

# Imaging the Word: Art & Theology

## Celtic High Crosses

One of the most striking artistic developments of the Celtic Church was the erection of the great stone crosses or "high crosses." They can be found today in Wales, Scotland and Northumbria, but above all in Ireland, where there are still between sixty and seventy. These lands were long familiar with pre-Christian standing stones and with giant prehistoric megaliths, and so it was natural that between the eighth and the tenth centuries this tradition carried forward under Christian influence into a totally new form, in great decorated high crosses appearing in hundreds across the islands.

These stone crosses arose in the time of the Viking invasions, though some high crosses may predate those raids. Still their number certainly increased after this time, and some, no doubt, were built to replace many older bronze crosses which has been looted and removed. Others were erected as boundary markers, as indicators of sacred places, as recorders of some historical happening or agreement, as tools to teach biblical stories, and also as places of prayer and worship. One historian, Robin Flower, has characterized the crosses as "sermons in stone which could be the commentary or the theme of a meditation... prayers in enduring stone, rising within the circuit of the monastery wall, visible at all times far and near, a perpetual silent liturgy, a dedication and a hope."

The best examples are the 'cross of Muiredach' and the 'west cross,' both at Monasterboise, the 'market cross' and the 'broken cross' at Kells, the cross at Durrow, and the 'cross of the scriptures' in Clonmacnoise. At Iona, where the Vikings had devastated the ancient monastery, the wonderful Celtic crosses of Saint Martin and Saint John can still be seen today.



Muiredach's High Cross,  
Monasterboise



West Cross, Monasterboise



Market Cross, Kells



High Cross, Durrow



Book of the Scriptures,  
Clonmacnois



St. Martin's Cross, Iona

These are truly "high" crosses, some of them as high as 20 feet tall. They are sculptured in relief with scenes, mostly of the Bible, but also the lives of saints, such as Paul of Thebes and Anthony of Egypt, favorite heroes of the desert. One study of these crosses has found a remarkable concordance with the biblical scenes found in frescos in the continental churches dating from the time of Charlemagne, thus suggesting that these outdoor crosses were substitutes for frescos which wholly unknown in the simpler Irish wooden churches. The inspiration for the selection of scenes depicted for both might well go back to the churches of Rome.

A distinctive feature of these early crosses is the circle or ring around the junction of the horizontal and vertical bars at the cross. This may be simply structural or pragmatic, a way to reinforce the section point of intersection. Even if this is so, the Celtic imagination would have seen more. The circle may represent the sun, a vestige to the old Celtic pagan worship, but also a sign of the cosmic Christ, or it may represent a garland of victory for the figure of the victorious Christ. Perhaps it is even the symbol of the union of creation spirituality and salvation spirituality. Two hundred years later, in the 12th century, there appeared another series of high crosses. The ring on these crosses is not as prevalent as in the earlier group. The type of cross that typified the post-Norman church is less dramatic and unique. However, the ringed Celtic Cross eventually experienced another revival in the 19th century, largely for nationalistic employment as an expression of the resurgence of a Celtic identity.

As distinctive as these crosses are, the question remains, Where did the inspiration for them come from? There are no parallels for them anywhere else in Western Europe. The only comparable work is to be found more than two thousand miles to the East in Transcaucasia, or what is now Armenia.



Mayrivank Cross-stone, 12th century



A khachkar in Gandzasar,  
Karabakh



Khachkar at Goshavank, 12th to  
13th-century monastery



Arates monastery, 8th century



Geghard monastery, 4th century

In the words of Hillary Richardson, an archeologist recently retired from the University College, Dublin, who has spent much of her life studying Celtic Christian art, "alone in the Christian world, the extreme West and extreme East preserved an established convention of erecting monuments and stone."

For more on the high crosses and their place in Celtic Christianity, read this article, "[Cross](#)."