# Central or marginal in the ceramic history of these islands? A case study

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#### Summary

After a short introduction that reviews Gerald Dunning's relationship with the Isle of Man, the paper presents five ceramic assemblages from the Island ranging in date from the 13th through to the early 20th century. Two groups from excavations in Peel Castle and one from Rushen Abbey are

considered, along with a collection from a 19th-century shipwreck and a watching brief on an early 20th-century episcopal rubbish tip. They are each considered against contemporary evidence for differing types of marginality: political, constitutional, socioeconomic and cultural.

#### Introduction

A line drawn from the south-west of England to the north-east of Scotland and another from the north-west of Ireland to the south-east of England finds the Isle of Man at its intersection (Figure 1). Given that Man is geographically central to these islands why hold a conference here to discuss the ceramics of margins? The following paper is designed to show that, for various reasons the Isle of Man was and still is marginal in a number of senses and that the ceramics sequences recovered here, to some extent, reflect both that marginality as well as its centrality.

Figure 1
The Isle of Man at the geographical centre of these islands

#### Gerald Dunning and the Isle of Man

During his lifetime Gerald Dunning produced many studies of medieval pottery groups and important regional syntheses, such as his series on the dating of medieval pottery and the study of North Sea Trade (Evison, Hodges and Hurst 1974, 17–32; Hurst 1982, 16–18). The majority of his published reports involve excavated sequences from southern and eastern England, but with outliers in Wales, Northern Ireland and on the near continent (Figure 2). There is no apparent connection with the Isle of Man.



Figure 2
Distribution of published papers on medieval pottery by Gerald Dunning

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This reasonable inference from the published literature is actually wrong. In 1945 the distinguished German archaeologist and internee Gerhard Bersu had just completed the excavation of three socalled 'round houses' in the south of the Isle of Man and was in correspondence with British and Irish colleagues about his findings. Whilst the likes of Cecil Curwen, Thomas Kendrick, Christopher Hawkes, Gordon Childe, Graham Clarke, Raleigh Radford and Sean O'Riordain were well able to comment on the structural evidence from the sites and the metalwork and glass finds, it is clear from a letter to Bersu from Christopher Hawkes dated 15 October 1945 that the ceramics from the sites, particularly from Ballanorris, were regarded as problematic - 'as for the pottery it is a puzzle of its own'. He persuaded Bersu to approach a certain Lieutenant G C Dunning, Royal Naval Air Station, Worthy Down, near Winchester, Hampshire, for advice. Whilst the published report makes no reference to any advice or comment by Dunning he clearly kept in touch with Bersu and with the island authorities. He visited the island in 1968.

The administrative records in the Manx Museum include more than a dozen letters from Dunning who over the years commented on pottery from the Viking ship burial at Balladoole, on mortars from the island, on pottery from Megaw's excavation of a corn drying kiln (this was too modern for him and he referred it to the V & A). But most of the correspondence is about the pottery from Bersu's 1947 Peel Castle excavations which was sent to him on 1 November 1947; the report was delivered to the Manx Museum on 1 June 1948, Almost 30 years later, when the report on these excavations was almost ready for publication he was invited back to the island. He declined in his final letter to the Museum, dated 1 April 1978, just two weeks before he died (MS 09921).

Dunning's detailed report, together with informal comments by Jope, Hurst, Butler and others, formed the basis of the pottery section of the full account of the excavations eventually published by Marilyn Wright (1982). It marks the beginning of serious research on Manx medieval pottery. So there ought to be a Dunning dot on Man!

Peel Castle also provides the first of the five ceramic assemblages that form the focus of this paper. In each case the pottery recovered from different periods of the island's history will be used to assess the degree to which it reflects a society on the edge. Marginality may be defined within a number of differing parameters: political, constitutional, social, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, technological, psychological and physical. The Isle of Man exhibits marginality in all of these senses at some time or other, and to a certain extent still does.

#### Peel Castle 1200-1250

A group of 380 minimum vessels dating from the first half of the 13th century was excavated during the 1980s excavations at the Castle (Freke 2002). Almost half of the assemblage is Manx, consisting of very small, hand-made, reduced cooking vessels in granite tempered ware. Slightly more than a half is from England, in particular from Cheshire, the Bristol area and Somerset. Just less than a quarter is continental, divided almost equally between northern and south-western France (Figure 3; Davey 1999a; 2000; 2011).

From the end of the 11th century until the middle of the 13th the Isle of Man lay on the southern boundary of the Norwegian empire. The kingdom of the Sudreys, or southern islands, extended into the centre of the Irish Sea, creating a narrow penetrating finger that pointed south and functioned as the spearhead of its interface with Britain, Ireland and continental Europe. Man lay at the end of the 'sea road to the Hebrides', part of a 'super highway', that linked Norway to western Europe (Macdonald 2000, 42–43). It also represented, together with the Hebrides, a cultural, ethic and cultural boundary between incoming, Old Norse speaking, Viking communities and the pre-existing Celtic language speaking inhabitants of the region.

The 13th-century pottery assemblage recovered from Peel reflects these marginal elements in a number of ways. First, as is common in frontier zones there is a degree of necessary leakage. The arrival of such a high proportion of continental and south-west English pottery emphasises the importance of the island as an entry point for trade between Scandinavia and Europe using the 'super highway' (McDonald 2007, 24, Map 4, 43). There is only slight evidence for Scottish, Irish or northern English economic connections. Secondly, the locally produced Manx granite tempered ware which caused Dunning some degree of disquiet is evidence not only for cultural contact between the aceramic Vikings but also of their assimilation of technological traits from the native populations – a process that is repeated in the areas of religion and language (Figs 4 and 5). By the late 1190s the Manx king, though a member of the

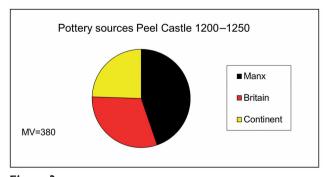


Figure 3
Peel Castle: the major sources of pottery 1200–1250



Figure 4 Peel Castle
Granite tempered ware rim excavated
by Bersu in 1947 and reported on by
Dunning

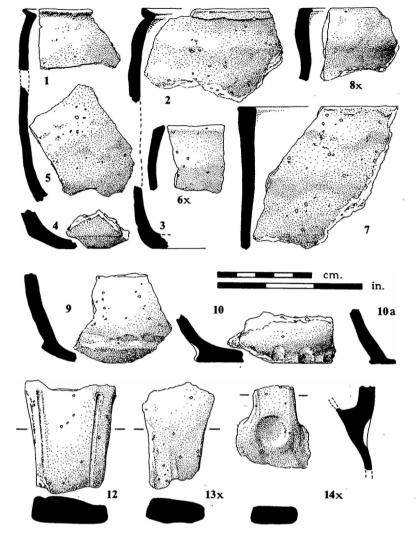


Figure 5 Peel Castle
Granite tempered group reported on by Dunning and published by Wright in 1982

royal Scandinavian blood line, was a Christian whose court poet wrote in Old Irish (O Cuív 1955–57).

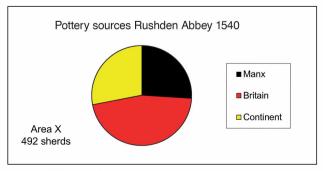
Thus the frontier position represented by the Isle of Man in this period involved not only permeation from the lands beyond, but also active assimilation between societies in apposition to each other.

#### Rushen Abbey in 1540

Rushen Abbey was dissolved and largely demolished in the summer of 1540 (Davey and Roscow 2010). Between 1998 and 2008 the Centre for Manx Studies carried out annual excavations on the site during which a substantial group of ceramics was recovered from the demolition deposits (Davey 2008). This pottery has still to be studied in detail but a group of 492 sherds from one area (Area X) included just over a quarter of locally produced wares, slightly more continental and almost a half from Britain (Figure 6). As with the earlier group from Peel the continental finds are largely French (Figure 7). There is a similar equality between north and the south—west France (Davey 2011). On the

other hand the British finds are predominantly from north-west England, with small groups from Cumbria, the London area and the south-west. The latest versions of Manx granite tempered ware are also in evidence, though less numerically important.

The Isle of Man in this period was the private possession of Edward Stanley the 3rd Earl of Derby who was legally King of Man but used the title



**Figure 6** Rushen Abbey
The major sources of pottery in the 1540 demolition deposit

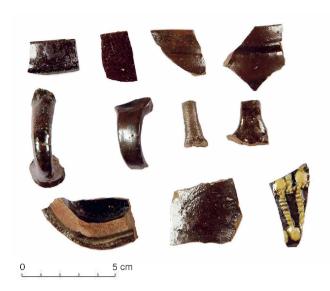


Figure 7 Rushen Abbey
Cistercian wares from the I540 demolition deposit

Lord. He was a significant landowner in north-west England and an important power broker at court. When Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries in England and Wales, Edward had little choice, short of rebellion, but to follow suit in Man (Davey and Roscow 2010, 14–16). This situation emphasises the constitutional marginality of the island. It was, and is, completely separate from England and the UK, but the fortunes of both are so closely bound up with each other that notions of Manx independence are, at bottom, illusory. The Royal assent to Manx laws approved by Tynwald, still ultimately resides with the Privy Council, none of whose members is elected by the Manx population, which under certain conditions can advise the Queen to withhold her consent (Sharpe 2002).

Rushen Abbey and its abbot provided a resident focus of power and wealth, parallel to that of the Stanleys. The pottery in use on the site in 1540 reflects this. Given a necessary element of local production the quality and range of ceramics recovered is very similar to what might be expected from a north-west English site of similar status; perhaps the continental element is a little larger. In other words this assemblage does not reflect political or constitutional marginality, but rather a central status in the economic geography of the Stanley estates.

#### Peel Castle in the Civil War 1644-1652

The excavations at Peel located two phases of mid-17th century upgrading of the defences, the first of which was interpreted as an initial attempt to improve the site by the Derbys from 1644 until the castle fell to Parliament in 1652 (Freke 2002, 174). The pottery assemblage from this phase produced 550 minimum vessels together with a collection of 384 tobacco pipe

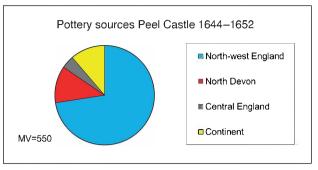


Figure 8 Peel Castle
The major sources of pottery 1644–1652

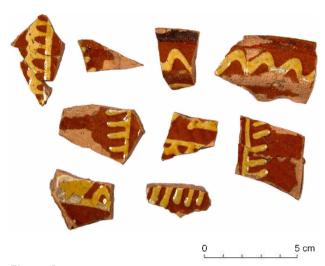


Figure 9
Peel Castle: slipwares from north-west England 1644–1652

fragments including 47 bowls (Figure 8; Davey 2002a, 407–511, 2002b). Some 73% of the pottery was from north-west England, including developed coarse and fine Cistercian wares, northern reduced green wares, yellow and purple wares and a range of slip-wares (Figure 9). North Devon provided a further 12% of the total and the continent 11%. There was also a small group from the English Midlands (4%).

James, 7th Earl of Derby was a key player on the Royalist side in the English Civil War. He joined Charles II in the defeat at Worcester, was captured and executed at Bolton on 15 October 1651. His wife, Charlotte de la Trémouille, who had conducted a successful defence of Lathom House (Lancashire) in 1644, had retreated to the island and held out against Parliament until an internal rebellion in 1651 handed the castles over to Colonel Robert Duckenfield. The surrender of Man was the final act in the defeat of the Royalist cause (Winterbottom 2007, 118–121).

The ceramic assemblage from the mid-17th century garrison contains no Manx products and is similar to Civil War groups from castles such as Pontefract (Comberbatch 2002) and Beeston (Noake

1993). Much, if not all, of the continental material may have arrived on the island from England. The Frechen stone-wares that make up half the collection are closely paralleled at both Pontefract (cf the Constable's Tower, Comberbatch 2002, 212–217) and Beeston, both in Civil War contexts. These wares appear to have been distributed widely in England by a variety of mechanisms once having arrived in London. Martincamp and late Saintonge finds are also widespread in England. Thus, as with Rushen Abbey a century earlier, the pottery finds lack any marginal attributes whether in quality, quantity or source.

#### The wreck of the John Fairfield, 1834

On 7th November 1834 the John Fairfield, on her maiden voyage out of Liverpool for Havana, Cuba, was wrecked at Poyll Vaaish in Malew on the southeast coast of the Isle of Man (Davey 1999b). The Liverpool Bills of Entry show that she was carrying a very mixed cargo including materials such as linen, lace, cotton, worstead, baize, flannel, woollens, caps, bonnets, carpets, hardware, nails, ploughshares, soap, writing slates, painters' colours, muskets, gunflints and crates of earthenware. Between 1926 and 1993 the Manx Museum received a number of items from divers and collections from the shore that included gunflints and two bowls with pedestal feet that bore transfer printed designs 'in claret' colour (Figure 10).

In 1993 three systematic collections along the shore produced 1,395 sherds of pottery and 29 testpit excavations carried out on the storm beaches in December 1997 a further 923 sherds (Davey 1999b, 281–286). With a handful of exceptions the assemblage was a coherent one consisting of a narrow range of types: shell-edged, sponged, dipped, painted and transfer printed wares (Figure 11). The evidence



Figure 10 Poyll Vaaish
Pedestal from a bowl with the Adams'
'Grecian Font' design in red transfer printing

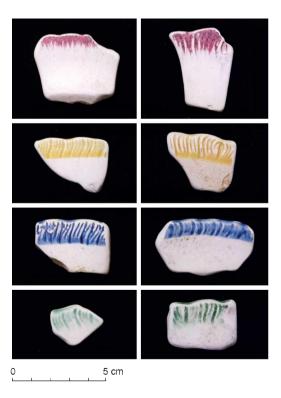
from stamps and the transfers show that the maker was the Staffordshire potter William Adams who had established a warehouse in Liverpool in 1832. The most distinctive characteristic of the pottery is its colour schemes. Whilst blue and green shell edged and moulded edged wares occur, such as might be found anywhere in Britain and Ireland, the Poyll Vaaish collections included considerable numbers of these forms in red and yellow. The transfer printing is entirely in red. On the other hand painted bowls, the so-called 'rosy basins', formed 10% of the assemblage. These are still to be found in Manx farm houses and as stray finds in field walking.

There are graphic descriptions in the Manx press of the morning after the wreck:

'immense quantities of goods of all descriptions lay scattered among the rocks and along the shore for nearly two miles; bales of calicoes, stuffs, broad cloths, webs of linen, blankets, hundreds of fouling pieces, handsome lamps, and lots of Scotch caps covered the rocks all the way'

Mona's Herald, 14th November 1834

Although the wreck was breaking up some way off shore and looting and salvage continued for some time, there are no reports of pottery or gunflints being recovered. None of the distinctively coloured and decorated wares appear to have found their way into Manx private or museum collections. This may be because their



**Figure 11**Poyll Vaaish: a selection of the wares from the John Fairfield, 1834

value was relatively low, but more probably that these weighty crates were stored in the bottom of the vessel to act as ballast and to assist the trim. They took time to break up and appear within the storm beaches as very small rolled fragments.

The pottery from Poyll Vaaish provides an excellent example of the adaption by a significant Staffordshire potter to a market whose taste was on the edge of the range he was accustomed to produce. Cuba probably acted as a distribution centre for the Caribbean and central and southern American markets. The transfers he chose to send largely involved Mediterranean themes, including historically nostalgic ones such as the two versions of his 'Andalucia' design and 'Grecian Font' (Davey 1999b, 289-290). Printed in red they are far removed from current English or North American taste. The inclusion of rosy basins is interesting in that this colourful hand-painted product, popular among rural communities in Britain and Ireland, was one of the few 'normal' products which could be sent to Cuba without modification.

This group demonstrates further examples of the idea of marginality. Here the edge is a 'cliff edge' – something that if you fall off you come to grief, but also if you run into it. Over 1,000 wrecks are known to have occurred in Manx waters from 1600 to the present (Corkhill 1995). The island is like a mist net sampling wider trading patterns. The ceramic element in cargoes such as that of the *John Fairfield* will reflect this trade and may also throw light on the insular situation. This pottery lies on the edge of taste as well as the geographical front of the market.

#### The bishop's rubbish, 1850-1930

In May 2002 the Centre for Manx Studies carried out a watching brief on a garage development immediately to the north of Bishopscourt, the medieval and later residence of the bishops of the Southern Isles. The southern side of a Civil War fort that had surrounded the tower house had been levelled early in the 19th century and the ditches subsequently filled with rubbish.

Something over 3,500 sherds of broken pottery was recovered ranging in date from c 1850 until c 1930. Most of the finds consisted of table-wares, many from dinner and tea services and often retaining factory stamps and year marks. Some interesting individual items were also found, including parts of at least two Chinese porcelain umbrella stands, art pottery from the south-west of England and parts of two Limoges dinner plates plus a number of items from a German porcelain tea set decorated with Egyptian scenes, possibly acquired on a grand tour (Figure 12). Perhaps the most remarkable object is a Chinese-style guilded tea bowl that is clearly a test piece from a factory (Figure 13). It has separate panels on the outside which are numbered in black ink on the inside. Each panel appears to have had a slightly different glaze applied to it. It has been repaired and, by whatever means it had come into the possession of the bishop's household; it was clearly highly valued. Around 40 complete stoneware bottles were recovered and parts of many more broken ones. Although most were made in England, parts of two rare German products were included. Items of coarse



**Fgure 12**Bishopscourt: German porcelain plate with transfer printed Egyptian design

earthenware and ceramic types such as 'rosy basins' known to be popular on the Isle of Man are virtually absent from the assemblage.

In addition to the pottery around 400 complete or nearly complete glass bottles were found. Although a few wine and beer bottles were recovered, the majority of the larger vessels appear to have been for mineral waters, including a single Sarsaparilla bottle from America. A wide range of other glass items was also found, including medicine bottles, ointment pots and other cosmetic containers. Domestic rubbish in other materials was also collected ranging from a single silver coin, a clay pipe bowl and part of a stone mortar to fragments of animal bones and parts of leather shoes. Compared with the ceramics and glass this material formed only a very small part of the whole assemblage.

The medieval diocese Sodorensis was created in 1152 by a re-organisation of the Scandinavian church which was carried out on political lines: Trondheim was the arch-diocese and the southern Isles was one of a number of diocese that corresponded to the petty kingdoms of the Norwegian ruling family. After the Treaty of Perth and the political changes they brought about, the Scottish king successfully imposed a bishop of his choice on the island. Later on the diocese was eventually taken in by York where it now resides.

The bishops' economic, social and cultural position placed them on the upper margins of Manx society. Unlike the surrounding islands Man had no aristocracy, no landed gentry, and consisted essentially of the king of Man (or lord as they decided it was more politic to be called) and some 770 or so tenured farmers, their families and dependents. There were no free-holding yeomen as would be the case in neighbouring counties of England or crofters such as would be found in the highlands of Scotland and parts of Ireland. Although by the 19th century an emerging merchant class had become significant, the medieval basis of land tenure

continued on the island until it was removed by act of Tynwald in 1911. The fact that everyone was at the same social level below the lord produced a society with a much more egalitarian outlook than was normal in neighbouring countries. The bishop was an exception. Holding land until the 19th century he was a secular baron as well as head of the diocese. This set him apart from everyone else except the abbot and the lord himself.

The bishop's rubbish has a number of distinctive characteristics. Although in general it consists of ceramic types that would be expected in an aristocratic or upper middle class family, there are a number of ways in which it is unusual. The almost complete lack of receptacles for storing or consuming alcohol or smoking tobacco is noteworthy, as is the presence of multiple examples of items from the same tea and dinner services. Both of these characters may be explained by the nature of the bishop's office and the behaviour society expected of his family and household. The diocese was, and is, lowchurch in Anglican terms and in the later 19th century was very supportive of abstinence from alcohol, and to a lesser extent, tobacco (Harrison 2000, 363). There was a strong grouping of temperance organisations with which the bishops were bound, theoretically at least, to be in sympathy. The other factor is the nature of the bishops' tenure of office. The bishops retired on a regular basis and new ones replaced them – together with their families, servants and belongings. Only occasionally can individual pieces of ceramic be linked directly to a particular bishop. For example the dinner plate fragment bearing the monogram NSZ and the motto SUGERE TENTO can be linked directly to Norman Dumeril John Stratton who was Bishop between 1892 and 1907 (Figure 14). This abrupt, 'cliff-edge' situation seems to have stimulated the mass ejection of ceramic items either by those about to leave or by the new arrivals. At this stage of research few of these can be related to individual bishops.



**Figure 13** Bishopscourt Porcelain bowl used as a test piece for glazes



Figure 14 Bishopscourt Dinner plate rim with the initials and motto of Bishop Stratton (1892–1907)

#### **Discussion**

The Isle of Man, though centrally located in the northern Irish Sea and within the British Isles, is placed on the margins in a number of senses: geographically in relation to Norway and England, politically in respect of its constitutional position, linguistically and culturally as a point of interface between the Scandinavian, Celtic, English and European worlds, socially as the limit of 'higher' society and physically as an abrupt barrier to shipping.

The question is whether the ceramic assemblages from different periods recovered from the island reflect this marginality. Even though there are elements that imply marginality such as the primitive nature of locally produced wares and the consistently large proportion of continental wares, they are predominantly main-stream throughout. Even when placed on the edge of empire in the 13th century, the pottery finds better reflect the island's central position in the Irish Sea as a focal point for the great Scandinavian-European seaway, as well as for the Anglo-Norman adventure in Ireland, rather than its political remoteness from its neighbours. In later periods the profile is less acute but the owners of Man were central players in the power-politics of England and Ireland and their lifestyle, including the pottery they used, is evidence for this.

## **Postlude** Internment in the First and Second World Wars

Due to its relative remoteness the island fulfilled another function in both World Wars: that of an internment camp for enemy aliens. 24,000 men were interned at Knockaloe for the duration of the First World War. This aspect of Manx marginality has been the subject of research by a number of academics associated with the Centre for Manx Studies. Weekly newspapers, identity when 'on the edge', photographs taken of and for the internees, artefacts they produced themselves or acquired, diaries, essays etc. The assemblage of artefacts retrieved from the site includes a range of bespoke Germanic imports and forms part of a PhD thesis just completed by Claire Corkill (2013).

Gerhard Bersu, an interned enemy alien, brought continental philosophy and field technology to the Isle of Man during the Second World War and introduced Gerald Dunning to its archaeology. He catapulted a small island on the edge into the centre of European Iron Age and later research and, through his contact with Dunning, initiated the serious study of Manx medieval pottery.

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#### Résumé

Après une courte introduction évoquant les liens entre Gerald Dunning et l'Île de Man, ce papier présente cinq assemblages céramiques provenant de l'île, allant du 13ème siècle jusqu'au début du 20ème siècle. Deux groupes issus de fouilles réalisées à Peel Castle et un autre de l'abbaye de Rushen sont examinés, ainsi qu'une collection provenant d'une épave du 19ème siècle et une opération de sauvetage sur une décharge d'ordures épiscopale du début du 20ème siècle. Ils sont tous évalués par comparaison avec des éléments contemporains relatifs à différents types de marginalité: politique, constitutionnelle, socio-économique et culturelle.

#### Zusammenfassung

Nach einer kurzen Einführung, die sich mit Gerald Dunnings Beziehung zur Isle of Man beschäftigt, stellt der Artikel fünf Assemblagen von Keramik von dieser Insel vor, die auf Zeiten vom 13. bis hin zum frühen 20. Jahrhundert datiert werden. Es werden zwei Gruppen von Ausgrabungen in Peel Castle und eine von Rushen Abbey betrachtet, zusätzlich noch eine Assemblage von einem Schiffswrack aus dem 19. Jahrhundert und eine Notausgrabung auf einer bischöflichen Müllhalde von Anfang des 20. Jahrhunderts. Sie werden jeweils im Zusammenhang mit zeitgenössischen Belegen für verschiedene Arten von Marginalität untersucht: politischer, konstitutioneller, sozio-ökonomischer und kultureller Marginalität.

