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# No Man is an island: evidence of pre-Viking Age migration to the Isle of Man

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ABSTRACT

The Isle of Man occupies a central position in the Irish Sea, in close proximity to the coasts of Ireland, north Wales, northwest England and southwest Scotland. The island's location means it presents an ideal stopping point for seafarers navigating the Irish Sea 'trade highway', and consequently, during the early medieval period, the island was the focus of power struggles between British and Irish elites, and eventually became the target of attack and subsequent settlement of people from Scandinavia during the Viking Age. It is the Viking-Age evidence that has been central to the discussion of migration to the Isle of Man to date, whilst less consideration has been given to population mobility to the island prior to the 10th century. This paper seeks to address this by presenting strontium and oxygen isotope data for a sample ($n = 12$) of two pre-10th century cemetery populations from the Isle of Man: Balladoole and Peel Castle. This study highlights evidence for mobility to the island prior to the advent of Viking-Age migrations, and consideration is given to the possible motivations for this early medieval mobility.



## 1. Introduction

The Isle of Man occupies a central position in the Irish Sea, and is no more than 80 km away from both mainland Britain or Ireland (Freke, 2002) (see Fig. 1). During the early medieval period (5th–10th century), the Isle of Man's location meant that it became the focus of interest for neighbouring elites because 'Man was at the hub of the Irish Sea and thus crucial for continuing links between the Britons of the north and those of Wales and between Britons and Ireland' (Charles-Edwards, 2013: 14). In the context of migration, however, the Isle of Man is most often discussed in the context of the Viking Age due to the archaeological evidence for the arrival and settlement of people from Scandinavia on the island from the early-10th century onwards (Wilson, 2008). For example, evidence for Viking-Age activity includes a boat burial from Balladoole thought to belong to a high-status male of Scandinavian descent, and a group of elaborately furnished 10th-century burials from Peel Castle (Bersu and Wilson, 1966; Freke, 2002). Less consideration has, however, been given to migration to, and settlement of, the island prior to the Viking Age. Thus, through the strontium and oxygen isotope analysis of human skeletal remains from two cemetery populations – Balladoole and Peel Castle – this study seeks to identify, and consider the possible stimuli for, pre-10th-century mobility, and in doing so will demonstrate that the Irish Sea was a means by which local communities navigated the British Isles long before the arrival of the vikings.

## 2. The early medieval funerary landscape of western Britain

Comparison between the early medieval funerary record of the Isle of Man and western Britain demonstrates the adoption of similar funerary rites in both regions; for example, the use of stone-lined graves was adopted across much of the north and west of Britain from the 5th century AD onwards. Burials in western Britain are said to reflect Christian ideals, with the deceased buried in a supine position, oriented with the head to the west and usually without grave goods, although it is worth noting that the inclusion of white quartz is a burial rite unique adopted to this region (Laing, 2006; Holbrook and Thomas, 2005; Gilchrist, 2008; Longley, 2009). Such similarities could therefore suggest a degree of contact and exchange of ideas between the Christian communities living around the Irish Sea at this time. In seeking to investigate mobility to the Isle of Man prior to the 10th century, a sample of burials ($n = 12$) from two cemetery populations – Balladoole and Peel Castle – were subjected to strontium and oxygen isotope analysis. In order to explore the data from these sites in the context of other early medieval cemetery populations from western Britain, the

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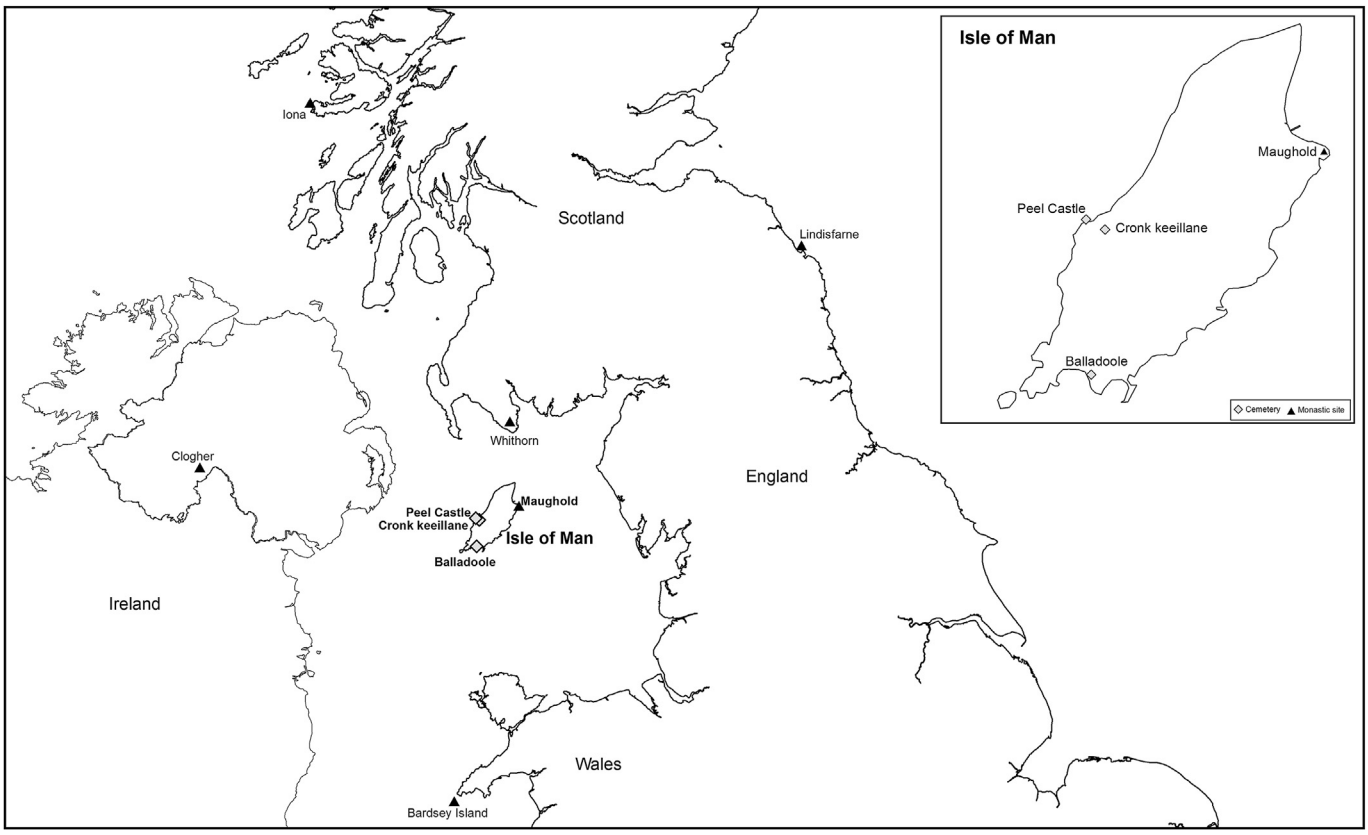


**Fig. 1.** Map of the Isle of Man illustrating the island's central position within the Irish Sea and the location of the sampled cemetery sites. The location of important ecclesiastical centres in Britain and Ireland are also shown.

results of this study are considered alongside data obtained from the analysis of the early medieval cemetery of Cronk keeillane ($n = 7$), also on the Isle of Man (Hemer, 2012) (see Sections 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3).

### 2.1. Peel Castle

St Patrick's Isle is a small islet formed of sandstone separated from the west coast of the island at Peel harbour (see Fig. 1). The islet is dominated by the ruins of the 13th-century cathedral of St German, and a 15th-century curtain wall, flanking tower and hall known collectively as Peel Castle (Freke, 2002). The earliest structural evidence for ecclesiastical activity on the islet includes St Patrick's Church and a keeill – a small rectangular stone chapel – which date from the 10th-to 11th-centuries AD (Freke, 2002).

A number of excavations have taken place on St Patrick's Isle since the 20th century; Professor Gerhard Bersu excavated the northwest half of the islet in 1947, and Dr C.A. Ralegh Radford concentrated on St German's Cathedral and St Patrick's Church in 1962 (Freke, 2002). A number of burials were found during these early excavations, but in the 1980s, a systematic excavation by David Freke conducted to the north of St German's Cathedral chancel revealed a cemetery of 327 burials (Freke, 2002). Radiocarbon dates show that the earliest burials date from AD 650–960 (2σ), and the latest date to AD 1290–1440 (2σ), whilst two coins including a half penny of Eadred (dated AD 946–55) and a coin of Edmund (dated AD 939–46) also provide a 10th-century date for a group of burials in this area (Freke, 2002). In total, 23 burials were identified as pre-10th or probable pre-10th century, due to their phase within the cemetery, available radiocarbon dates, or because of their overall characteristics (e.g. lintel graves) (Freke, 2002). The standard of skeletal preservation was considerably variable across the cemetery; many early burials were poorly preserved and consequently it was not possible to accurately age or sex all of the skeletons; the osteological data in Table 1 are drawn from the original assessment (Rubin, 2002). Stable isotope analysis was undertaken on eight skeletons who were believed to be of pre-10th century date, and whose permanent teeth were suitable for analysis (see Table 1).

### 2.2. Balladoole

On the southeast coast of the island, the cemetery of Balladoole occupies a small hillock overlying an outcrop of limestone known locally as 'Chapel Hill' (see Fig. 1). The site is best known for a boat burial excavated by Professor Gerhard Bersu in 1945 (Bersu and Wilson, 1966; Wilson, 2008), however it is not the occupant of this burial that forms the focus of the present study. Rather, this paper concentrates on the cemetery of lintel graves found beneath the boat burial, which indicate that the Balladoole cemetery was in use prior to the arrival of settlers from Scandinavia (Bersu and Wilson, 1966; Wilson, 2008). Radiocarbon dating confirmed this, providing a 4th–7th century AD date for one of the lintel burials (Fox, pers.comm). According to Bersu's excavation report, the bodies were laid supine with their arms by their sides and hands placed on the pelvis, and were oriented east-west and without grave goods (Bersu and Wilson, 1966). As the original osteological study was conducted in 1960 (Bunting and Verity, 1960), a re-assessment of the skeletal remains was undertaken by KH, which identified both adults and non-adults (Hemer, 2010). It was possible to correspond 18 skeletons with the *in situ* burials