniqueness in such an archaeological context makes it difficult to interpret the significance of this find.

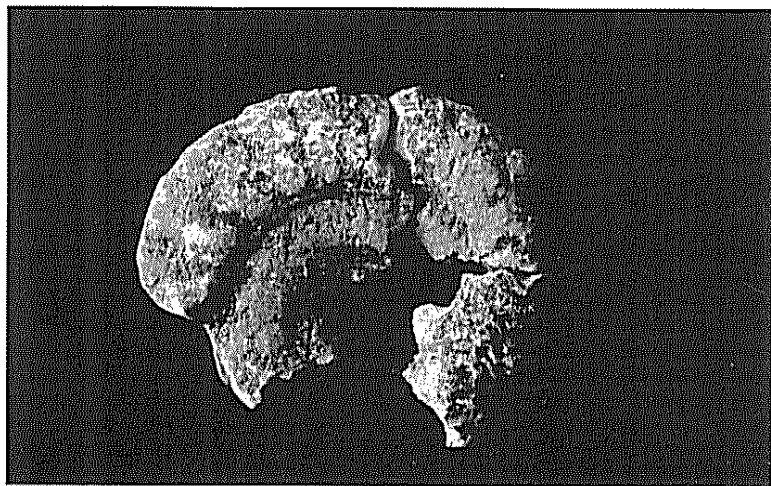


Fig. 10. *Ammonite fossil*, worn as a charm pendant by the “Pagan Lady”. Photo: D. Freke.

## Parallels and Meaning

As can be seen from the previous pages, the grave of this Viking "Pagan Lady" from Peel Castle is very rich. Such a collection of objects so great in number and variety immediately raises many questions concerning the status, date, origin and lifestyle of the woman with whom they were buried. In order to begin to answer these questions, the significance of the objects themselves must first be understood. Parallels must be found for all the objects so that they can be related to specific areas and a particular period. Once this has been achieved their meaning in archaeological terms will be clearer and so the origins and dating of the person with whom they were buried may emerge.

The *cooking spit* is unusual in that it is the only complete example to have been found in the British Isles to date. Indeed the only other one of its type is a fragment of a spit, found in the 19th century, at an unknown location in Ireland. But in Scandinavia cooking spits are often found as grave goods in pagan Viking graves and often in those of women. A very elaborate twisted spit was found at Fyrkat in Denmark, and another, similar to that at Peel, was found at Soreim, Dale, Luster, Sogn og Fjordane, in Norway.

The spit is also significant in that it is the first immediately recognisable "kitchen" utensil to be found in a grave in the British Isles. In the Scandinavian homelands, kitchen utensils in graves have traditionally been associated with female burials.

Because of the unique nature of this spit in Great Britain and Ireland the question arises as to the origins of the woman buried at Peel; its close parallels amongst Scandinavian Viking-age spits would suggest that she might have been a Scandinavian who was either visiting or had emigrated to Man with her belongings when she died.

*Knives* are typical of the pagan grave goods found in both male and female graves all over the Viking world, including Scotland, Ireland, England and the Isle of Man. The poor state of preservation of two of the knives is also a hindrance when seeking parallels for them, as their form cannot be precisely determined. Because they are so common throughout the Viking period in various shapes and sizes, it is not possible to pinpoint direct parallels or to identify where they might have been made.

Their decorative silver bindings suggest that they were more than just working tools, but this could simply mean that they belonged to a wealthy person. Such silverwork is typical of metalwork decoration of the period and twisted metal wires can be found on Saxon, Celtic and Viking objects, but their use is not clearly dateable.



The third knife or tool with the triangular-shaped blade and long handle also raises problems as regards parallels. It is an unusual object and its specific function is not identifiable. If it is not an ordinary knife, it could be a kitchen utensil or a specialised tool of some kind, perhaps relating to leather, metal or even cloth working. Without a detailed study of all the knives and similar objects found throughout the Viking world, one cannot be sure that a parallel does not exist in some form.

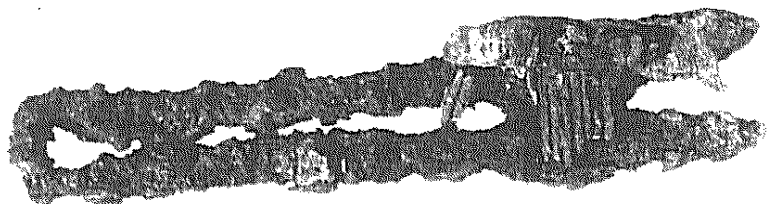


Fig. 11. *Comb (JL) and shears (JK), found corroded together, with cloth impressions between the blades of the shears. Photo: British Museum.*

The *comb and the shears* are also typical Viking grave goods. These objects are found in a great many graves all over the Viking world and in graves of both sexes. The shears are very similar in form to latterday sheep shears, but this is not to imply that they were used only for shearing sheep. As they are found in so many graves it must mean that they were used for a wide variety of purposes by many people, however the type of the shears from Peel can be paralleled with some found at Fyrkat in Denmark that were used specifically in textile working.

Combs were another essential item. In Scandinavia they have been found in most places especially on urban sites such as Hedeby, Birka and Ribe. At the Swedish site of Birka many of the graves in the cemetery contained combs, especially those of adults. It is probable that each person, male and female, would have had at least one comb, often made locally for them and lasting several years. It would therefore be considered a personal possession that would be buried with them when they died. In the British Isles combs have been found in graves of both sexes. The presence of a comb itself does not enable one to date the context. It is only by their form and decorative patterns that they can be associated with a particular period. The designs on the comb from Peel resemble, at a very basic level, the simple geometric decoration of combs from Birka. The 9th- and 10th-century date of Birka is not out of step with the broad dating of the pagan graves found at Peel. The origin of this comb need not have been in Scandinavia for there is evidence of bone and antler working in both York and Dublin. Indeed there may well have been bone working on the Isle of Man itself though as yet no evidence for this has come to light.

The 73 *beads* in the grave are immediately notable simply because there are so many. Beads of many types have been found in Viking graves, both male and female. The collection from the Peel grave is the largest single group found in a grave in the British Isles (the next comparable group in terms of number, that of 45 beads, was found in the Orkneys). Another interesting feature about the beads from Peel is their variety in material, glass, amber, and jet. The large number and different types and materials of the beads suggest that they are not all from one place. This implies that their owner had collected or inherited them from many parts of the Viking world. They might have been collected by the woman they were buried with, or they may have been brought her as gifts or trade items from travels abroad. Evidence for glass and bead working can be found all over the Viking world including sites in Great Britain and Ireland. Evidence shows that frequently glass was taken to a site to be re-used in the making of beads. This can be seen for instance at Hedeby in north Germany, and at both York and Dublin. The more elaborate multi-coloured and patterned beads may have been imported from as far away as Italy or the northern Baltic ports. "Melon" beads, so named because of their similarity in shape to Honeydew melons, are a typical Roman-type bead, as well as being found in many Viking and Saxon contexts.

The evidence for glass beads is so widespread that it is almost impossible to pinpoint where they came from and whether they were the results of trading or just souvenirs. Their value is obviously notable as a show of wealth and possibly social status, therefore one might assume that they could have been passed down from generation to generation before being buried with a person as grave goods. The "universal" and long-lasting characteristic of many of the simpler glass beads makes it almost impossible to assign dates for them within the Viking period.

The same can be said for amber and jet beads, though the source for these materials is more identifiable. Amber in the Viking period was found washed up on the shores of the North Sea: (western Scandinavia and eastern Britain) and of the southern Baltic. Hence the evidence for amber working in Viking York, Hedeby, and Birka; but it has been found in the form of beads and ornaments all over the Viking world.

The only known source for jet in the Viking period was from the areas of coastline around Whitby in north Yorkshire, yet jet too has been found over much of the Viking world. Evidence for the working of jet into beads and ornaments has often been found where the similar working of amber took place. The unique source of this material during this period must have made the value of jet extremely high, and to have possessed jet beads must have indicated something of the wealth and social status of their owner.

The finding of the small *ammonite fossil* (possibly used as a bead) also suggests links abroad, as this type of fossil is not found in any of the geological deposits on the Isle of Man. Ammonites are very rare in archaeological contexts and only one other has been found in a grave in the British Isles: that of an Anglo-Saxon in the early Saxon cemetery near Wrotham in Kent. In Anglo-Saxon society ammonites are thought to have been symbols of fertility carried by women as charms. They are also considered to have had medicinal qualities as well as giving protection against evil spirits and serpents. To date no other ammonites are known from Viking graves or related contexts. Does this suggest perhaps that the lady from Peel had links with the Anglo-Saxon world across the water in England?



Fig. 12. "Pestle and Mortar" found near the legs of the "Pagan Lady". Photo: D. Freke.

Another enigmatic object is the tiny "*pestle and mortar*". If this is a pestle and mortar, there is no evidence in the grave of what it originally ground, and no parallels for it have been found in either graves or domestic contexts elsewhere in the Viking world. It is impossible to say that it was definitely used as a pestle and mortar, indeed it could well be merely an accident of nature that makes it resemble a small dish with stirrer or grinder in it. But the presence of this material in the grave is unusual and is certainly not a natural occurrence. This in itself could mean that the object is a symbol for something, though of quite what we cannot be sure. Other miniature objects in Viking age graves have generally been interpreted as toys, for example the tiny querns found at Jarlshof.

The two bronze *needles* found in the possible remains of a *purse* or *pouch* give a strong domestic element to the grave goods. The purse remains are so fragmentary that its structure, let alone any parallels, cannot be identified. But the needles, though broken, are both very fine. Needles found in Viking graves are fairly common all over Scandinavia and bone ones have been found in a Viking grave at Ballinaby in Ireland. Bone and bronze needles have also been found in domestic contexts at York. They can be well paralleled with the silver and bronze needles found in female graves at Birka in Sweden. As distinctly domestic items they would be typical funerary objects for a female burial in the Viking period. The simplicity and unchanging design of needles makes it impossible to date them specifically on typological grounds to any particular period within the Middle Ages.

In looking at the objects from this grave at Peel, we can see that it is not only their number that indicates wealth and power, for their parallels are widespread across the Viking world. They tell us that the woman with whom they were buried must either have been rich herself or married to someone of great wealth and power. This lady must have been important to her friends and relatives as well as in the local community to merit such a rich display in her burial.

## Some Problems

Looking at the objects from this lady's burial, we can see that their richness in number, quality and variety suggest that she was a person of some standing in her time. But to place her within our knowledge of the Norse period we must now look at the historical and archaeological evidence from that period and attempt comparisons if we are to understand the true significance of this grave.

As a pagan burial this grave raises a number of questions concerning our understanding of the Viking period in the Isle of Man, and more generally of the Norse world. Firstly, there is the date of this grave, and of the other pagan graves in the cemetery, to be established. Then the woman's origin: was she Celtic or Norse? And what was her religion? What are the reasons for the pagan rituals of her grave contrasting with her burial in an earlier Christian cemetery? Lastly, there must be considered her status as a woman at that period of history. Many of these issues remains unresolved, although some suggestions can be put forward.

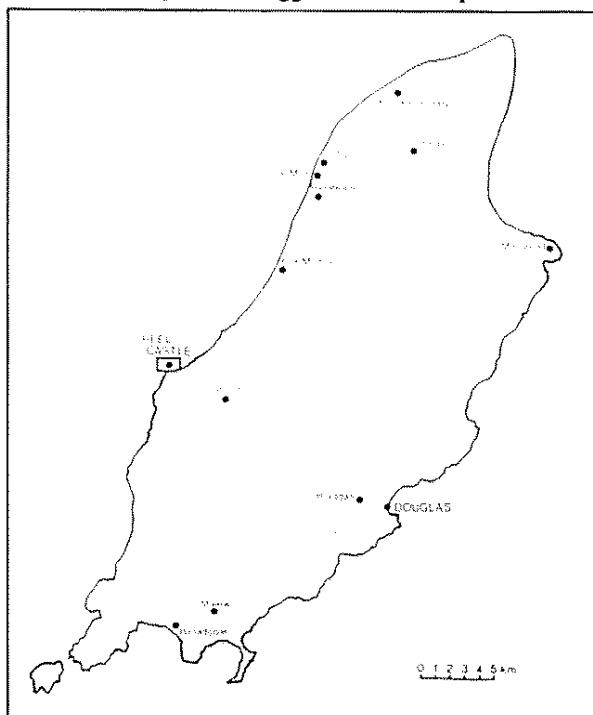


Fig. 13. Location of Peel Castle and other Viking sites on I.o.M. mentioned in text.

Taking these points in order we can begin with the date. Looking at historical evidence for the early pagan Viking raids and settlement in the British Isles, it is possible to identify the earliest possible date for these pagan burials. The first Viking raids on Ireland were in the last decade of the 8th century when Lambay Island off the Dublin coast was taken by pagan Vikings. We can assume that soon after this, if not before, the Isle of Man was attacked. Settlement in Ireland and Scotland was established by the mid 9th century. The pagan Norse settlement of the Isle of Man is likely to have taken place at a fairly similar date to that of Ireland, giving the pagan burials at Peel a date after the middle of the 9th century. The date after which paganism is unlikely is difficult to assess. The Orkneys, for example, were converted to Christianity as late as the early 11th century. But in the Isle of Man, closer to the English and Irish Christian communities, conversion was in progress during the first half of the 10th century. A coin of the Anglo-Saxon king Edmund was found in one of the pagan burials at Peel and as he reigned from 939-946, it cannot have been deposited much before the late 940s. To some extent the coin gives support to the suggestion that some of the pagan burials at Peel were interred no earlier than the mid to late 10th century.

The origin of the woman is an equally difficult problem. We can begin to find answers to this by looking at the 10th-century carved memorial stones found on the Isle of Man. The decorative patterns carved on many of them show strong links with both the Celtic and Norse art-styles, suggesting an interaction of ideas that could only have been achieved if the two races were, at least to some extent, co-existing. The Norse runic inscriptions support this when we find references to Celtic and Viking names of the same family on one cross. For example, the cross at Braddan raised by Thorleif Hnakki in memory of his son Fiac. Fiac is a Celtic name, but the names of his father and uncle (also mentioned) are Norse. The implication is that the boy's mother was a Celt. Could this suggest that the Peel lady was a Celt married to a Viking who had settled in the Isle of Man? Evidence from elsewhere shows that Viking settlers took native wives. But on the other hand there is a cross at Andreas that was erected by the Viking Sandulf in memory of his Scandinavian wife Arinbiorg, so the "pagan lady" could have been a Viking settler herself. The balance swings back again though when we can find no evidence in the Peel burial for the oval "tortoise" brooches, the traditional dress fasteners worn by Norse women and characteristic of many Scandinavian female graves of the 9th-10th centuries. Their absence suggests that she was buried in Celtic dress and might have been a Celt, but on its own it is hardly conclusive evidence as Scandinavian women may not have worn such brooches after the first generation of settlers. The cooking spit however, until now not found in graves outside Scandinavia, suggests links with Scandinavia as strong as those suggested for the Celtic lands by the lack of oval brooches. The other objects in the grave are too generally distributed around the Viking world to be of much help in establishing this woman's origin. The inter-marrying between Celts and Scandinavians implied on the memorial stones, coupled with the total lack of evidence for oval brooches on the Isle of Man, along with the presence of pagan burials in earlier Christian cemeteries in both Man and England, suggests some accommodation between invader and natives. The Peel woman could have been second generation Norse or Celtic of mixed blood from Dublin or some other area within the Scandinavian sphere. The romantic idea of her being a local Celtic girl

married to a wealthy pagan Viking settler is quite an attractive one, made more intriguing by its uncertainty.

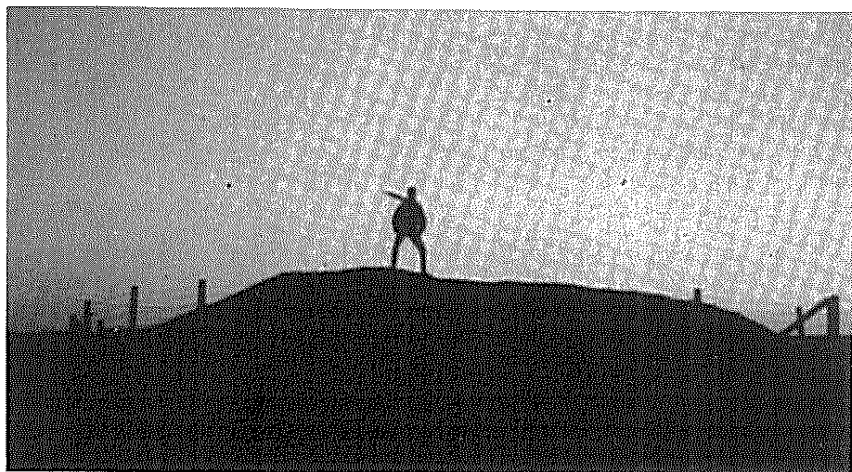


Fig. 14. *Viking burial mound at Knock-y-Dooney.*

The question of the woman's religion is as difficult to be certain about as are her date and origins. Elsewhere on the Isle of Man pagan Viking burials have been excavated, but they have all been of a different nature to those found at Peel. There are the ship burials at Balladoole and Knock e Dooney, and the mound burials at Ballateare and Cronk Moar. All of these are primarily adult male burials, though at Ballateare and Balladoole the body of a woman was in the grave, believed to be the sacrificed servants of the men with whom they were buried. Between them these graves produced a rich array of swords, spears, knives, shield bosses, tools and other objects associated with the traditional Viking-period male warrior. Even the bridle mounts for the man's horse were found at Balladoole, and at Knock e Dooney the man was buried with both his horse and pet dog. But these graves have to be set apart from those at Peel because they are all special. They are single burials of men made significant by the obviously specialized ritual of the large and noticeable memorial raised to them, whether it is a boat in which they were buried or a barrow mound raised over the place where they lie. They are possibly the tombs of the founder Viking settlers, marking dynastic claims over the quarterland farms on which they stand. If this is the case the question arises as to where the others were buried? Where are their wives and families? Throughout the island, over the years, Viking artefacts have turned up in the early Christian cemeteries still in use. A 9th-century sword was found at St Johns, and other objects in the churchyards of Kirk Michael, Braddan and Malew. At Jurby there is a mound within the early Christian earthwork boundary of the cemetery. Though unexcavated it is probably a Viking burial mound. These finds have led to the suggestion that the early Christian cemeteries were used by the first pagan Viking settlers on the Island, respected as sacred places for the burial of the dead. This suggestion is further supported by the early Christian lintel-grave cemetery used for the ship burial at Balladoole, where the placing of the Viking warrior's "ship tomb" in the cemetery could not help but disturb the graves.



Fig. 15. Viking burial mound in Jurby Churchyard with Cronk-ny-aree-Laa on horizon.

That the earlier Christian cemeteries continued to be used by both Celts and Vikings is not such a far flung idea when we have evidence for a fairly easy and fast integration of the two communities, with the intermingling of family names and art styles shown on the Manx crosses of the 10th century. The pagan Viking cemetery at Peel lying within an early Christian cemetery is the first substantial proof of the continued use and respect of a Christian burial place by pagan Vikings during the 10th century in the Isle of Man.

Obviously the lady's grave goods are evidence of a pagan ritual, but her burial in an early Christian cemetery raises the alternative question of whether she or her husband were Christian while the other partner was pagan. Several hypotheses could fit: both are pagan and the pagan community treats Christian holy ground as sacred; pagan husband respects Christian wife's wishes for burial in Christian holy ground, but ensures that his beliefs are acknowledged, especially the gift-giving aspect which would be important for his esteem and standing in the community; or the pagan wife's desires for her domestic goods and jewellery to accompany her are respected by a Christian husband who buries her in the ground consecrated by his Church. What is difficult to accept is the possible suggestion that both were fully Christian. The quantity and richness of the accompanying goods amount to far more than the odd personal trinket found in fully Christian graves.

The lady was clearly rich. This is the richest pagan woman's burial from this period found in the British Isles, both in the quality and in the numbers of the objects found with her. She must at least have been the wife of a chieftain or someone of that standing within the community. If this is so, what sort of status did she enjoy as a woman of this period?

The documentary evidence for the status of women in this period is scarce and often not trustworthy. Contemporary texts and literature give us only a general idea of the attitudes towards women and what position they held within society. More is known about the aristocratic woman than the peasant. What evidence we do have, in the sagas and various Scandinavian laws, comes from a later period of Norse history and therefore can only be looked at in general terms, assuming that attitudes to women did not undergo any dramatic changes throughout the whole of the medieval period. The "Lady of Peel" was probably from the higher echelons of Viking society, as a Celtic or Viking woman married to a wealthy Viking warrior.

Women in this period would have been responsible for the domestic duties: preparing food, weaving, making clothes, cleaning and looking after the care and upbringing of children. Slave women had no rights or responsibilities and would have undertaken the most menial of these day to day chores. Free women further up the social scale would have been responsible for the running of the household. This could often mean managing her husband's estate and workforce while he was away. It was the wife who had to maintain the reputation of her husband while he was abroad. For the wealthy this was often a large responsibility that well justified the respect some women would have gained. In Sweden, there is an 11th-century memorial stone raised by the yeoman of Hassmyra to his wife Odindisa. Part of the inscription reads "No better mistress will come to Hassmyra, to look after the farm". This memorial could well apply to many women not unlike Odindisa. When the husband returned home, his wife would have to ensure that he and his guests were comfortable as well as provide plenty of food and entertainment. There are many references in the sagas to women being the cupbearers or hostesses at feasts. Only the very wealthy would be able to pass on the many chores of running a household to retainers and slaves leaving themselves time for leisure activities.

A woman had no political rights. The husband or guardian (usually her father) would have held full responsibility for all her actions. Daughters did not share in the family inheritance as long as they had brothers to take it. If a girl did inherit land, it was controlled by her guardian until she came of age. If she married her estates would be controlled by her husband. A woman could inherit as a widow and in this way obtain considerable wealth and power. This she was free to control for herself. In the 13th-century *Laxdæla saga* there is the story of Aud "the deep wealthy" who, when her father and son were killed by the Scots, took control of her wealth and family, and emigrated with them from Scotland to Iceland. As a widow a woman would also administer the estates of her children. In this way women could become important landowners and it was as widows that they were closest to independence. In England, Domesday book refers to estates that were held by women of Viking descent, and indeed many place-names in Britain derive from female names of Scandinavian origin suggesting that some at least of these lands had once been held by Scandinavian women, although the situation is complicated by the fashion for Scandinavian personal names, which were sometimes adopted by the Anglo-Saxons.

Women might not necessarily have been just householders or landowners; there are legends about fierce and militant women. In "The War of Gaedhil with the Gaill" we are told of Ingen Ruadh, "the red girl", who led a group of Vikings and a fleet of ships and invaded Munster in the 10th century. This presents a picture of Viking raids where women were not just taken along for the ride.

Within a family a girl would represent a lot in terms of a "marriage bargain". Her dowry was very important and its size would be an indication of the social standing of that family. Any prospective partner would have to be of equal if not greater status for an arrangement to be made. This is shown in the *Laxdæla saga* when Melkorka's son is betrothed. His bride to be complains at the thought of being married to the son of a slave, but her father points out that the boy's grandfather was of Irish royal blood, and he considers this far more significant than the slave status of the boy's mother. One notable injustice in modern eyes was that, once married, if a woman committed adultery the husband had the right to kill her and her lover, yet a man could have as



many mistresses as he liked. But it appears that in the event of a divorce a woman could take back her dowry as well as the marriage gift she had received from her husband on their wedding day. This power could well have been a useful weapon for a woman to use if her husband was abusing her. Though they held no rights politically, in reality free women must have wielded some power in being able to manipulate the running of the household, the upbringing of the children and to some extent their husbands' actions towards them.

Married to a Viking warrior, the "Lady of Peel" could fall easily into the category of aristocratic women, having the responsibility of running the household and possibly managing the estates of her husband. If she was a widow she might even have held that land for herself and her children. With the evidence we have, we can only speculate as to exactly who she was and what position she held within the society of that period.

That valued women in families were respected is shown by the memorials dedicated to them. It might also have been shown in pagan times by the gifts with which they were buried. The greater the number and quantity of the grave goods the wealthier the family was and perhaps the more valued and respected the woman was. The most spectacular is the Oseberg ship burial in Norway. The family by whom the "Lady of Peel" was buried were clearly rich and her status as an aristocratic householder, and even possible landowner, was reflected by them in the objects with which they buried her.

## Conclusion

The discovery and excavation of the pagan woman's burial at Peel was exciting in itself, but what it means in terms of its archaeological significance is even more exciting. This lady is a first in many ways. Hers is the first pagan Viking woman's burial to be found in the Isle of Man, and it is the richest pagan Viking woman's burial in the British Isles. This and the other pagan burials are also the first substantial evidence for the continued use of Christian burial grounds by pagan Viking settlers in the Isle of Man. The dating of the pagan cemetery at Peel using the coin of King Edmund, though very uncertain; puts the conversion of at least some Vikings in Man forward by some years from the first quarter to at least the middle of the 10th century. The presence of the pagan graves in an earlier Christian cemetery may also reinforce the evidence for the Norse and Celtic people having co-existed and inter married. The richness and international quality of the objects found in the "Pagan Lady's" grave tell of her aristocratic status, as might be expected when we find her buried on such an archaeologically important site as Peel Castle. The Viking "Pagan Lady's" burial establishes Peel Castle with the Isle of Man as an integral part of the Norse domination of the Irish Sea area, linking Dublin, York and Scandinavia.

# Description of the Metal Objects

The following descriptions are based on the report by Peter Winsor from the Conservation Department at the British Museum in London.

1. *The Cooking Spit (JJ)*: the spit measures 83.7cm in length, and is approximately square in section, tapering at both ends, with a loop at one end (possibly a hand guard). Attached to the spit by corrosion were several different types of textiles (probably wool), twisting in layers and folds around its length. These textile remains were all mineralised and remain only as iron corrosion. Fragments of goose feathers were also found on the spit for a length of about 30cm. Of the textiles, there were four types of plain weave material, and possibly up to three types of cord. In amongst the folds of material were scattered many tiny spherical seeds.



Fig. 16. Detail of cloth impressions preserved on cooking spit. Photo: D. Freke.

2. *One Knife (JM)*: the total length of this knife is 14.8cm, with the hilt being 5.1cm long and the blade 9.7cm long. The cross-section of the hilt is 2.1cm by 1.5cm. The knife is in a very corroded state with probably no metallic iron remaining. The blade is complete and found to have on it a pale creamy-coloured fibrous deposit towards the

tip. This may be degraded leather and could be the remains of a sheath. The top of the hilt of the knife (the pommel) is missing, but because of this one is able to see the iron tang that ran inside the wooden grip. The actual wood of the grip is also very badly decayed. The hilt itself shows the remains of decoration in the form of silver bands running around the wooden grip. Only two of these bands survive, either as mineralised silver or as impressions in the wood surface. There is evidence of further silver wire decorations running along the hilt in line with the edge and back of the knife blade. These are in the form of two wires twisted together.



Fig. 17. Knife (JM), with silver bound wooden hilt and organic sheath. Photo: British Museum.

3. *One Knife or Tool (JN)*: this measures a total length of 15.7cm with the blade being 5.4cm long and the hilt 10.3cm long. This object could be considered rather more as a tool than a knife, with a very long handle and a short blade that in cross-section is triangular. The tip of the blade had broken off enabling the section to be seen. The hilt of the tool is probably made of wood and has a fracture approximately 5.5cm from the end. It is in a very decayed state and shows that the iron tang of the blade passes through its entire length and appears to have been hammered over an iron 'washer' at the tip of the hilt.

Fig. 18. Knife or tool (JN), with a long handle and short blade. Photo: British Museum.



4. *One Knife Hilt (JP)*: this measures a total length of 8.3cm, and in cross-section is 2.5cm by 1.8cm. The hilt is complete though very badly degraded. There is no trace of the blade other than that of the iron tang running throughout the centre of the hilt. This can also be seen as a broken section at the blade end of the hilt. The hilt itself is made of a fibrous structure resembling wood though it has been stained a rusty brown colour in the centre, probably by the corrosion of the iron tang, while the outer area of the grip is still a creamy-white colour reminiscent of decayed wood. As with the other such objects from this burial, the wood is in such a decayed state that it is unlikely that species identification will be possible. At the end of the hilt furthest from the blade there is a disc of what appears to be degraded leather. Whether or not this was part of the actual structure of the hilt is difficult to ascertain because of the poor state of preservation. The hilt is decorated with silver wires similar to the other knife found in the grave. The remains of three bands of silver wires set into grooves cut into the wooden grip are present, but much of the silver has corroded and broken off. Where it has been lost the impressions of wires can be seen in the remaining outer surface of the wood. The bands are spaced regularly along the hilt approximately 2.5cm apart. Each is made up of two silver wires twisted together. All the silver was in a mineralised state.

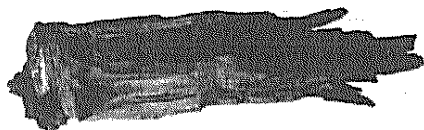


Fig. 19. Knife hilt (JP), with twisted silver wire decoration. Photo: British Museum.

5. *One Pair of Shears (JK)*: the shears measure a total length of 18cm and a maximum width of 3cm. They are made of iron now in a very mineralised state, but are complete. One side of the shears showed the remains of three types of textile and two types of cord; the most interesting being an area of tablet-woven fabric lying between the blades of the shears. It was not possible to identify the type of these fabrics as mineralisation had caused them to lose all their organic nature, though they are probably similar to the fabric remains found on the spit. Attached to the shears by iron corrosion products were the remains of a bone comb.

6. *Antler/Bone Comb (JL)*: much of the comb has been lost through decay since burial, but some of its original character still remains. The comb was made in three parts: plates from which a single row of teeth were cut, and two decorated panels which were secured one either side of the 'tooth' plates by a row of three iron rivets. In section the outer plates are segments of a circle. They are decorated on the surface with a simple geometric incised pattern.

7. *Pouch (NS)*: the possible remains of a leather and bronze pouch, found only in the form of small pieces and dust within the grave. The advanced state of decay made it impossible to identify the original form these fragments took and it is only speculation that they could represent the remains of some sort of purse or pouch. Located in the area below the skull, it comprised fragments of bone, leather and two bronze bars, resembling purse mounts (OS and OV), approximately 4cm long and 0.5cm wide; also within this mass were two bronze needles. These needles are in a comparatively good state of preservation and are complete, though they have broken at an obvious weak point, across the eye. The needles are not dissimilar to modern types except that they are bronze. They measure approximately 2cm and 2.5cm in length.

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#### Abbreviations

BAR	British Archaeological Reports
CBA	Council for British Archaeology
PSAS	Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland
THRS	Royal Historical Society Transactions

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