

Thorvald's Cross

The Viking-Age Cross-Slab
'Kirk Andreas MM 128' and its
Iconography

Dirk H. Steinforth



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*To my father,
Harm Steinforth*

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Introduction

The Isle of Man is justly famous for its *Manx Crosses*, a magnificent collection of medieval gravestones. Often decorated with scenes of humans and animals and intricately carved interlace as well as inscribed with runic texts, the stones from the Viking Age provide a unique glimpse into the spiritual world of medieval society on the Island between paganism and Christianity.

The most intriguing of them all is ‘Thorvald’s Cross’ or ‘Kirk Andreas MM 128’, a fragmentary mid-10th-century cross-slab in the parish church of the village of Andreas, in the north of the Isle of Man. Featuring dramatic scenes of both pagan Norse and Christian imagery, juxtaposed back to back, in well-cut bas-relief, it has invited several differing interpretations; most frequently, the death of the Norse chief god Óðinn by the demonic wolf Fenrir on one face, and the triumphant Christ walking over the poisonous serpents on the other. Together, both scenes are considered to signify the victory of Christianity over heathenism. Other opinions, however, have been put forward that deserve closer attention.



FIGURE 1: COLLECTION OF MANX CROSSES IN ST ANDREW’S CHURCH, ANDREAS, ISLE OF MAN (JULY 2017). (PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR, REPRODUCED COURTESY OF THE RECTORS AND WARDENS OF ST ANDREW’S CHURCH, ANDREAS, ISLE OF MAN)

This volume describes the details of the carvings, discusses plausible (and some not so plausible) suggestions and considers the images of MM 128 and their elements in their spiritual, cultural, and chronological context. It presents a hypothesis of its own as to how to interpret this remarkable monument, arguing that religious confrontation was not its original purpose. Instead, it claims that both faces of 'Thorvald's Cross' convey a common, much more subtle and comforting Christian message.

Background

The Isle of Man – a small island in the middle of the Irish Sea, between England and Ireland, Scotland and Wales – boasts a rich archaeological heritage. Since the Stone Age, humans have lived here and left their mark in the Island's cultural landscape, in the shape of grave mounds, settlement sites, or stone and metal artefacts. On the eve of the Viking Age, its inhabitants were a Celtic people with close links to their Irish and Welsh neighbours. They were Christians since the days of Saint Patrick (mid/late 5th century), built churches and monasteries, and buried their dead in cemeteries. According to their customs, no grave-goods were given into the burials, but occasionally, they erected simple gravestones marked with crosses over the graves.¹

In the year AD 798, so the Irish chronicles indicate, Vikings from Scandinavia entered the Irish Sea for the first time – a date that marks the beginning of a long period of raiding and warfare along the surrounding coasts. Eventually, in the middle of the 9th century, Vikings settled down permanently in Ireland, founding their own towns and kingdoms, such as in Dublin, and in about 870, the Vikings of Dublin also conquered the Isle of Man.² They introduced a material and spiritual culture very different from that of the native population. The Norse settlers were predominantly pagan and followed their old burial-customs, furnishing the dead with all the necessary equipment for a life after death: weapons, riding-equipment, tools, jewellery and commodities, and occasionally large ships were provided as well as animals and even humans specifically sacrificed to accompany the deceased to the mythical realms of the dead, such as Valhøll (Valhalla), home of Óðinn (Odin), in the gods' kingdom of Asgard. Great barrows were erected over the graves, often on top of hills and ridges, for everyone to see from far away.³

In time, the two ethnic groups came to terms with each other. The newcomers assumed political and social dominance in the Island, but gradually adopted the material culture of the locals. While some Vikings held on to their old gods, others married local Christian women and were baptised, which brought on a phase of religious re-orientation and syncretism. Eventually, the Christian faith of the native Manx prevailed, and by about 960, the Norse had embraced the customs of the new religion, including burial in church cemeteries and in simple flat-graves without any objects at all. But

¹ See Steinforth 2015b, 36–56, 97–111.

² See Steinforth 2015b; 2015c; 2018; cf. Fell *et al.* 1983; Wilson 2008.

³ Steinforth 2015a; 2015b, 157–246; Wilson 2008, 26–56.

as if to replace the lost splendour of the old furnished mound graves, the Christian Vikings now adopted and adapted to their tastes another way to commemorate the dead and created intricately carved gravestones.