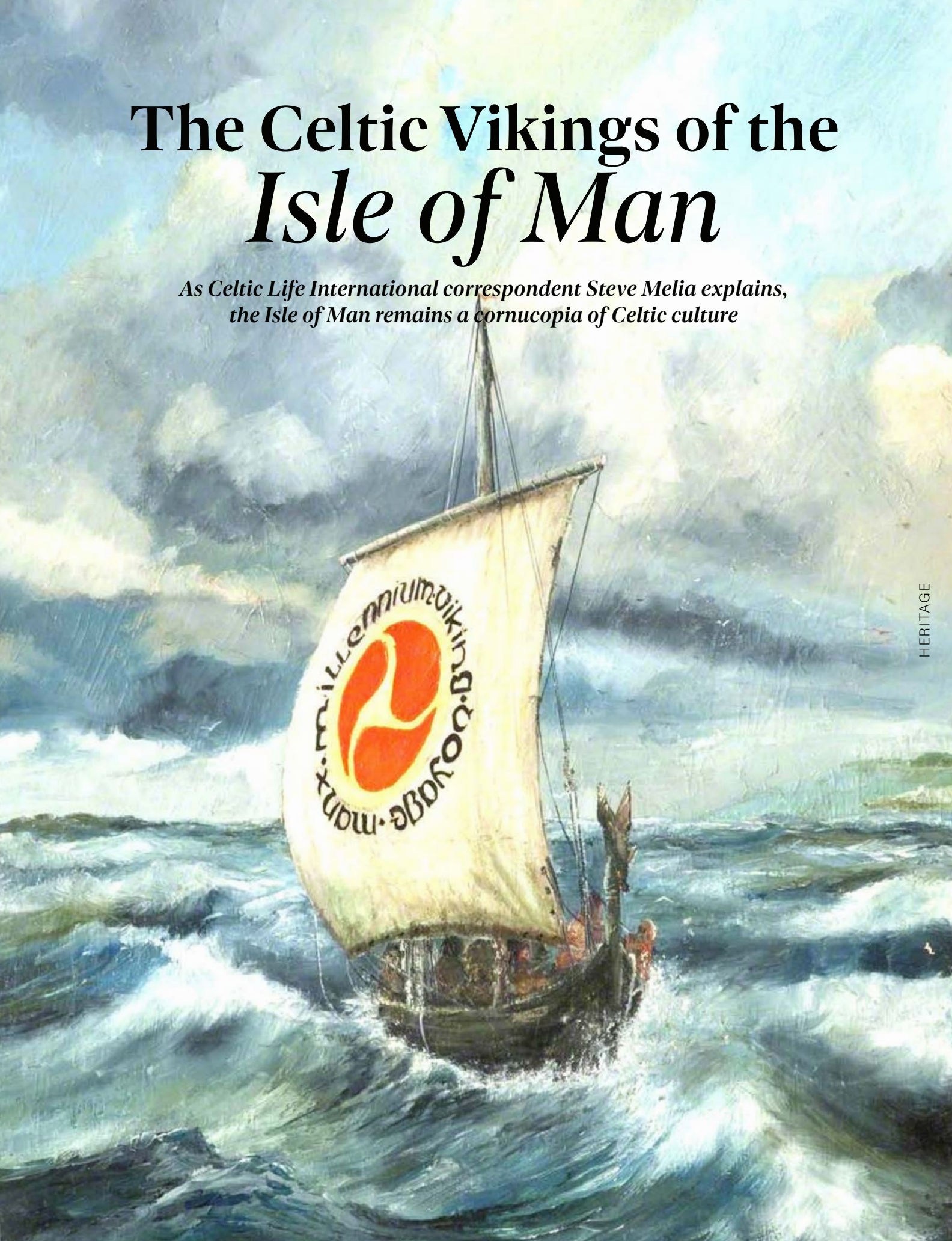


# The Celtic Vikings of the *Isle of Man*

*As Celtic Life International correspondent Steve Melia explains,  
the Isle of Man remains a cornucopia of Celtic culture*





*“A Viking was a pirate until he arrived somewhere he wanted to be. And to these shores he brought his own customs, his own gods and his own lords. A way of life that was bartered in marriage with the Celt. And the blood that was mingled became Manx blood...”*

This is how the Celtic god Manannan Mac Lir - played by the late Irish actor T P McKenna - introduces visitors to the House of Manannan in Peel on the Isle of Man. I had come to explore those origins, and this was a good place to start.

My wife Sara and I had arrived the night before on the ferry from Liverpool to Douglas. The Isle of Man lies roughly midway between Britain and Ireland. Douglas is its ‘capital city’ - stretching around the bay as far as the eye can see. When the sun rose the following morning, we saw green hills behind the hotels and guest houses on the seafront, and it felt more like its true size: of the 84,000 residents that inhabit the island, 26,000 of them live here.

Internationally, Man is represented by the U.K. government, though it is not part of the U.K. Financially, it is one of the richest places on Earth, however those statistics are misleading. As a tax haven, a lot of money flows in and out of the region, but only some of it impacts the local economy. From earliest times, Man has been forged by international movements of people, wealth, and power.

Manx National Heritage had given us Go Explore cards, which give free entry to their sites, and free public transport for five days. If you are planning to explore here, it may be worth buying one. The public transport was excellent: buses link all parts of the island from early morning to late night, seven days a week, and there are three heritage railways, powered by electricity, steam and horses. The Manx Transport app shows all its vehicles moving in real time, including an icon of a heavy horse, plodding sedately along Douglas’s seafront.

Our first visit was to Peel, on the opposite coast, facing towards Ireland. Man is longer than it is wide, so the journey was quite short.

“The artefacts are in the Manx Museum in Douglas” the assistant at the House of Manannan explained. “We do the fun version



Allison Fox and Andrew Johnson beside Viking Age crosses in Manx Museum

here.” In the foyer stands “the world’s smallest car” - manufactured here in the 1960s. The centrepiece of the museum is a replica Viking ship, rowed from Norway to Man in 1979, to celebrate 1000 years of the Tynwald, the oldest continuous parliament in the world. In between, Manannan guides guests through the early history of the island - as much as is known, because there are many gaps. One of those gaps relates to language; the earliest settlers, we believe, spoke Brythonic, the Celtic language which morphed into modern Welsh. What became of them is unknown; later arrivals from Ireland spoke Gaelic. Modern Manx, which is spoken (alongside English) by about 2000 people today, is a form of Gaelic, but did it survive the Viking Age, or was it reintroduced later? Linguists and historians remain uncertain.

**“The Vikings who invaded Man from about 800 AD built the castles you still see here today, but their language left little trace.”**

A reconstruction of a Viking Age family illustrated one possible reason for that: a Viking husband bickers with his Gaelic wife, like a modern couple, complaining that their children don’t understand his language. “Well, you should speak to them more,” she says, teasingly. Remember that cuddly domestic scene when I pick up the story again in the Manx Museum.

The main attraction in Peel is the castle on St Patrick’s Isle, overlooking the bay. Viewed from the beachfront, it looks entirely intact but inside is a mixture of standing walls and ruins. The earliest surviving parts were built in the 12th century, a few decades after the Vikings created the Kingdom of Man and the Isles, incorporating the Hebrides, off the West Coast of Scotland. In one corner of the



Sara with the Peel Trident - the World’s Smallest Car

site stand the remains of a Viking Age cathedral, with a dark, dank crypt, used to incarcerate sinners against ecclesiastical law until as recently as 1780.

Archaeologists have made some significant discoveries here, including the ‘Pagan Lady’ I would meet in the Manx Museum. They have also found traces of an Iron Age settlement and an early Celtic keeill, or chapel, but no structure from those earlier times remains visible today. Across the island, all that remains above the ground are earthworks and a few uncovered foundations.

The next morning, I met Allison Fox and Andrew Johnson, archaeologists and curators, in the Manx Museum. They have written a Guide to the Archaeological Sites of the Isle of Man - 82 of them in all. They showed me around the Celtic and Viking collections, explaining what is known and where there are gaps, particularly in the Iron Age, which lasted longer here as there was no Roman conquest.

Carved stone slabs and crosses are particularly important here. The museum has several, and many others can be found in churches or churchyards across the island. Before the Vikings converted to Christianity and established monasteries, they provide the only surviving written record of Man. Johnson points to one of the crosses, which bears a key piece of evidence on that disputed question about the Manx language:

“This one dates back to the 7th century. That name, Maqleog, is an early Gaelic form of ‘Clague’, a surname unique to the Isle of Man. That suggests continuity of the Gaelic language since before the Vikings, though it doesn’t prove it.”

Fox guided me through the Viking excavations, including the Pagan Lady, with her necklace of glass, jet and amber beads, and an iron rod associated with leaders of pagan

rituals. A chieftain buried in his ship was discovered on top of older, simpler, Christian graves. Were the Vikings trying to show, “we are in charge now”, or were they trying to say, “we are part of this community”?

Two of the finds were silver ingots - jewellery and coins from surrounding countries. Fox smiled and said: “we were an offshore financial centre, even in the Viking Age.”

The next grave reminded me of that domestic scene at the House of Manannan, with its message of peaceful integration. Here, a wealthy Viking man had been buried with a young woman: a loved one or a slave? Someone had killed her by slicing her skull with a sword, then added her remains to the butchered animals who would accompany him in the afterlife - so not so peaceful for everyone!

The next morning, we took the electric tramway to Maughold, near the northwest coast. The 130-year-old narrow-gauge trams trundle along at 24km/h, or slower, which was ideal for admiring the views. If you're not into climbing rocky paths, this is the best way to see the coast.

**“We were unusually lucky with six days of unbroken sunshine, and the rocky coastline was gleaming yellow with gorse in flower.”**

Kirk Maughold is one of the most important ancient sites on Man, not that you would notice if you were passing by. It looks like any other quiet country church, its Viking Age stonework covered by more recent rendering. Saint Maughold was a missionary from Ireland, who was cast to sea in a coracle with no oars, according to legend, and landed on Man, to start a monastery here, two centuries before the Vikings arrived. The foundations of three small keills used by the monks can still be found between the gravestones in the churchyard.

Opposite the church stands a three-sided shelter, open at the front, containing dozens of stone slabs, crosses and fragments, some from the Viking Age, others even earlier. Some display a fusion of Celtic and Norse styles. There are some familiar patterns and strange stylized images of people and beasts. Time and the weather have eroded most of them, so you have to look closely to make out a Viking longship or the shapeshifting Norse

god Ótr, in his guise as an otter, eating a fish.

From Maughold, we walked 8km along the coast to Ramsey, the second largest town. The Manx coastline is still wild in places, with strange rock formations, and teeming with wildlife. Choughs are the emblem of Cornwall, although they are rare today. Here, they were abundant. I never got to see the basking sharks or porpoises, which sometimes surface around this coast, but I did see a family of harbour seals, later that week, including a mother with her pup. The haze of the morning had cleared, revealing the coast of Galloway in Scotland, from where invaders sailed to attack the island on several occasions, during and after the Viking Age.

The Shennaghys Jiu festival of music and dance was running in Ramsey that weekend. Local groups, including children, performed alongside artists invited from across the Celtic world. We learned the difference between an Irish jig and a Manx slip jig (different musical times) and danced Fez-Noz style to Loïc Heurteaut from Bretagne.

A steam railway links Douglas to the south of the island. These trains are faster, reaching the dizzying speed of 46km/h. Our first stop was Ballasalla, home of Rushen Abbey. In 1134, King Olaf Godresson invited monks from Cumbria to establish a monastery here, which would gradually replace Maughold and Peel as the centre of ecclesiastical power. We know this, because Rushen's monks wrote the Chronicles of Mann, the principal source for early Manx history ever since.

You enter through a small interpretation centre to reach the gardens and ruined buildings which remain today. Most of the display concerns the life of Cistercian monks, who followed the rigorous teachings of St Benedict. Their vow of silence could only be broken for “essential conversation” in the parlour and underwear was only allowed when travelling. The Abbot was Deputy Governor of the island and held power of life and death over the inhabitants of abbey lands.

Our next stop was Castletown, and Castle Rushen, which overlooks its harbour. Unlike Peel Castle and the abbey, its walls remain intact. The earliest parts were built towards the end of the 12th century, a few decades after Peel, which it eventually replaced as the royal centre. Inside was a labyrinth



Steve inside Peel Castle

of small rooms and spiral staircases, leading to the rooftop, with battlements facing in all directions, over the harbour, south to the smaller island known as the Calf of Man, inland to Snaefell mountain and outwards to the Irish Sea.

Castletown remained the capital of Man through several changes of political control, from an independent kingdom, to rule by the Kings of Scotland, to a feudal possession of the English crown. A guided tour of the Old House of Keys, which stands beside the castle, brought the story up to date. The House of Keys is the Manx parliament, which was a self-selecting clique until they voted in 1866 to take the first steps towards democracy. Fifteen years later, the Keys became the first national parliament in the world to grant the vote to women. Today, the island effectively governs itself.

Towards the end of our stay, I was reminded of where we began, with Manannan's story of two peoples mingling. How that process really worked, we may never know, but a long-running genetic study, the Manx Y-DNA Project, has revealed some more. A quarter of volunteers with uniquely Manx surnames had Scandinavian male ancestors, with the rest, including the Clagues - classified as “Celtic” - from Ireland or Britain, in the distant past.

Several people told me how the revival of the Manx language and culture has been deliberately inclusive - anyone living there is welcome to join in. Watching the children of recent immigrants dancing the traditional Manx dances at Shennaghys Jiu, I realized that - through all that history of invasion, conquest and peaceful migration - the Celtic identity of Man has endured.