

SYMBOLISM
OF THE
CELTIC CROSS



Derek Bryce



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By
DEREK BRYCE
with drawings by
J. ROMILLY ALLEN
and others.



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Published by
LLANERCH ENTERPRISES

ISBN 0947992 33 2

Acknowledgements

The author thanks Mrs. Margaret Hall for supplying the photograph of the Langholm Mercat. Also Cornwall Books (Wheaton Publishers), who have issued a reprint of G. Langdon's book on Old Cornish Crosses, for permission to reproduce the drawing of the Mylor Cross.

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PREFACE

The text of this book has been written not as a work on the techniques and development of Celtic art, but with the intention of giving readers some understanding of the meaning of the Celtic cross, the basic symbolism.

By illustrating it mainly with drawings, readers have a chance to form some idea of what the ornamented crosses looked like when they were new, something which cannot be achieved by photographs of those of our ancient stone monuments that are weather-worn or vandalised.

In writing about symbolism, I have concentrated on what is basic or essential, rather than try to comment or speculate on the meaning of every single decorative item on the stone monuments.

Thus I have made no comment on the fascinating range of Pictish symbols illustrated, leaving them in the purely descriptive stage. It would, perhaps, have been possible to expand on the Pictish mirror-symbol with reference to other traditions, such as the ancient Chinese description of the perfect sage being like water and reflecting the truth to all who look at him, or the legend of the world-mirror in which all things can be seen; but interesting as such speculations may be, they do not necessarily explain the symbolism intended by the Picts themselves. Similarly, the Pictish crescent-symbol could be compared with the gold ornaments found in Ireland called 'lunulae,' which some think were worn on the head, others slung on the chest; but this would not take us much closer to an explanation of their meaning.

Readers will find in this book a story of the progressive development of Celtic Cristian art, from very simple beginnings in the so-called dark ages, to the wonderful productions of the pre-Norman period. On noting this, it is important not to jump to the conclusion that they represent a progressive development of spirituality, for the early Christians were taken up by near-continual internal prayer and had little need of symbolism. Many of them were saints, and St. Paul's words implying that all Christians are saints applies to them, and not to those of later times. When Christianity changed from an esoteric sect to state religion, begun in the Celtic lands by St. David in Wales, St. Patrick in Ireland, and St. Kentigern and St. Columba in Scotland, it embraced people of much less spiritual aptitude than the first Christians at a time when even the esoteric Christians were finding it harder to keep up internal prayer. Thus there was a greater need of symbolism to act both as a support and reminder, and this is what triggered off the development of Christian symbolic art. It is not a question of spiritual progress, but something rather less than swings and roundabouts. Despite the invasions and wars of the dark ages, the Christians of those times included many spiritually-enlightened souls; in the 'Life of St. Kentigern' it is written that more than six hundred saints were buried in Glasgow cemetery alone. Many of those who have become saints in later times needed the supports of the rites and symbolic arts of traditional Christianity, and even more so the people.

I have retained the older county names when giving localities for crosses. Pembrokeshire, for example, gives a clearer indication of a locality

than the much larger modern county of Dyfed, and the same is true for localities in the Scottish Highlands.

Most of the drawings in this book are from the works of J. Romilly Allen, especially his 'Early Christian Monuments of Scotland' (1906), but also his 'Christian Symbolism in Great Britain and Ireland before the 13th. Century' (c.1889), and his article in *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, fifth series, vol xvi, entitled 'Early Christian Art in Wales' (1899). Drawings of Scottish market crosses are from J. W. Small's 'Scottish Market Crosses' (1900). The market crosses of Bromboro and Lydney, together with the illustrations on the fly-leaf and title page, are from Alfred Rimmer's 'Ancient Stone Crosses of England' (1875). Early Welsh crosses are from J. O. Westwood's book 'Lapidarium Walliae' (1876/79), and his 'Sepulchral Stone in the Churchyard of Fishguard,' *Arch. Camb.* fourth series, vol. xiv, (1883). Drawings of Manx Crosses are from J. G. Cumming's 'On Some More Recently Discovered Scandinavian Crosses in the Isle of Man,' *Arch. Camb.* third series, vol xii (1866). The Malew paten is taken from E. L. Barnwell's 'Church Furniture in Malew Church' in the same volume. The drawing of the Menhir of Kerloaz is from the same author's 'French Megalithic Remains,' *Arch. Camb.* fourth series, vol. v (1874). The miniature from Würzburg is from Miss Stokes' 'Observations on Two Ancient Irish Works...' in *Archaeologia*, vol. xliii, 1869. I have also consulted W. G. Collingwood's 'Northumbrian Crosses' (1927), and two articles in the RILKO Newsletter (Research into lost knowledge organisation) No. 33, 1988, namely 'Pillar and Cross' by John Irwin, and 'Avebury - Ancient Capital of England' by Brian Ashley.

Derek Bryce

1989.

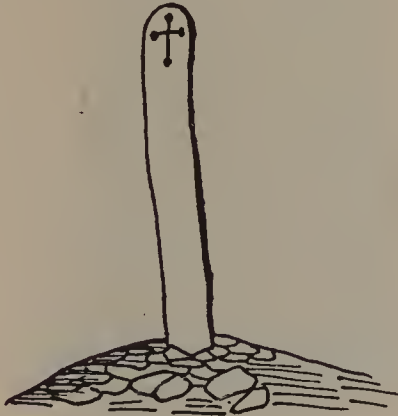


The Menhir of Kerloaz

1. PILLAR STONES: THE WORLD-AXIS

Long before the days of Christianity, in the Celtic West there were sacred stones. Whilst it is not within the scope of this book to discuss stone circles and alignments, standing stones or pillar stones are very relevant, for they symbolise the *Axis Mundi* or world-axis, the 'pole' or link between heaven and earth. The oldest symbol of the world-axis is the sacred tree, best known as the Tree of Life. Pillar stones probably began to replace sacred trees when nomadic peoples settled and cleared the land for agriculture.

In Britain, pillar stones are generally of modest proportions; the one illustrated from Lampeter in Wales measures 13'6" high above the ground. In Brittany, however, they are sometimes of gigantic proportions. The Menhir of Kerloaz, illustrated here, stands some 40 feet above the ground. It is said to have lost its upper part through having been struck by lightning.



Neath Cross



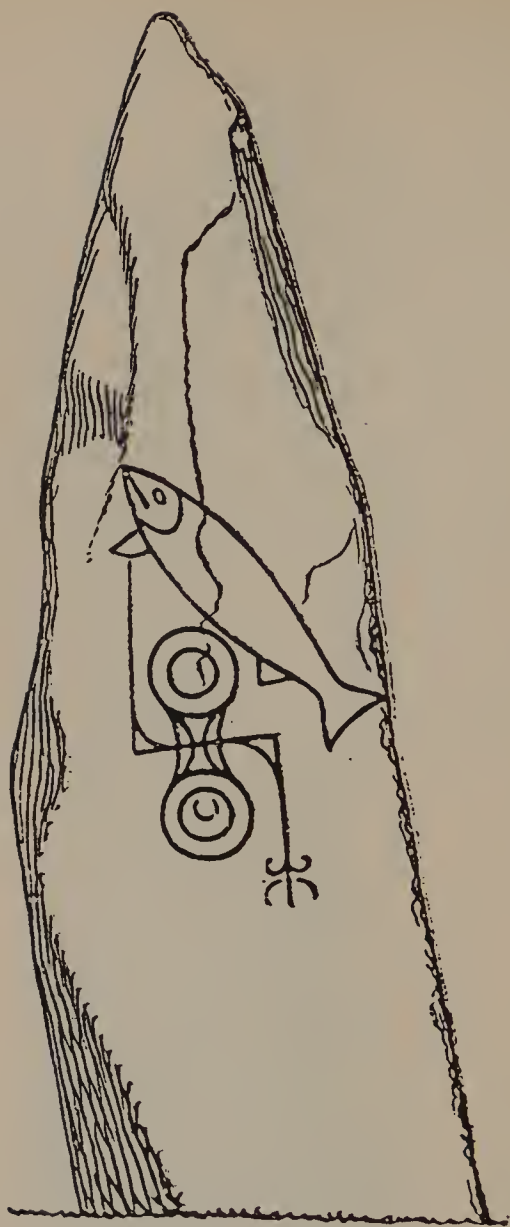
Standing stone near Lampeter

In Britain, a stone some 22 feet high and shaped like a giant phallus, stood in the centre of the Avebury stone circle. It was broken up for building material in the eighteenth century.

Although many standing stones have survived in remote places untouched, some have been given a Christian modification or addition. Thus the Menhir of Kerloaz was surmounted by a wooden cross, replaced later by an iron crucifix. Neath Cross in Wales appears to be a pagan standing stone which has had a cross inscribed on it, and there are other similar examples to be found. These modifications imply that some early Christians saw the symbolism of these ancient sacred stones as not incompatible with Christianity. This is, of course, because the symbol of the world-axis is universal. Similarly, the old Roman emperors and the popes have the title of *Pontifex* or bridge-makers between heaven and earth, which again shows continuity between pagan and Christian traditions.



Inscribed pillar-stone, Trawsmawr, Wales.

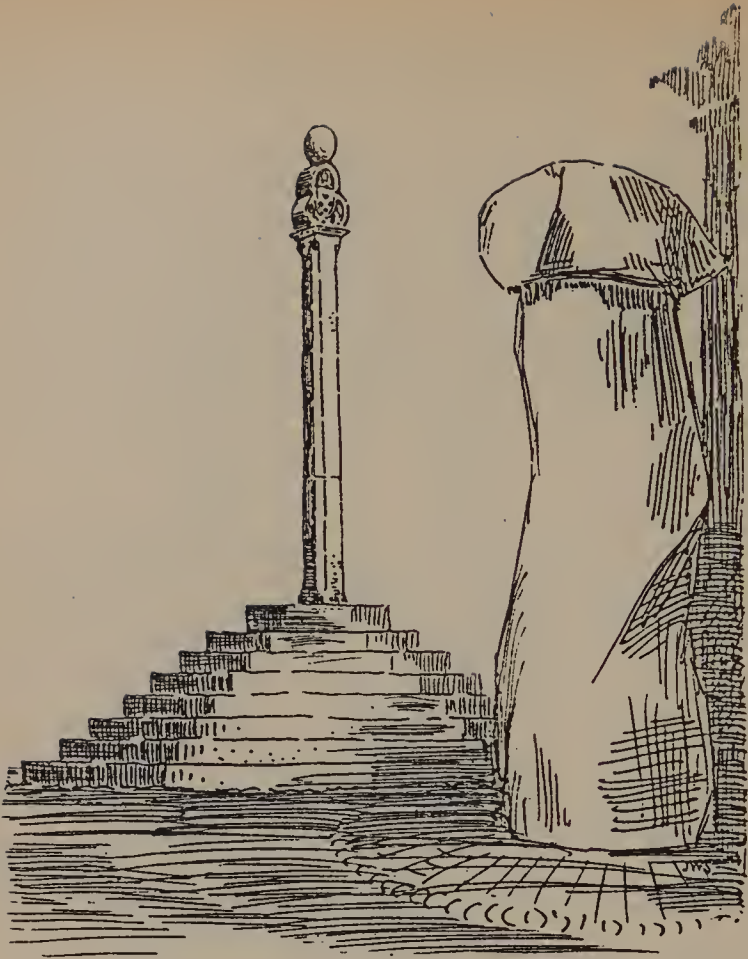


*Pillar stone sculptured with incised symbols
at Edderton, Ross, Scotland.*

2. MARKET CROSSES: HEAVEN, EARTH, AND THE SPACE BETWEEN

Some of the late Victorian writers, such as J. W. Small, assumed that our stone market crosses had replaced wooden ecclesiastical crosses erected by saints in the early days of Christianity, and that they had gradually lost their Christian symbolism and become secular or civic monuments. If this were true, they would have no distinctive Celtic connection.

A modern writer, John Irwin, has pointed out that early in the nineteenth century, when amateur archaeologists began to explore the remoter parts of the West of Britain, they found sculptured stones which were obviously pagan, and some of which were clearly phallic in shape. They also found that in some places the local people still had customs associated with them. Although the purpose of archaeology should be to record and preserve, these objects were too embarrassing for nineteenth-century gentlemen to report in the literature, and most of them were quietly made to disappear, broken and/or buried. One of the few to escape seems to have been the Clackmannan stone, situated to the east of Stirling. We reproduce J. W. Small's drawing of it, with a typical mediaeval market cross nearby. Small made no comment on the phallic shape of this stone; perhaps he did not wish to draw attention which may have been detrimental to it. The antiquity of this stone is underlined by the name Clackmannan itself, which implies the 'place of the stone.' No one knows how many of these stones, which bridge the gap between the ancient standing stones and Christian monuments, were made to disappear. We have already mentioned the great stone that



The Clackmannan stone and market cross.

once stood in the centre of the Avebury circle, and which was broken up for building material. The fact that stones of this kind survived through many centuries of the Christian era may indicate that they were not seen as offensive or embarrassing until the nineteenth century. In India where phallic stones are still venerated, they represent the world-axis under its aspect of fertility, and have nothing to do with sex as conceived in the modern world, nor with the idea of worshipping a

sex organ. In terms of the ancient Chinese tradition, they symbolise the action of Heaven on Earth... Another stone, which was dug up by road makers about 25 years after its disappearance, is the Langholm Mercat, or market cross. It was unearthed near its original site, which was the cross-roads at Langholm in Dumfries-shire. Our photograph shows that its shaft is chamfered near the bottom, leaving a square base, and on top there is a depressed sphere. Its form is clearly pagan, and a cross inscribed on the top is without doubt a later Christian addition. The shape of this stone is important in establishing a link between pagan market crosses and those of the Christian era. Another possible pagan survival, which may have survived because it was just a block of natural stone, is the so-called market cross in the ancient village of Minigaff, about a mile from Newton Stewart in Kirkcudbrightshire. We illustrate it below; if it really is a market cross, it poses the question why they were ever called crosses at all, and we shall return to this point later.

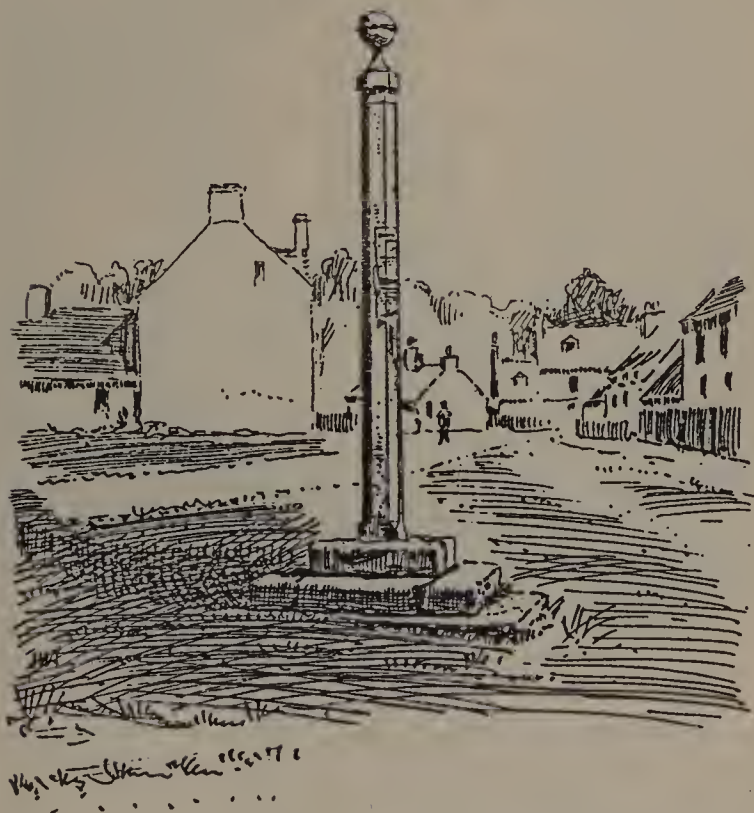


The "market cross" at Minigaff



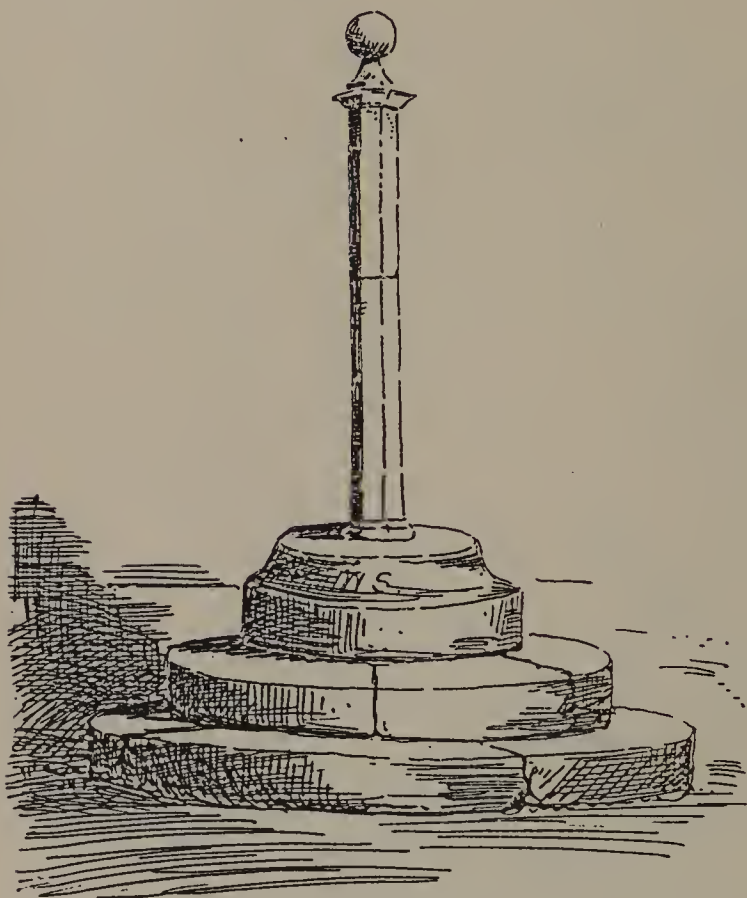
The Langholm Mercat (Market Cross)

If we look at a large number of market crosses, although they vary in form, a general pattern emerges: A square base in the form of a stepped pyramid, although the 'steps' are not always proportioned to be used as such; an octagonal shaft; and a ball or sphere on top. Of course there are many exceptions, but perhaps this common form corresponds with a pagan prototype which has not always been adhered to when crosses have been reconstructed or made in later times. The market cross at Milton, Rossshire, is a typical example; also the one already illustrated from Clackmannan.



Market cross at Milton.

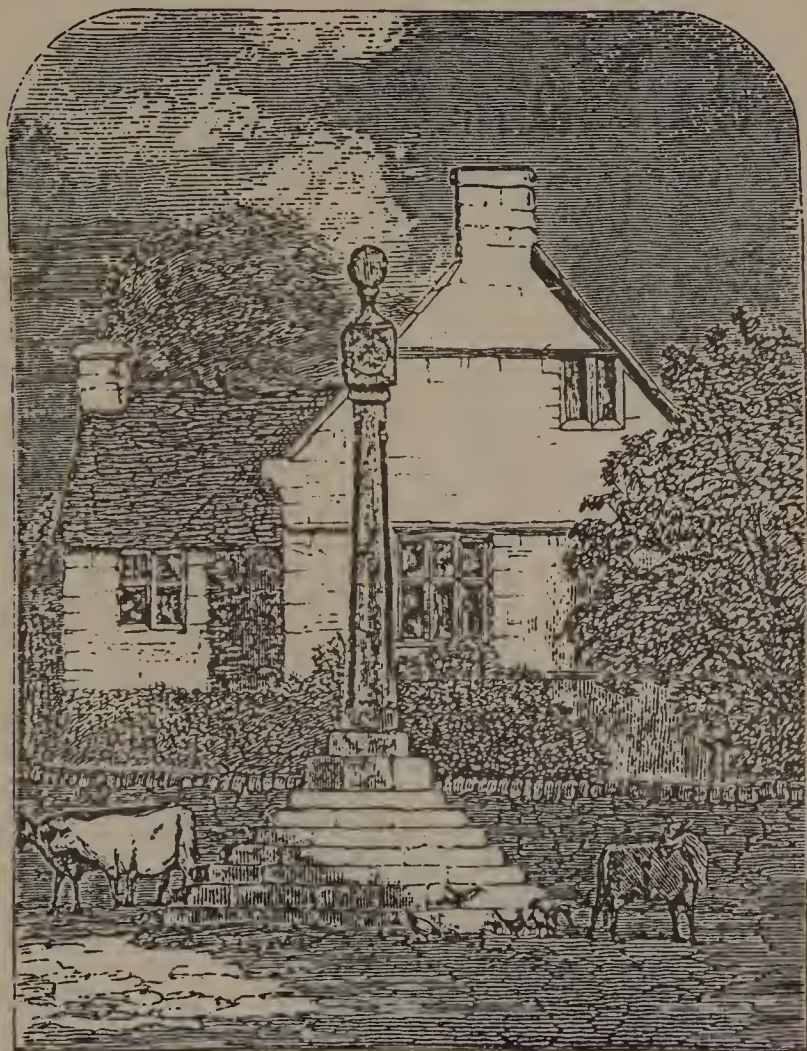
The cross at Findhorn, Elginshire, shows an exception to our general type, in that the stepped base is circular instead of square. Other variants include hexagonal or octagonal stepped bases, and square or round shafts.



Market cross at Findhorn.

The cross at Bromboro in Cheshire stands on a stepped pyramid base, the steps of which are clearly not intended for treading. We reproduce a wood engraving of it from Rimmer's Ancient

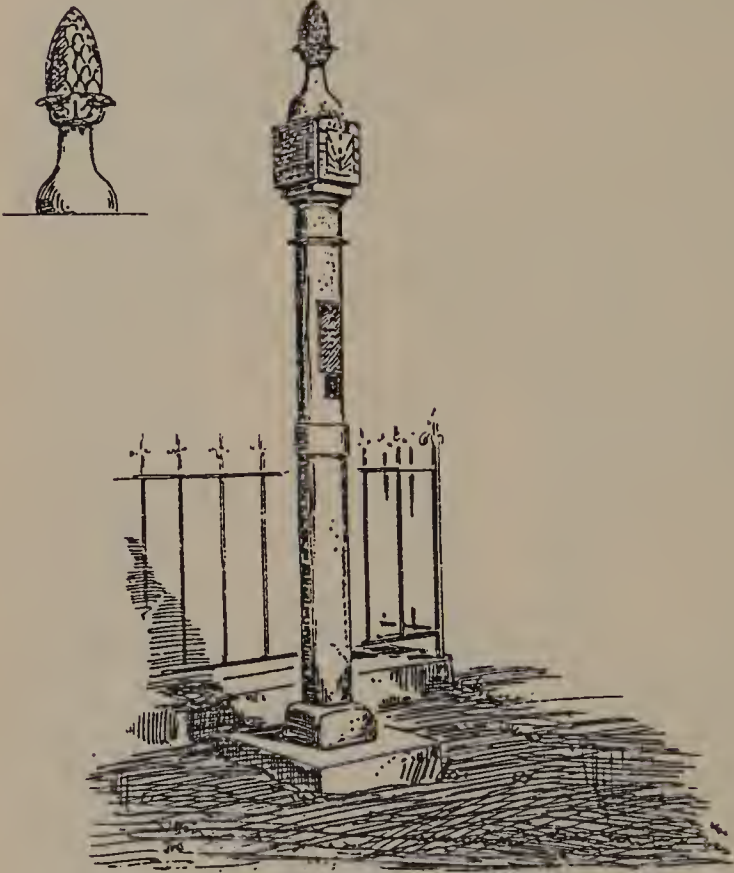
Stone Crosses of England, 1874. This engraving shows the cross surmounted by a sphere and sundial, which have since been replaced by a cross ecclesiastical.



Bromboro Cross

The market cross at Wigton has a fircone above a sun-dial on top. John Irwin points out that fir cones occur on some market crosses in Belgium, and that they must represent the link between the

stone axis-symbol and the sacred tree, the cone being the fruit of a tree.

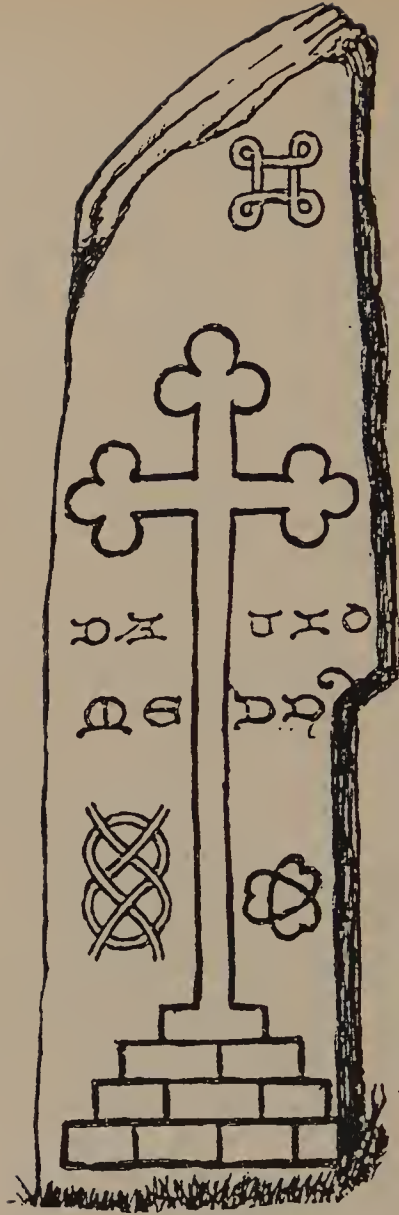


Market cross at Wigton.

The basic symbolism of these market crosses, like the ancient pillar stones, is once again of the world-axis, the link between heaven and earth, but elaborated. The ancient traditional world-view recognises three worlds, spiritual (heavenly), psychic, and corporeal. The spiritual is symbolised by the sky, with the sun as symbol of divine light,

the corporeal by earth, and the psychic or intermediate world by air or the space between heaven and earth. Thus the sphere on top of the cross can represent Heaven, a sphere being the most perfect, 'fluid' form; it can also represent the sun. The shaft itself represents the world-axis, pole, or spiritual bridge between Heaven and earth; the octagonal exterior of the shaft, however, representing the directions of space, air, the intermediate space between heaven and earth, corresponds with the psychic states. The square base represents the 'fixed' earth, the corporeal state. The stepped base forming a pyramid no doubt represents the ancient sacred earth mounds known from ancient traditions throughout the world. On the next page we illustrate a cross-slab from Fish-guard churchyard, where a Latin cross has been inscribed with a stepped mound, indicating that the stone-mason may have considered the base an important piece of symbolism... We have already indicated that some market crosses incorporate a sun-dial near the top, and there is some evidence that the sphere or ball on top of some of these crosses was originally gilded. All of this adds up to the pagan Celtic prototype being a world-axis associated with a solar symbolism... The Maypole, which continued as a children's dance within living memory, has something in common with the form of the market cross, the pole being surmounted by two hoops representing a sphere. Those performing the Maypole dance are, in effect, dancing in a circle around the world-axis.

Much of the symbolism we have mentioned is universal. Thus the ancient Chinese sages wore a round hat representing Heaven, and square shoes representing Earth. Islamic mosques have a domed roof and square base. (The famous Taj Mahal is



Cross,
Fishguard Churchyard,
Pembrokeshire.

octagonal on the inside).

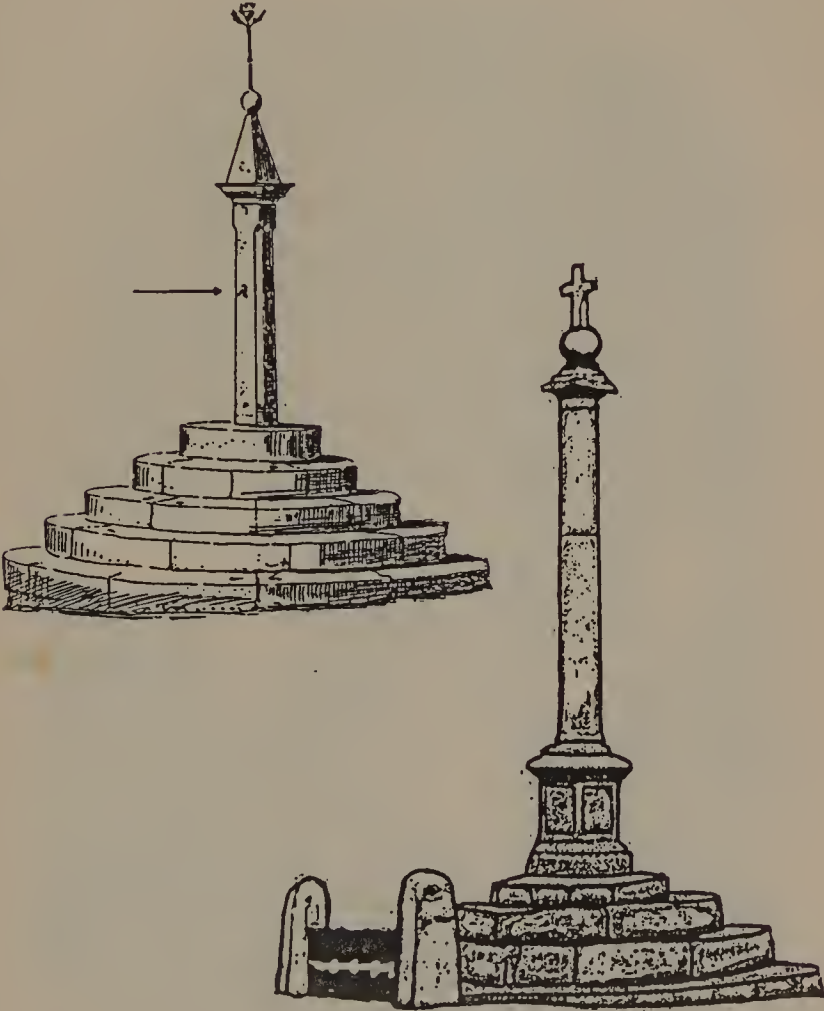
If the market cross thus symbolises the world-axis, the link between heaven and earth, but in a more elaborate way than the old pillar stones, why, it may be asked, are they called crosses at all. A possible answer could be that they eventually came to have an ecclesiastical cross stuck on top, or replacing the top. On the Continent, when the Church found that the people clung to the worship of these stones even after edicts to destroy them, their broken shafts were repaired by iron collars, and they were surmounted by a cross. In Britain many such crosses were broken off during the Cromwellian period; some were replaced in late Victorian times... It is more likely, however, that they became known as market crosses through being situated at cross-roads, meeting places which eventually grew into our market towns. This leads us to a consideration of the vertical symbolism of the cross:

The Hindus have a theory of three *gunas* or tendencies: *sattvas*, an upward tendency, spiritual, corresponding with knowledge, light, and white in colour; *rajas*, an outward tendency, corresponding with human activity, and the colour red; *tamas*, a downward tendency, corresponding with ignorance, obscurity, darkness, colour black. Note that where the Hindus speak of knowledge and ignorance, Christians would speak of good and evil; these are different points of view relating to the same symbolism. If we imagine a pillar stone, or market cross situated at a cross-roads, we have a three-dimensional cross, the stone itself representing the upwards, spiritual tendency, the cross-roads representing human activity in one plane, and the prolongation beneath the stone monument

down into the earth representing the downwards tendency, towards the infernal regions. This summarises the vertical symbolism of the cross; it is applicable to the well-known Latin form of the cross (but we shall see later that many Celtic crosses have a different symbolism, that of the wheel-cross).

In the ancient world there was not the clear distinction made today between sacred, and secular or profane, and many human activities were carried out at the market crosses, and continued to be so even when the sacred nature of these crosses had become largely forgotten. Official proclamations were read out, rules for commerce such as weights and measures, were laid down, justice and punishment were dispensed, and oaths were witnessed. Even last century, sailors from Cornwall would swear oaths on board ship on an axe, an ancient portable symbol of the world-axis. Some people may be surprised that punishments were carried out at a sacred site, but it must be remembered that in the ancient world the treatment of criminals was intended to be curative as well as punitive. Thus the Celts used the birch for corporal punishment because they believed this tree to have the property of driving out evil. The following extract from Joceline's *Life of St. Kentigern*, concerning a cross erected at Glasgow, may help to clarify this point: "...the cross was very large, and never from that time lacked great virtue, seeing that many maniacs and those vexed with unclean spirits are used to be tied of a Sunday night to that cross, and in the morning they are found restored, freed, and cleansed, though oftimes they are found dead or at the point of death." Although Joceline's account does not directly refer to all criminals, it does

give us some insight into what was believed. We illustrate the market cross of Old Rayne, Aberdeenshire, with an arrow indicating the point of attachment of the chain which once held wrongdoers by means of an iron collar; also the stocks and cross at the market place, Poulton-le-Fylde, Lancashire:



Upper left, cross at Old Rayne, lower right, stocks and cross at Poulton-le-Fylde.

We end this chapter with another reproduction of a wood engraving from Rimmer's *Ancient Stone Crosses of England*, the base of Lydney Cross in Gloucestershire. The upper part probably consisted of an octagonal shaft supporting a cross; it was dismantled during the civil war. The base is a fine example of a stepped pyramid.



Lydney Cross

3. THE CELTIC CHURCH: EARLY SYMBOLISM

The Celtic Church

There is every reason to believe that a Celtic British Church existed nearly three centuries before St. Augustine landed on the shores of Kent in 597 A.D. Those who believe the Arimathean legend, think that Christianity was brought to these islands during the first century by Joseph of Arimathea, and that he founded the first Christian community at Glastonbury. The Legend of St. Alban, a Roman soldier, likewise implies Christianity in Britain before the end of the Roman occupation. The earliest historical record is that in 314 A.D. three British bishops were present at the Council held at Arles in France. St. Chrysostom, writing in 367 A.D., described the British Islands as possessing churches and altars. Gildas, who wrote around 564 A.D., asserts that churches existed generally in Britain before the departure of the Romans; and Bede confirms his statements.

There were probably some Christians in Ireland before St. Patrick, but he is undoubtedly responsible for the main dissemination of Christianity there. He landed in Ireland around 440 A.D., and, according to the Annals of the Four Masters, died in 493. The first attempt to convert the Southern Picts was by St. Ninian, who landed at Whithorn early in the fifth century. He dedicated his church there to St. Martin of Tours, whom he had visited in Gaul. The Picts, however, were only fully converted over a century later when St. Columba established himself at Iona; he landed there in 563 A.D. Soon after, St. Kentigern completed the conversion of the Welsh-speaking king-

dom of Strathclyde/Cumbria, the Southern Welsh being already Christian. Northumbria received its Christianity indirectly from Ireland, through Iona, when Aidan was made first Bishop of Lindisfarne by King Oswald in 653 A.D.

Thus the Celtic church had an origin earlier and entirely independent of the Roman form of Christianity introduced by St. Augustine. The chief points of difference were the time of celebrating Easter and the shape of the monks' tonsure, but there were also differences in the rite of baptism, the ordination of bishops, and the consecration of churches.

The Celtic calculation of Easter corresponded with that of the Roman Church before the Council of Nice (325 A.D.) when it was altered not on theological, but on astronomical grounds. The Celtic Church, isolated from the rest of Christendom, adhered to the old calculation until the Synod of Whitby in the seventh century, when the Celts agreed to conform to the Roman usage.

In Central England the Celtic Church became extinct around the end of the fifth century, due to the Saxon invasions; the Welsh conformed to the usages of the Anglo-Saxon Church at the end of the eighth century, but the supremacy of the See of Canterbury was not fully established until the twelfth century; the British Church in Cornwall became subject to the See of Canterbury in the time of King Athelstan (925 - 940); the Celtic Church of Northumberland conformed to Roman usage after the Synod of Whitby in 664 A.D., and the Church of Iona in 772 A.D. Some customs peculiar to the ancient Celtic Church survived, however, until the eleventh century.

The Fish: Oldest Christian Symbol.

Despite the Hollywood epic films which have featured early Christians scratching the sign of the cross here there and everywhere, before they were thrown to the lions, the fish, and not the cross, was the first Christian symbol. It was used in the catacombs of Rome during the first three centuries of the Christian era. The fish is generally accepted as a symbol of Christ. It is thought that it originated because because the letters of the Greek word for a fish

(ἰχθύς),

are the same as the first letter in each word of the phrase 'Jesus Christ, the Son of God; Saviour'

Ἰησοῦς, Χριστός, Θεοῦ, Υἱὸς Σωτήρ

But there is more to it than just that, for here we have a symbolism that can be related to the world-axis, the link between heaven and earth. In the Book of Genesis, we find that God separated the upper waters from the lower waters, early in the creation. The upper waters represent the spiritual or heavenly state, the lower waters the psychic. Christ represented as the fish is thus the guide across the dangerous 'waters' of the psyche, towards the heavenly state, a horizontal symbolism which nevertheless implies ascent, for the movement is from the lower, to the upper waters.

Celtic stone monuments depicting Christ as a fish are very rare. Many of the early sculptured stones of Scotland have fish on them. One such stone, from Edderton, near Tain, illustrated on page 14, shows a fish and a Pictish symbol. There are also Christian cross-slabs from Scotland with fish and other animals sculptured either side of the cross. It is, however, more likely that the

fish and other animals on many of these Pictish stones are to be related with old shamanistic practices, and that they continued into the Christian period as decorative art. There is, however, a Latin-type cross from Riskbuie, Argyllshire, with a head at the upper end, and a fish-tail at the lower end. This would seem to be a clear example of a Christian fish symbol.



*Cross from Riskbuie
(later taken to Colonsay House)*

In Ireland the tombstone of Oidican at Fuerty, Roscommon, includes a fish which seems likely to be a Christian symbol.

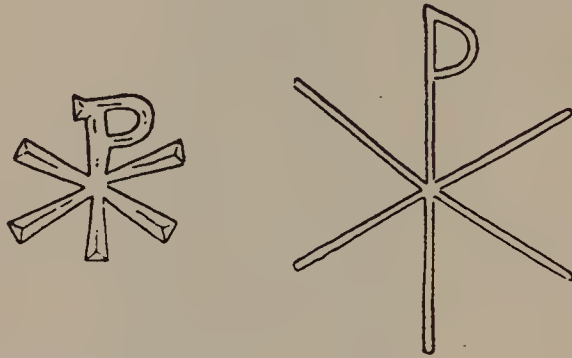


Fish symbol on tombstone of Oidican at Fuerty.

The Chi-Rho Monogram

This monogram consists of the two Greek letters X (chi) and P (rho), which are the first two letters of the name of Christ in Greek. A monogram can be formed by placing one over the other so that the vertical stroke of the P cuts through the intersection of the X. Sometimes the X is rotated so that one of its strokes coincides with the stroke of the P, the other stroke becoming horizontal. The earliest dated examples of this early Christian

symbol from the Catacombs belong to the beginning of the fourth century. This monogram became famous because, in 312 A.D., the Emperor Constantine gained a great victory which was attributed to his having had the monogram painted on his soldiers' shields. The monogram had previously featured on coins, but it was Constantine's victory that promoted its use. This monogram gives us what are probably the oldest authentic instances of Christian symbolism of the Romano-British period in Britain, at Chedworth in Glostershire:



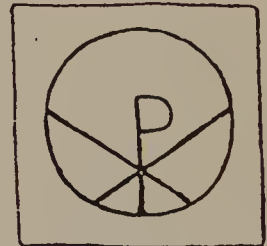
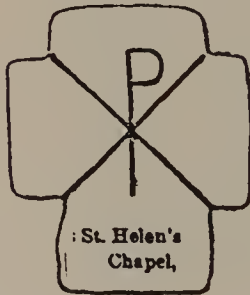
and at Frampton in Dorsetshire:



Here are later examples from Cornwall:



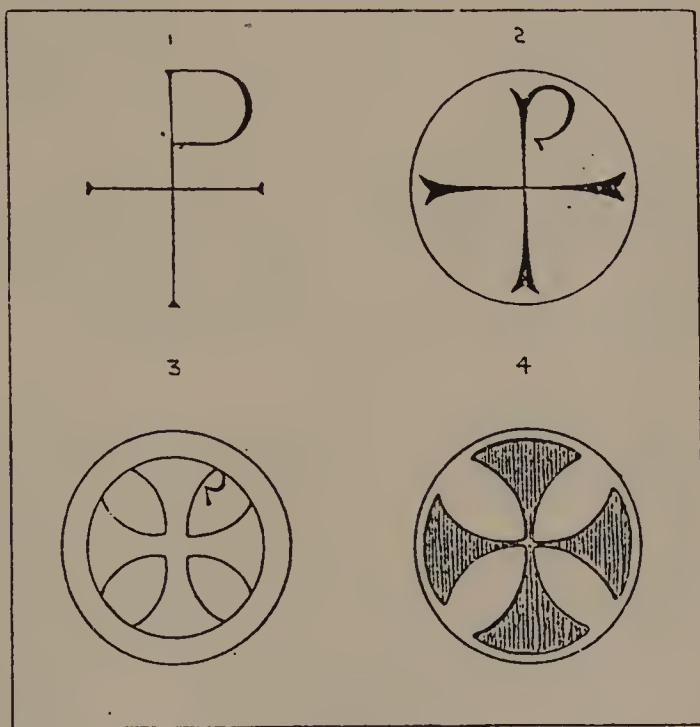
St. Just,



Phillack.

The chi-rho monogram on stones from Cornwall

In Wales there is a monogram on a stone from Penmachno in Gwynedd. There the monogram is in the common form of the four-rayed cross, and not the six-rayed type. This symbol was the beginning of an art form which, in the Celtic lands, led to the production of the beautifully sculptured crosses we shall be discussing later. What happened was that the chi-rho monogram came to be enclosed within a circle, and the curved part of the P became detached at its lower end, and reduced in size until it eventually disappeared, leaving a circle, or wheel-cross, originally of the type known as the Maltese cross. The following diagram illustrates this development.



Development of cross out of monogram on stones (1) at Penmachno, (2) Kirkmadrine, (3) Whithorn, and (4) Aglish.

A similar sequence of events can be traced in the catacombs of Rome. This same symbol, of the wheel-cross, was also used to represent the nimbus or halo behind the head of Christ, and the saints. John Irwin points out that this symbol is very similar to the Assyrian rayed cross, which dates from many centuries before the Christian era, and is considered to be a solar symbol. This symbol is believed to have come into Byzantium via Persia, to represent the nimbus on icons; but it may have a dual origin, for there is a head of Christ with a nimbus formed of the chi-rho monogram on a mosaic in the Church of S. Aquilino in Milan.

Thus the early Christians had, albeit unintentionally, arrived at an ancient solar symbol by developing the chi-rho monogram. The wheel-cross has therefore, in its origin, nothing to do with the crucifixion. As a solar symbol it has a lot to do with the representation of Christ in Majesty, Divine Light; it being understood that the early Christians never looked upon it in any terms other than this.

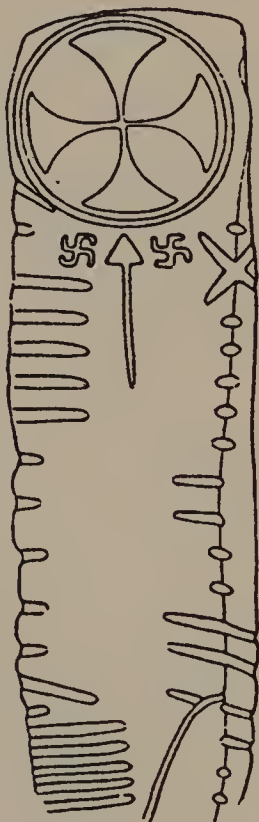
In the symbolism of the wheel, the point at the centre represents the Most High God, the motionless mover, for the point at the centre has no dimensions and cannot turn, yet all moves around it. Movement towards the centre is against the centrifugal force of the turning wheel, away from it is towards the outer darkness. Compare this with the upwards movement against the pull of gravity in the vertical symbolism of the cross. The symbolism of the wheel, in the eastern traditions, is often applied to universal existence; in the case of Christian sculptured crosses, the intention is generally that of the derivation of the



Wheel-cross nimbus behind head in miniature of Christ in Majesty from ms. written for Charles the Great by Godesscalc; oriental influence.

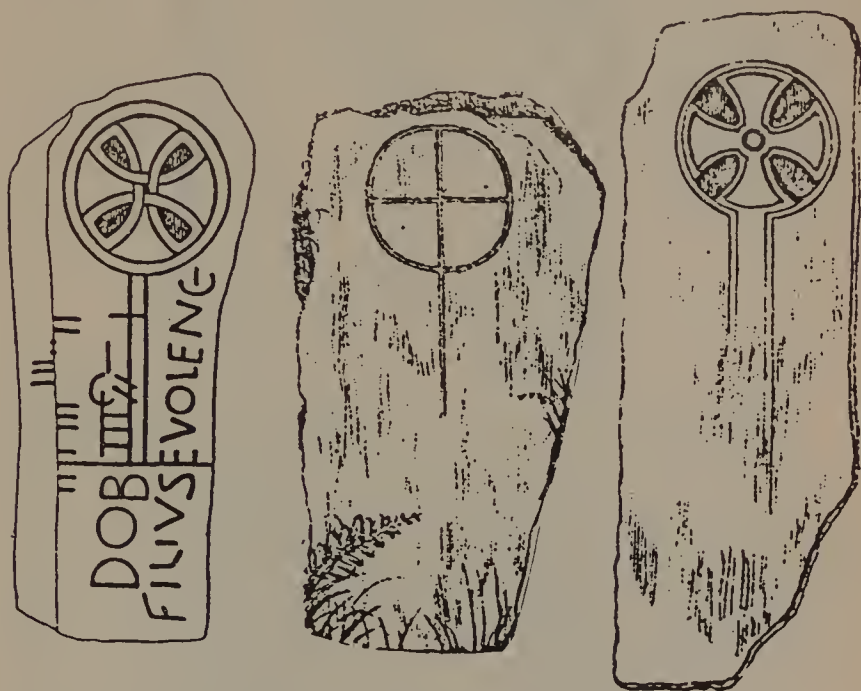
symbol - a representation of Christ, with the emphasis on Divine Radiance.

Once the Celtic Christians realised that this ancient symbol of the wheel-cross was not incompatible with their religion, they began also to use its more ancient form, the swastika, which is believed to be the symbol of the wheel from the time before the wheel had been invented, the bent-over ends of the arms of this cross implying rotation around the central point. We illustrate a stone from Aglish, Co. Kerry, which shows an early Maltese cross and two swastikas.



Circular cross on stone at Aglish.

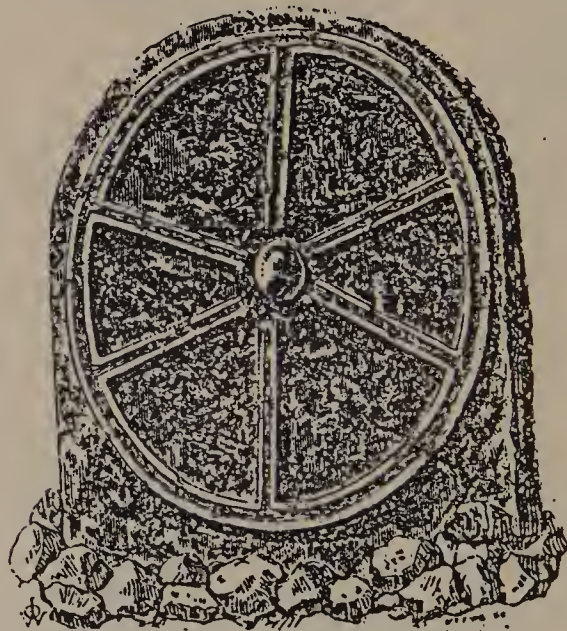
Note the arrow pointing upwards towards the cross, on the above stone. It was not long before a vertical line was added to these early crosses, representing the world-axis, and giving them a similar symbolism to the pre-Christian Maypole, and our prototype of the pagan market cross, in which the solar orb is replaced by a symbol of Christ in Majesty. We illustrate some examples from Wales:



Stones from Dugood, St. Nuns Church, & Nevern

A stone from Port Talbot, Wales, has the symbolism changed by the addition of two leaves or side-branches to the base of the axis, turning it into a flower. The meaning of the symbol is, however, little changed, for Dante represented God in the highest Heaven, surrounded by angels forming the petals of a flower calyx. The other

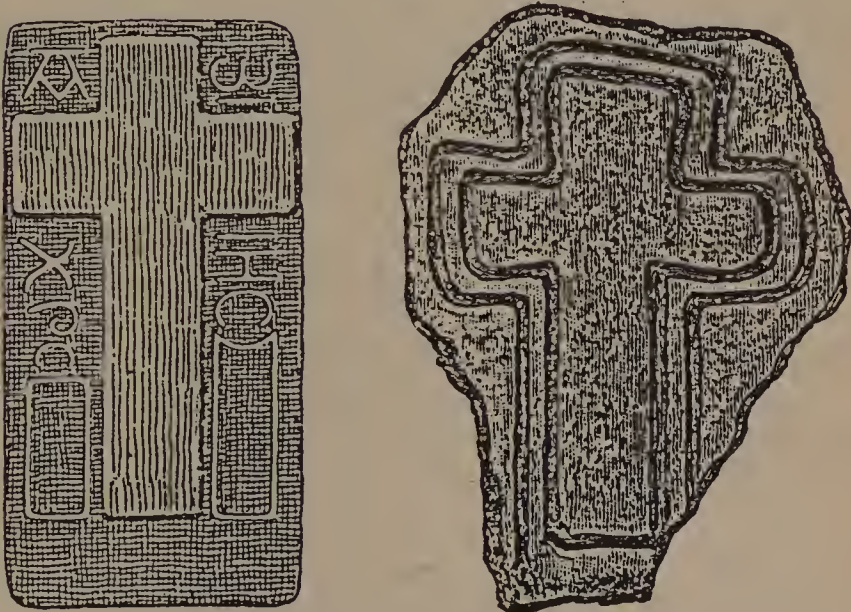
side of this stone shows a wheel-cross derived from the six-rayed version of the chi-rho monogram:



Stone from Port Talbot

The Latin Cross

The Latin cross, which can be related to the traditional form of the crucifixion, also figures on some early Celtic stones. We illustrate a few examples from Wales:



*Latin crosses on stones from:
Strata Florida, Port Talbot, Pen Arthur,
St. Edrens, and Goodwic.*

The Crucifixion.

Representations of the crucifixion do not occur amongst the paintings in the Catacombs of Rome during the first four centuries.

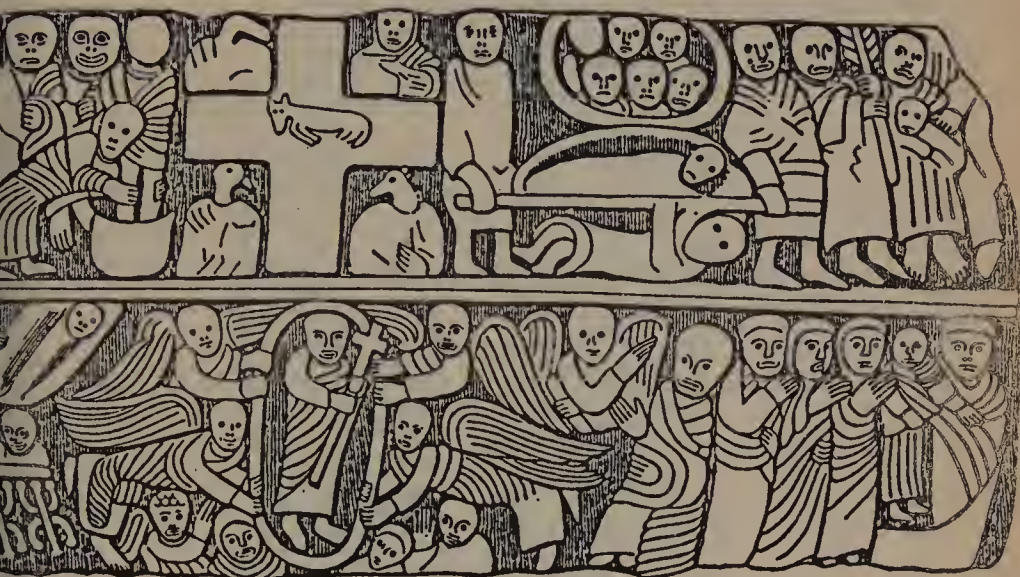
During the fifth and sixth centuries, the Agnus Dei is used to represent Christ on the sculptured sarcophagi at Rome. The Lamb is seen first with the chi-rho monogram on its forehead, then with a Latin cross on its forehead; then the Lamb is seen carrying a cross on its shoulder, then placed on an altar, with blood flowing and a cross behind it; and finally the Lamb is seen enclosed within a medallion forming the centre of a cross. The next step was to substitute the figure of Christ for the symbolical Lamb. The Quinisext Council, held at Constantinople in 683 A.D., decreed: "We pronounce that the form of Him who taketh away the sin of the world, The Lamb of Christ our Lord, be set up in human shape on images henceforth, instead of the Lamb, formerly used."

The traditional portrayal of the crucifixion is clearly connected with the Latin cross, which can easily be understood as derived from the monogram if we look at just two examples below, the one on the left from the Catacombs, the other from the Church of S. Aquilino, Milan.



Once again, we see the curved part of the P separating and becoming smaller, this time leading to the Latin cross.

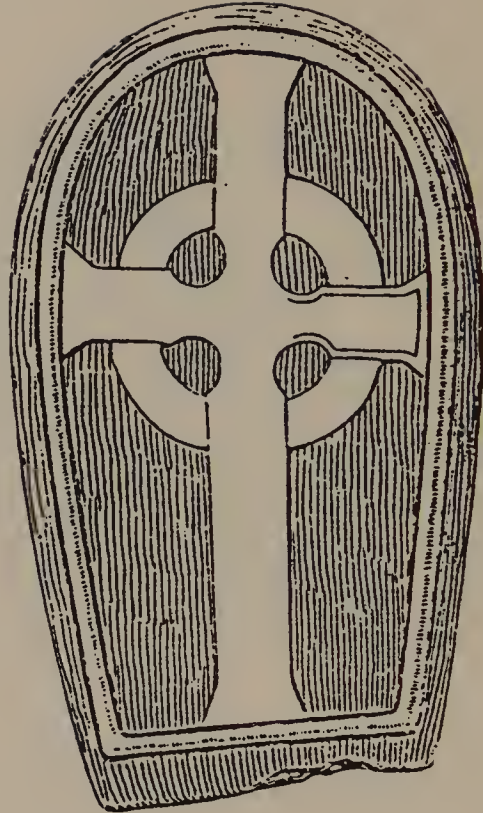
In Britain there is a unique instance of the Lamb of God on a cross, on a sculptured slab in Wirksworth Church, Derbyshire:



Early Sculptured Slab at Wirksworth.

But to return to Celtic lands, we can see how the wheel-cross, derived from the chi-rho monogram, and a symbolic representation of christ, may be connected with the traditional form of the crucifixion.

We illustrate a wheel-cross from St. Edrens, Wales, in which the arms of the cross have been extended beyond the circle into the form of a Latin cross.



Stone from St. Edrens.

If we now look at the cross from Pont Faen, Wales, we can relate it with the previous one if we assume that the wheel, representing Christ, has been made smaller so as to fit into the centre of the cross, equivalent to the Lamb in the centre, mentioned above.



*Cross at Pont Faen,
Pembrokeshire.*

In Celtic sculpture, the head or face of Christ seems to have been depicted first, before the whole figure. This cross from Bosherton, Wales, shows a face in place of the symbolic representations of the circle, or Lamb mentioned above. It is worth noting that the shaft of this cross is octagonal, and the base square, confirming it as a representation of Christ on the world-axis.



Cross at Bosherton, Pembrokeshire.

Thus we have arrived at a representation of Christ on the Latin cross, the traditional form of the crucifixion. The cross has been derived from the chi-rho monogram, itself a symbol of Christ, but also a symbol of the world-axis. The fact that Christ is portrayed as *fixed* to the cross by nails, implies that he became one with the world-axis.

Many of the later representations of the crucifixion show Christ suffering or apparently dead, and naked except for a cloth around the waist. The early Celtic representations show Christ in triumph, often clothed, sometimes magnificently so, and with his eyes wide open. The following illustrations speak for themselves:



Crucifixion on cross at Llangan, Wales



*Crucifixion on Metal Plates
in the Museum of the Royal Irish Academy.*



*Crucifixion on Cross
of SS. Patrick and Columba at Kells.*



Crucifixion, from the St. Gall Gospels.

In the Crucifixion from the St. Gall Gospels, a wavy line can be seen passing from Christ's side to the eye of the soldier holding the spear. The soldier's name is said to be Longinus, which seems

to be derived from the Greek word for a spear. A legend states that Longinus was blind; that he struck Christ by accident, and that blood fell on to his hand, his sight returning when he rubbed his eyes with it. This no doubt refers to spiritual blindness, for a blind soldier would hardly be in the Roman army. In the St Gall Gospels a wavy line shows the blood spurting directly into his eye.



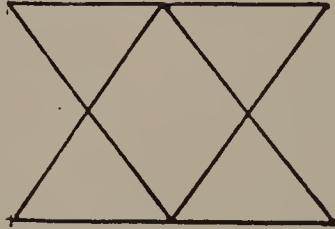
Crucifixion on Slab of Slate,
from the Old Chapel, Calf of Man.

In the highly-stylised, incomplete crucifixion from the Calf of Man, the circular breast adornment shows a void in the middle, representing the heart as spiritual centre; a return to the symbolism of the wheel.

A striking feature of many of the early Celtic crucifixions is that the lance and the pole of the sponge-bearer stand out to form a triangle or pyramid. This leads us to another symbolism concerning the link between heaven and earth; that of the two triangles. Here is a sandstone pebble from Broch of Burrian, Scotland, with this symbol in its best-known form:

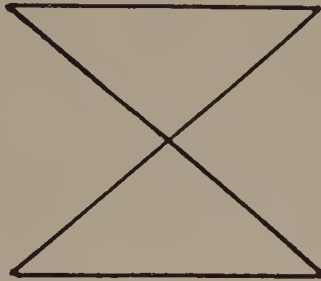


Here is another way of representing the two triangles:



Here the base of the upper triangle represents heaven, the lower one earth. This form of the symbol is designed to show that what is greatest in heaven (represented by the upper horizontal stroke) is smallest on earth (represented by a point where the tip of the upper triangle touches the base-line of earth); and vice-versa.

The two triangles may also be drawn with their points just touching, the upper triangle representing Heaven, the lower one earth:



In this representation, the link between Heaven and earth is the point of intersection, symbolising the "straight and narrow gate" on the way from earth to Heaven. The triangle formed by the lance and sponge-pole in some of the early crucifixions thus represents the way to the gate of Heaven. This symbolism can also be applied to the pyramid of steps beneath market crosses, and to ancient sacred mounds like Silbury hill. When steps are present, they no doubt represent the steps or stations on the first part of the spiritual journey; we say first part, for the true spiritual journey, the second part, is through the Heavens.

When looking at these early crucifixions, it is important to note that the Celtic artists and artisans who produced them were not in any way attempting to reproduce the execution of Christ as it might have happened in history. What they were doing was portraying Christ on the world-axis, triumphant over death. On the next page we reproduce yet another Celtic crucifixion, to emphasise this point. It is from an illuminated Irish manuscript in the library of Würzburg. Our reason for stressing this point, is that there are some critics of traditional Christianity who point

out that in the original Greek of the New Testament, Christ is described as being executed on a stake or pillar, there being no mention of a cross-bar. It was only when the Gospels were translated into Latin that the word *Crux*, or cross appeared. Some of the critics imply from this that the Church fabricated the idea of the crucifixion. It is possible that the translators into Latin assumed the stake must have had a cross-bar; it is also possible that they had access to oral tradition that has since been lost; but what is important, is



Crucifixion, Irish manuscript at Würzburg

that the Greek texts describe the *essential*, that is, Christ dying fixed to a symbol of the world-axis. It would seem that the traditional form of the crucifixion came from depicting Christ on the Latin cross, itself derived from the chi-rho monogram. The Latin cross is thus a symbol of Christ and of the world-axis. The cross-bar adds another dimension to Christ, horizontal, embracing the souls of his followers; whereas the vertical dimension of Christ united with the world-axis provides them with the Way to Heaven.

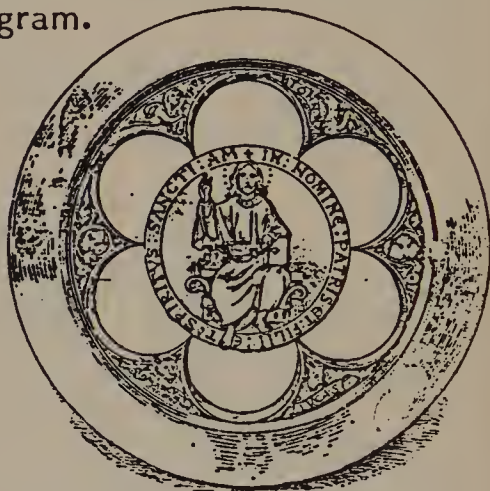
If we compare these early crucifixions, with Christ wide-eyed and clothed, with later ones nearly naked and suffering, some literal critics could likewise say that one of them is wrong; but they are both right once one realises that they are not so much representations of historical facts as two works of sacred symbolic art; the former depicting Christ on the world-axis triumphant over death, the latter Christ suffering on the axis for the souls of the world.

It is worth mentioning that the oldest known crucifixion is on an ivory plaque in the British Museum. Art critics date it as late fifth, or sixth century. It shows Christ crucified on a wheel-cross! We illustrate below a wheel-cross crucifixion on a sculptured tombstone in Meifod Church, Wales.



Church Plate

Here is an ancient paten or sacramental wafer-dish believed to have belonged to the Monastery of Llanelltyd in Wales. It was made by Nicholas of Hereford, and shows christ surrounded by a six-rayed floral design which can easily be derived from the Chi-Rho monogram.



*Paten from
Llanelltyd, Wales.*

And here is the design in the centre of a paten from Kirk Malew, Isle of Man. Once again we see a six-rayed floral design, but the ornamentation within is clearly solar.



*The St. Lupus paten,
Kirk Malew, Isle of Man.*

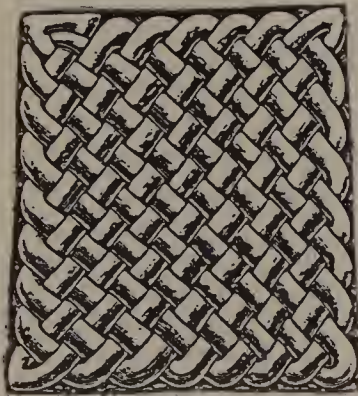
4. THE ORNAMENTATION OF CELTIC CROSSES: SYMBOLISM AND BEAUTY

In this chapter we shall be looking at the types of ornamentation found on Celtic crosses, but it is not our purpose to describe the constructional details of Celtic art; that information can easily be found elsewhere. We shall restrict ourselves to an illustrated account of the ornamentation from the point of view of aesthetic symbolism.

The principle types of ornamentation are plaitwork, knotwork and key patterns, swastika and spiral designs, animal and plant designs, figures of people such as saints, scriptural scenes, and hunting scenes.

Plaitwork

The idea of plaitwork patterns no doubt comes from weaving, and it is usually plain weave that is imitated. Here is an example of regular plaitwork from a cross at Llantwit Major in Wales



Regular plaitwork from Llantwit Major

Like that of weaving, the 'basic symbolism is that of the 'great cosmic loom of the universe,' but it is important also to note that there are no loose ends, and the symbol is also one of continuity of the Spirit throughout existence. The continual background note or drone maintained behind the music of the bagpipes, expresses the same symbolism.

Plaitwork is not always regular. By breaking some of the 'threads' and joining them up in different ways, irregularities can be produced, as in this panel from the cross-shaft at Golden Grove, Carmarthenshire, Wales:



Irregular broken plaitwork from Golden Grove

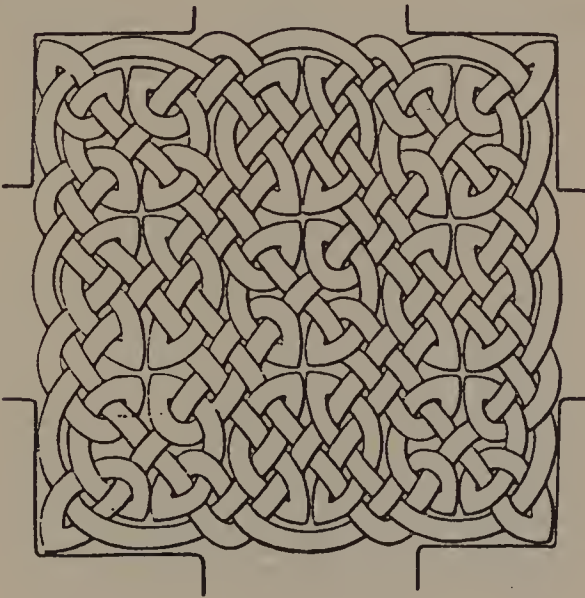
The overall effect is still pleasing. Such breaks in regular plaitwork may have been included in order to imitate nature; a flower, for example, may look attractive and symmetrical, yet not one of its petals is exactly identical with any other; The builders of our mediaeval cathedrals likewise introduced slight imperfections with the same end in view, yet the result is, like a flower, pleasing to the eye. The idea seems to be that perfection

belongs to God alone.

Sometimes breaks are made at regular intervals in plaitwork, and this has the effect of breaking up a large surface pattern into smaller units.

Knotwork.

Knotwork seems to have been developed from plaitwork by making multiple breaks at regular intervals. It is one of the striking features of Celtic Christian art. The knots are generally endless, and thus cannot be untied. Here the symbolism is of the knots which bind the soul to the world. Like the Gordian Knot cut by Alexander the Great, these knots must be cut or broken for the soul to become free to begin the spiritual journey. Here is an example of circular knotwork:



Panel of circular knotwork in centre of front of Nigg Cross, Scotland.

Here is an example of triangular knotwork:



*Triangular knotwork from Dunfallandy,
Perthshire, Scotland.*

Chain-link patterns.

Interlocking circles forming chains, when they appear on Celtic crosses, are generally a sign of Scandinavian influence. Here is an example from a cross at Penmon in Anglesey:

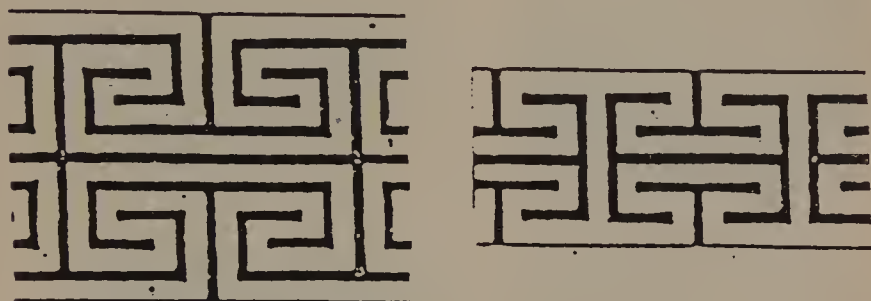


Chain-link design, Penmon.

Key-patterns

Key patterns are so-called because of their interlocking nature.

The classical square key-patterns, in which the lines run horizontally and vertically parallel to the margins, were seldom used by the Christian Celts, but there are good examples on one of the crosses at Penmon, Anglesey:



Square key-patterns from Penmon.

The first step in the development of the Celtic key-pattern was to turn the Greek fret through an angle of forty-five degrees so as to make the lines run diagonally with regard to the margins, instead of parallel with them. We illustrate a key-pattern in this stage of development from an Anglian cross-shaft which used to be at Aberlady, Haddingtonshire. (It was later moved to Carlowrie Castle, Midlothian). The result is striking, but it leaves large triangular areas without ornament all around the edge. When these triangles are partly filled in by bending the ends of the diagonal lines round to run parallel with the margins, we get a characteristically Celtic pattern such as the one on the great cross-shaft at St. Andrews,



1



2



3



4

Key-patterns

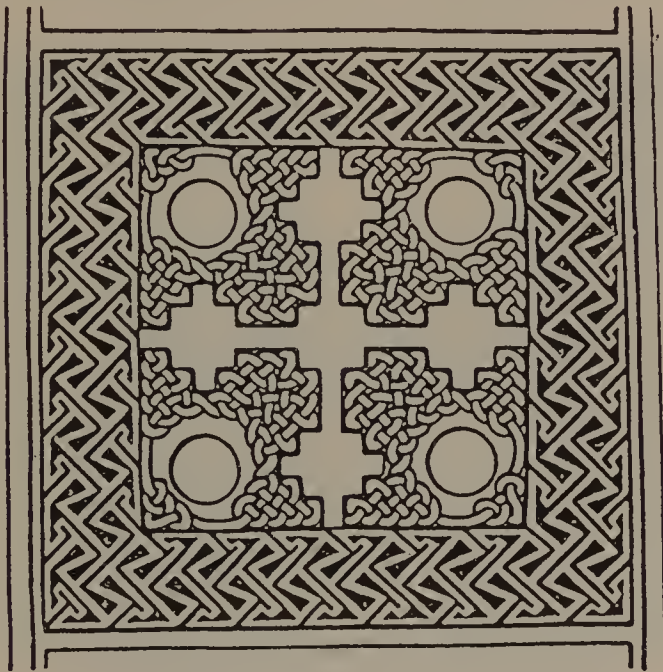
(1) Aberlady, Haddingtonshire
(3) St. Andrews, Fifeshire

(2) Abercorn, Linlithgowshire
(4) Collieston, Sutherlandshire

Fifeshire. Finally, when the opposite ends of the diagonal lines are bent round in a similar manner, the most typical of all the Celtic key-patterns is produced, like the one on the cross-slab at Farr, Sutherlandshire.

Next to interlaced work (plaits and knots) the key-pattern is the most common motive used in the decorative art of the Christian Celts.

We illustrate below the ornament on the erect cross-slab at Rosemarkie, Ross-shire. It has interlaced work around the cross, and a key-pattern all around; it indicates that the sculptors often used ideas from the pages of Celtic illuminated manuscripts.



Ornament on erect cross-slab at Rosemarkie.



1



2



3



4

Key-patterns

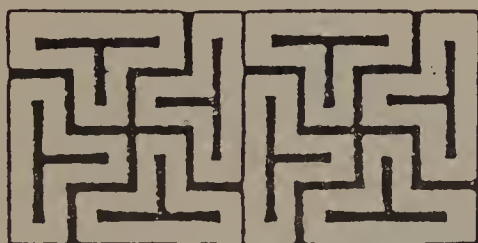
- (1) Rosemarkie, Ross-shire
(3) Gattonside, Roxburghshire

- (2) Farr, Sutherlandshire
(4) Nigg, Ross-shire

The swastika and the spiral

We have already pointed out that the swastika occurs on Christian Celtic stones from quite early times, and that its symbolism is like that of the wheel-cross.

Sometimes key-patterns incorporate the swastika as in the following example which is common to several crosses in South Wales, including the one at Nevern:



Square key-pattern of swastika type.

An interesting development, showing four men placed swastika fashion, occurs on a recumbant monument at Meigle, Perthshire:



Four-man swastika at Meigle

So far, we have illustrated the swastika only in its well-known four-rayed form. But the Celts also had the three-rayed type, best known from the Legs-o-Man. Spiral designs were highly developed by the pre-Christian Celts, but many of the spiral designs of the Christian period are clearly related to the three-rayed swastika. The symbolism of these spirals, which are little more than curved swastikas, is, once again, that of the 'motionless mover,' the Most High God, in the centre, around which all things revolve. The spiral emphasises the movement. It seems likely that the spiral designs on Celtic crosses were taken originally from Celtic illuminated manuscripts. We illustrate a spiral design from the Book of Durrow for comparison with one from a boss on the Nigg Cross:

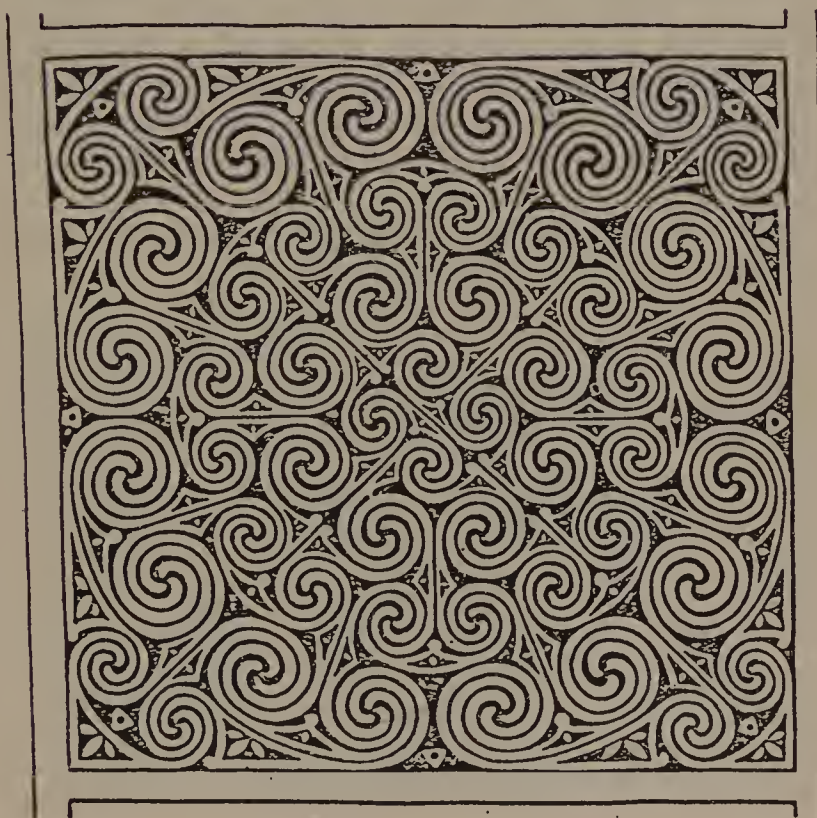


Upper left, spiral ornament from the Book of Durrow; lower right, from a boss at Nigg.

Here are two more examples of spiral designs,
from Nigg, and Shandwick, Ross-shire:



Nigg. Boss with spiral and interlaced work



Shandwick. Panel with spiral ornament

Animal and plant designs

The Celts seem to have preferred interlaced work and key-patterns for decorating cross-shafts, and foliage is but occasionally used.

Animals figure rarely on crosses in Wales, but they are met with in Ireland and Scotland. We have already pointed out that many Pictish stones have fish and quadrupeds sculptured on them, and they include both known and fabulous types. In *Myths and Legends of the Celtic race*, Rolleston has pointed out that some of the earliest Christian poems from Ireland show respect for the Druids. Perhaps the occurrence of shamanistic animal designs on early Christian Pictish inscribed stones indicates a time when the old and new traditions were existing together. This type of design may have continued in use later, for purely decorative reasons. Readers will see examples of Pictish animal designs in the next chapter. We illustrate below a so-called Elephant symbol from the cross-slab at Shandwick, Ross-shire:



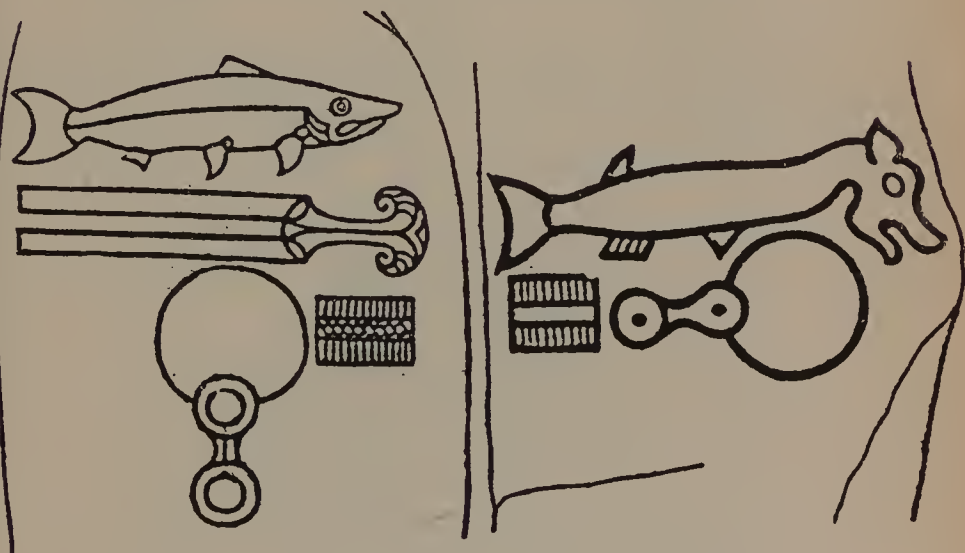
"Elephant" symbol on panel from Shandwick

We shall return to animals when we consider hunting scenes at the end of this chapter.

Pictish symbols

Apart from animal symbols mentioned above, there are some specifically Pictish symbols, which include domestic and related items, as well as certain peculiar symbols. The symbols in question can be found on early inscribed stones with no clear Christian connection, and also decorating the margins and panels of cross-slabs.

Domestic items which occur frequently include a mirror and a comb. The inscribed stone on the left below, is from Dunrobin, Sutherland; it shows a fish, tuning fork, mirror and comb. The one on the right is from Upper Manbean, Elgin; it shows a fabulous fish-animal, a comb and a mirror.



Incised stones from Dunrobin and Upper Manbean

It is difficult to imagine these recurrent symbols as purely representative art without any underlying meaning.

Other characteristically Pictish symbols include a crescent with a V-shaped rod, and various types of rectangle. We give an example below from an incised stone from Clynekirkton, Sutherland, which was taken to the Dunrobin Museum.



Incised symbols from Clynekirkton

Two other common symbols are a Z-shaped rod, and two discs linked together. We show them in combination from an incised stone at Anwoth, Kirkcudbright.



Incised symbols from Anwoth.

The mirrors depicted often have handles in the form of the double-disc symbol. Here is a panel from the back of the top slab of the Rosemarkie Cross (No. 1):

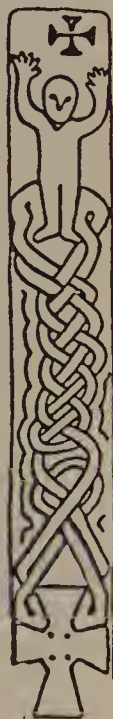


Symbols on panel from Rosemarkie

The meanings of these Pictish symbols have not been satisfactorily explained. Even giving them descriptive names such as 'crescent' and 'V-shaped rod' can prevent people from seeing them in a different, clearer way. One recent suggestion is that the Picts traded overseas in tin, and that these symbols are from their ships, but useful as this may be, perhaps there is more to them than simple trade-marks.

Figures

Figures, of course, occur in the scriptural and hunting scenes on crosses. Here we wish to draw attention to figures of early saints from Wales, with their arms held up in the ancient attitude of prayer. Here are two examples, from stones at Llanhamlach (left) and Llanfrynach (right), both from Brecknock:



Stones showing ancient attitude of prayer

The symbolism of this ancient attitude of prayer is that of the chalice, for, if the elbows and hands are rotated forwards until they touch, the movement describes an invisible cup or receptacle, to receive the blessing from above.

There is another Cross from Flintshire in Wales, known as the Maen Achwyfan. This cross is not pure Celtic-Welsh, for a chain-link pattern on one side indicates Scandinavian influence. The critics do not rate it among the best examples of Welsh crosses. Panels on the front and one side, each show a man with arms upraised as in the ancient attitude of prayer. The man on the front seems to be holding a spear; the one on the side has an axe between his legs. Victorian writers such as Romilly Allen concluded that he could not be in the ancient attitude of prayer because he seemed to be associated with weapons. The Victorians, however, were probably embarrassed by the figure on the front, for the nineteenth-century drawings showed it as that of a naked man. W.G. Collingwood's 1927 drawing of this man, perhaps based on more careful scrutiny, shows him clothed and holding a spear with his right hand. We leave the interpretation of this figure, with the sole comment that the axe, as already mentioned, can signify the world-axis. Here is a drawing of part of the south side of this cross, showing the man and axe:



Scriptural scenes

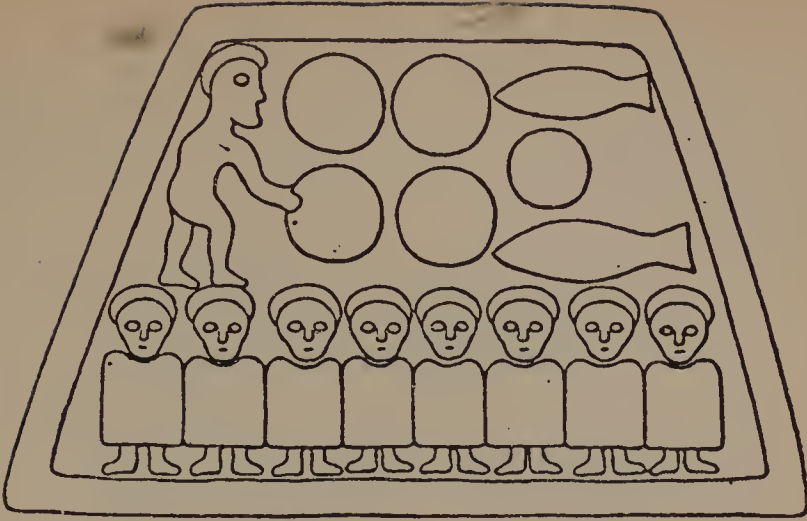
Many of the high crosses of Ireland are 'crosses of the scriptures,' a descriptive term taken from the Annals of the Four Masters. These crosses are decorated with panels illustrating scenes from stories in the Bible. They were no doubt intended as a means of disseminating scriptural knowledge at a time when most of the people were illiterate. Here are a few examples:



The sacrifice of Isaac on the shaft of the Great Cross at Monasterboice.



Daniel in the Lions' Den on the base of the Moon Abbey Cross.



*Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes,
on base of Cross at Castledermot, Co Kildare*

Some Scottish crosses have scriptural panels:



*Temptation of Adam and Eve
on shaft of Cross at Iona*

Hunting scenes

Hunting scenes, and others depicting human activities, fabulous animals, and so on, occur on the Irish and Scottish crosses, but rarely on the Welsh ones which are mainly sepulchral. Here are some examples:



Hunting scene, etc., on panel of Shandwick Cross

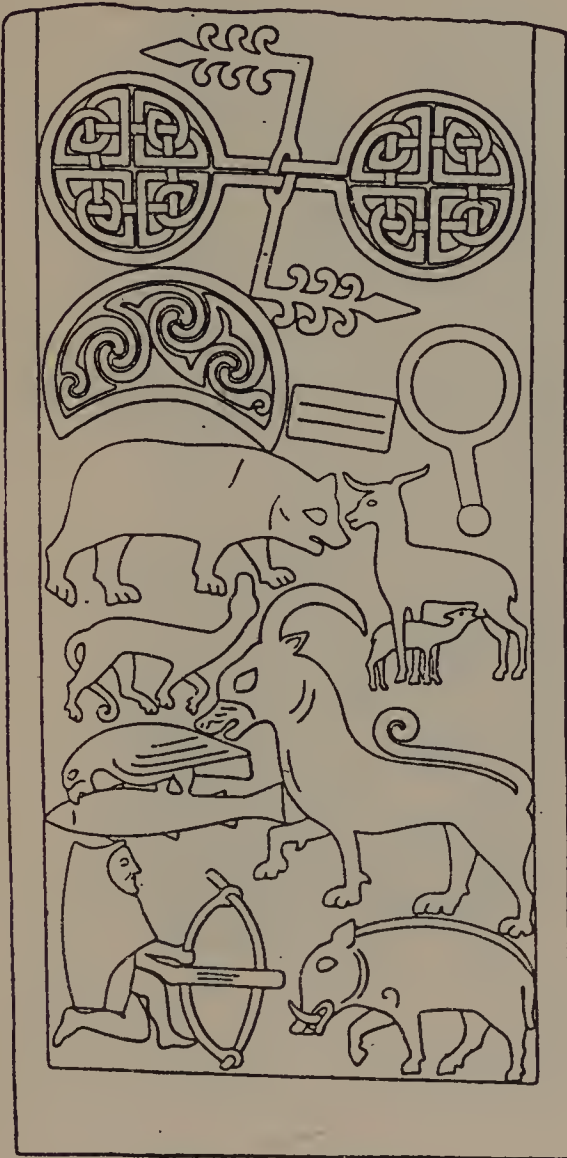


*Chariot etc., on base of Cross
of SS. Patrick and Columba at Kells*



*Man, fabulous animal, and centaur on base
of Cross of Muiredach at Monasterboice*

We end this chapter with a hunter, a boar and other animals, and several Pictish symbols, all on the Cross of Drosten, at St. Vigean, Forfarshire:



Wild boar, etc., on Cross of Drosten



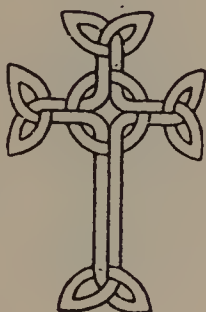
The Glendalough Stone

5. CELTIC CROSSES

By Celtic crosses, we mean crosses which show characteristic types of Celtic ornament, whether they are inscribed on rough blocks of stone, on recumbant or erect stone slabs, or are shaped into Celtic crosses as commonly understood.

Early Celtic ornamented crosses

The tombstone of Daniel in the cemetery at Clonmacnois, Ireland, is decorated by a cross composed of a double band, forming knots at the ends of the arms, and passing through a circular ring in the centre. It is composed entirely of interlaced work, without any surrounding margin:

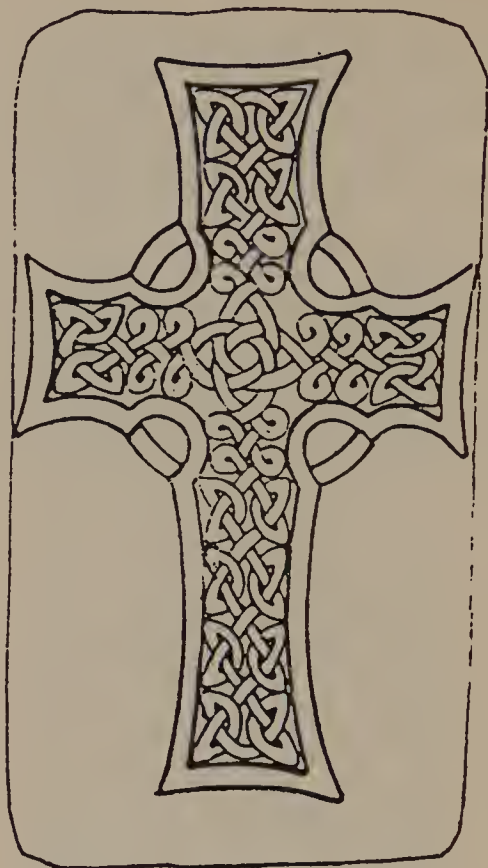


Cross on tombstone at Clonmacnois

The Glendalough stone, also from Ireland, is composed in a similar way, but there is a separate circle in the centre, and the design includes a rectangular margin.

There are similar recumbant cross-slabs on the Isle of Iona, and in Wales. The one at Iona has the interlaced circle in the centre replaced by a square.

Here is another recumbent cross-slab from Iona, with a circle, and the interior decorated by interlaced work:



Cross-slab at Iona

The tombstone of St. Berechtir at Tullyease, co. Cork, Ireland, is one of the earliest dated examples of Celtic ornamentation which have survived. St. Berechtir is supposed to have been one of the three sons of a Saxon prince who left England after the defeat of Colman, Bishop of Lindisfarne, by Wilfred of York, at the Synod of Whitby (A.D. 664) but his death is recorded on the 6th of December, 839 A.D.

The tombstone in question bears the name of 'Berechtvire.' It is a beautiful example of early Celtic ornamentation. The cross is covered with a diagonal key-pattern, and a central circle is filled in with a wreath of interlaced work, but leaving a small central circle to symbolise the 'motionless mover.' There are four circles in each of the corners, decorated, and probably symbolic of four of the wounds of Christ:



Tombstone at Tullyease

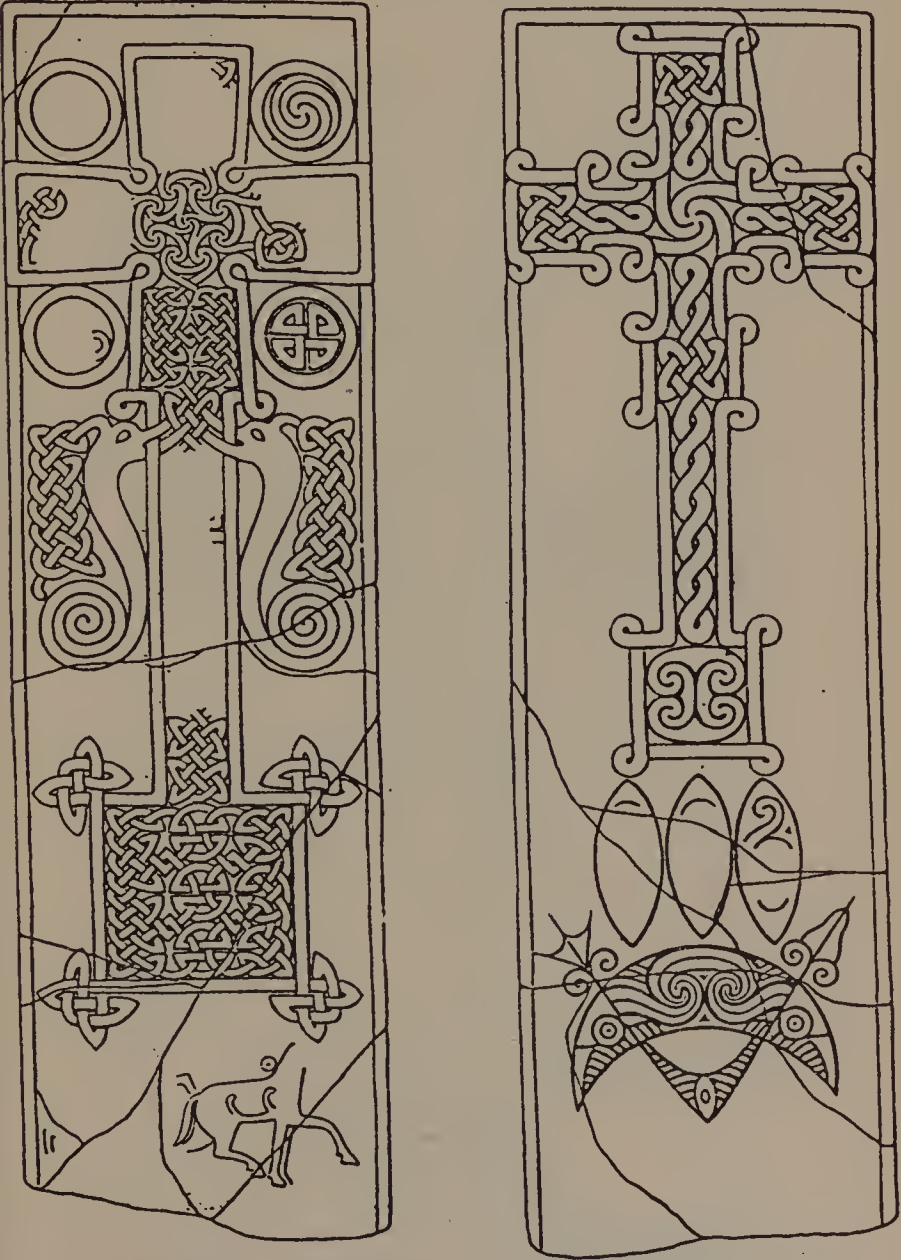
Crosses with Pictish symbols

The cross illustrated below, with Celtic decoration and an ornamented circle in the middle, is on a pillar-stone from Monymusk, Aberdeenshire. It is accompanied by two Pictish symbols, the lower of which looks like a decorated dish with two circular handles.



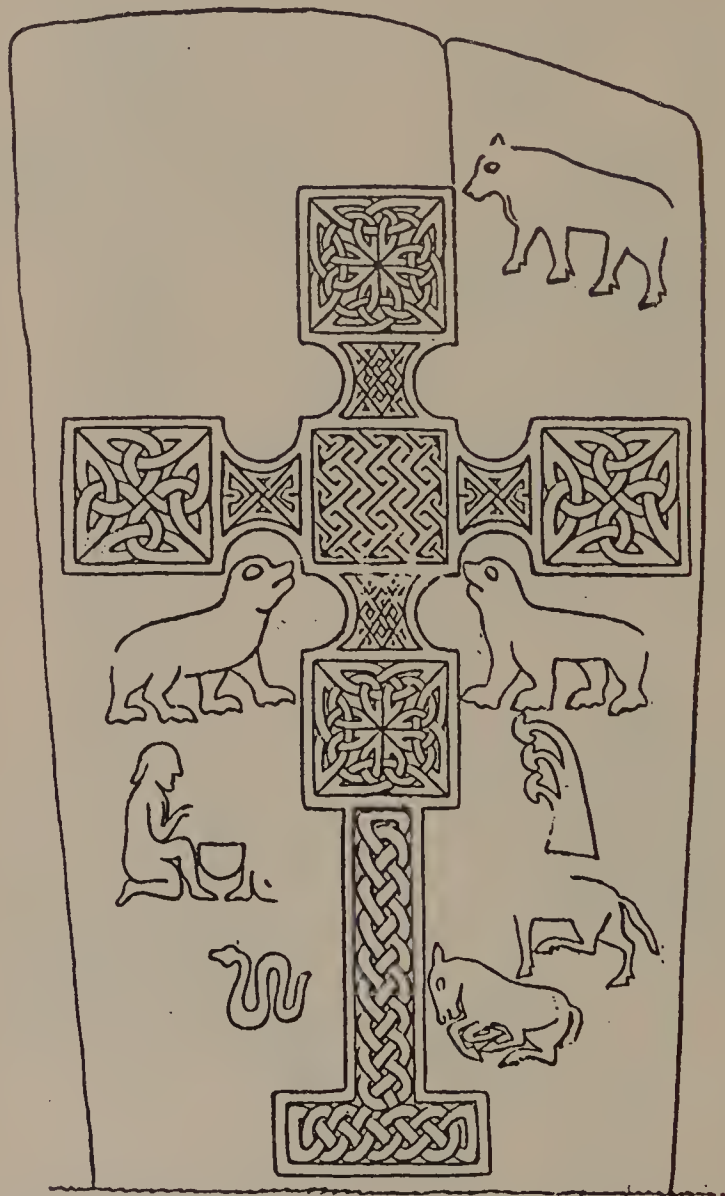
Monymusk. Ornamented cross and symbols.

The cross-slab from Skinnet, in the far N.E. of Scotland, though incomplete, is beautifully decorated with interlaced work and knots; on the back there is the Pictish crescent and V-shaped rod:



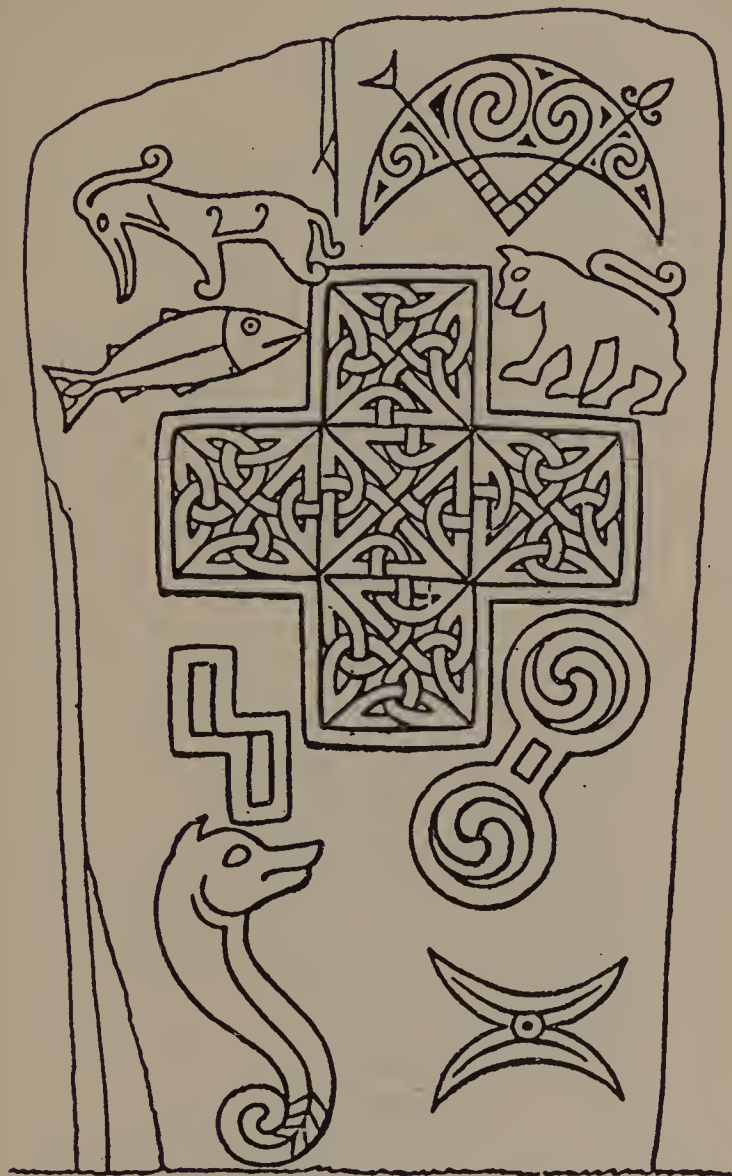
Cross-slab from Skinnet, in the Thurso Museum

This cross-slab from Ulbster, which was also taken to Thurso, has a cross on the front decorated with interlaced work and a key-pattern. Outside the cross are people and animals. The back



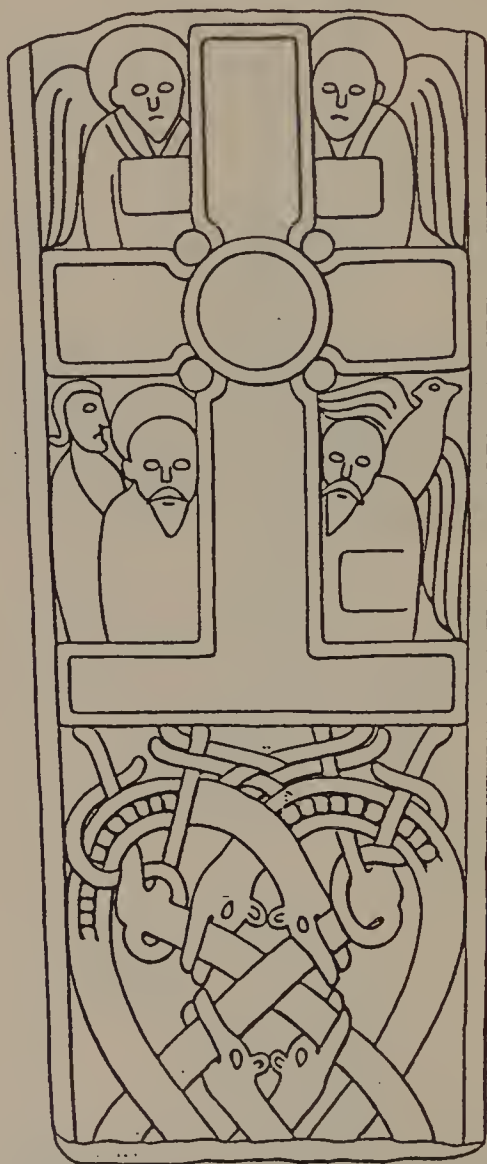
Front of cross-slab from Ulbster

also has a cross, of triangular knotwork; it is surrounded by animal and Pictish symbols, including the crescent and V-shaped rod, and the double disc with spiral swastikas.



Back of cross-slab from Ulbster.

Dug up during street repairs in 1828, this cross-slab was taken to Elgin Cathedral. The front has a cross decorated with interlaced work similar to that on the base, but too defaced to be drawn. The four figures would seem to be the four Evangelists; the bird is probably the eagle symbol of St. John.



Front of cross-slab in Elgin Cathedral

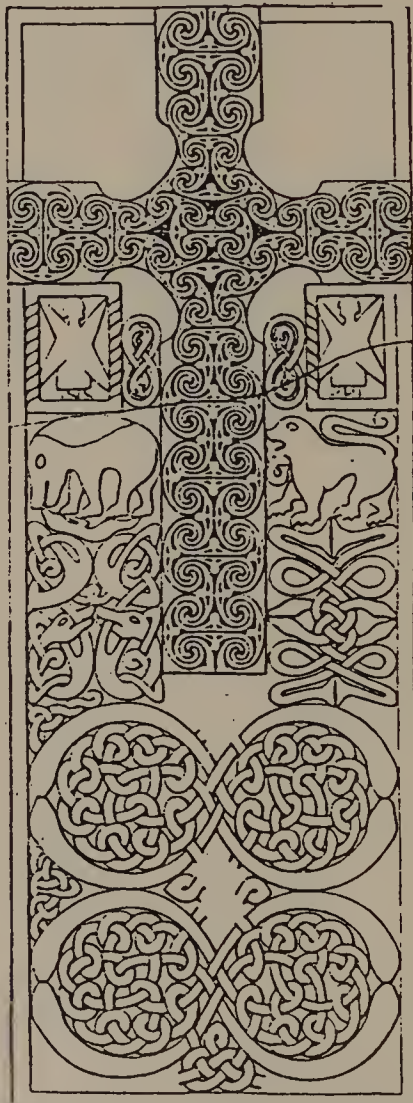
The back of this cross-slab shows Pictish symbols, including the double disc and Z-shaped rod, and the crescent and V-shaped rod. There is a hunting scene below, with a hawk, dogs, and a stag.



Back of cross-slab in Elgin Cathedral

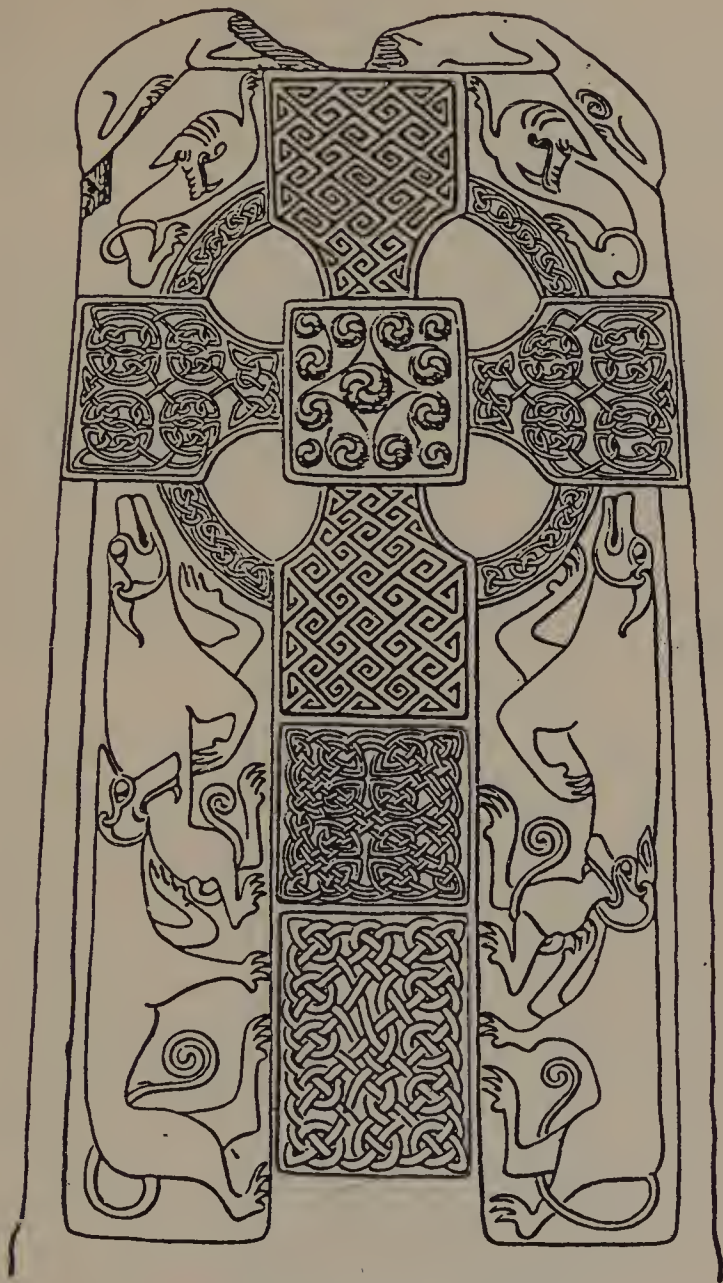
More Scottish cross-slabs

J. Romilly Allen took the view that the designs on the Scottish cross-slabs were in imitation of the pages of Celtic illuminated manuscripts, and the slab illustrated below, from Shandwick, Ross-shire, along with the one from St. Madoes, and the Farr Stone, illustrate this point well.



Shandwick. Front of cross-slab.

The cross-slab from St. Madoes, Perthshire, is a superb example of Celtic art.

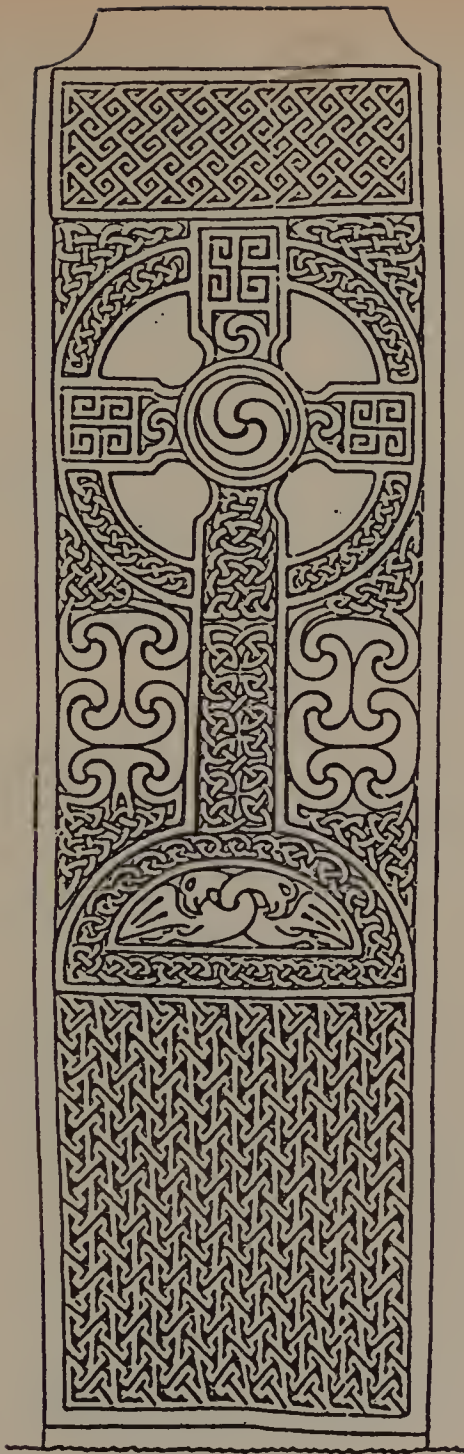


Cross-slab at St. Madoes

The Farr Stone, from Sutherland, is yet another fine piece of Celtic art. Around the outside of the cross there is interlaced work merging into spiral designs, with a simple key-pattern above, and a more developed Celtic one below. The cross has interlaced decoration, swastika-like key-patterns on three of its arms, and a central three-rayed spiral swastika.

The symbolism of the Farr Cross is interesting. The shaft, representing the world-axis rises up to the circle of Heaven, with the spiral swastika in the centre representing the Divinity. In addition, the shaft rises from a hemispherical mound, equivalent to the stepped pyramid beneath market crosses, and two dragons or winged serpents are shown inter-twined inside the mound. This is reminiscent of Vortigern's tower in the Arthurain legends. The tower would not stand up for King Vortigern because he had not subdued the beasts beneath.

This leads us to consider another aspect of symbolism, that of the analogy between the macrocosm of the world outside, and the microcosm of the world within. Thus this symbolic cross on the Farr Stone can be compared with a person, the mound representing the lower part of the trunk, the shaft the vertebral column, and the circle the crown of the head, around which is the halo of nimbus of the saints. This symbolism relates to the inward spiritual journey of the saints and sages. The two beasts within, symbolising man's worldly and anti-spiritual tendencies, lust, greed, and the like, must be overcome before he can 'ascend' to the state of True Man; through a mystical rebirth to the state of the twice-born.



The Farr Stone

To help explain this we give extracts from the writings of two sages. First, Abraham Lambspring, a noble ancient philosopher:

"The Sages do faithfully teach us that two strong lions, to wit, male and female, lurk in the dark and rugged valley [of the soul]. These the Master must catch. Though they are swift, fierce, and of terrible and savage aspect, he who by wisdom and cunning can secure and bind them, and lead them, of him... it may be said... that he has merited the meed of praise before all others, and that his wisdom transcends that of the worldly wise."

Second, Hermes, who represents the wisdom of the ancient Egyptians:

"The soul must begin by warring against itself, and stirring up within itself a mighty feud, and the one part of the soul must win victory over the others, which are more in number. It is a feud of one against two, the one part struggling to mount upward, and the other two dragging it down; and there is much strife and fighting between them. And it makes no small difference whether the one side or the other wins, for the one part strives towards the Good, the others make their home among evils; the one yearns for freedom, the others are content with slavery. And if the two parts are vanquished, they stay quiet in themselves, and submissive to the ruling part; but if the one part is defeated, it is carried off as a captive by the two, and the life it lives on earth is a life of penal torment. Such is the contest about the journey to the world above. You must begin by winning victory in this contest, and then, having won,

mount upwards."

Regarding the mystical death and rebirth, St Thomas Aquinas wrote:

"No creature can attain a higher grade of nature without ceasing to exist."

And the anonymous text of the Sophic Hydrolith or Waterstone of the Wise says:

"And through this spiritual dying... all his actions have a heavenly source, and no longer seem to belong to this earth, for he lives no longer according to the flesh, but according to the spirit ... in works that stand the test of fire."

We have quoted at length in order to explain this important piece of symbolism. Just as there is a vertical symbolism of the cross, and also an axial one represented by the wheel-cross, so there is this vertical symbolism of the human person, and another which regards the 'heart' as spiritual centre; God above, and within.

The illustration on the next page, of an upright cross-slab from Bressay, which was moved to Edinburgh, shows a wheel-cross, and above it a man 'torn between two beasts.' In this case the two beasts are around the periphery of the wheel-cross, instead of below the shaft, giving a change from vertical to axial symbolism. The cross-slab itself, of course, may still be seen as implying the world-axis. The lower part of this slab shows ecclesiastics with crosiers, and animals beneath them. We also illustrate the back of this slab, which shows a wheel-cross made of a single inter-laced strand.



Front of cross-slab from Bressay



Back of cross-slab from Bressay

A related symbolism, of a human head between two beasts, occurs on the Cross of Papil, Isle of Burra, Shetland. In this case, the beasts hold the head by the ears, with their beak-like mouths, and here the symbolism is no doubt of subliminal suggestions whispered by invisible demons into the ears of men. Beasts without, and within.

The cross-slab from Aldbar, Forfarshire, shows a combination of fine interlaced work and simple key-patterns of the Greek fret type. This cross clearly represents the symbolism of the world-axis with a circular Heaven above, and a square earth below. There is a hollow square in the middle of the square earth symbol, recalling the space in the mound on the Farr Cross. The back of this slab shows a descending hierarchy of church, people, and animals. It also features a harp.



Cross-slab from Aldbar

Some Manx cross-slabs



Cross at Kirk Maughold, Isle of Man

The cross-slab on the previous page shows the circle outside the cross, ornamented with typical Celtic interlaced work. Either side of the shaft, we see the descending hierarchy of Christ/Heaven, Church, people, animals.

The cross illustrated below, also from Maughold, again shows typical Celtic interlaced work, but the circle is ornamented to indicate the movement of the turning Heavens. There are two concentric circles in the centre of the cross:



*Rough-hewn, ornamental cross-slab
in Kirk Maughold Churchyard, Isle of Man*

The cross illustrated below, also from Maughold, shows a Scandinavian influence in the interlinked ring design forming the axis or shaft. Like the previous example, this one also has a circle in the middle of the cross. Although the wheel-cross in its entirety was originally a symbol of Christ, being derived from the chi-rho monogram, it is likely that the outer circle came to symbolise Heaven (in conformity with the ancient symbolism) and the centre of the cross, Christ in the centre of Heaven, symbolised by the inner circles mentioned above.



Cross, Maughold Churchyard, Isle of Man.

The segment of a damaged runic cross below shows the Scandinavian chain-link axial design changing into tree-like branches where it enters the wheel; a reminder of the link between the stone monument and the Tree of Life. The runic inscription, part of which is visible on the right of the shaft, states that Thurketil raised it for Ufaig son of Klinais.

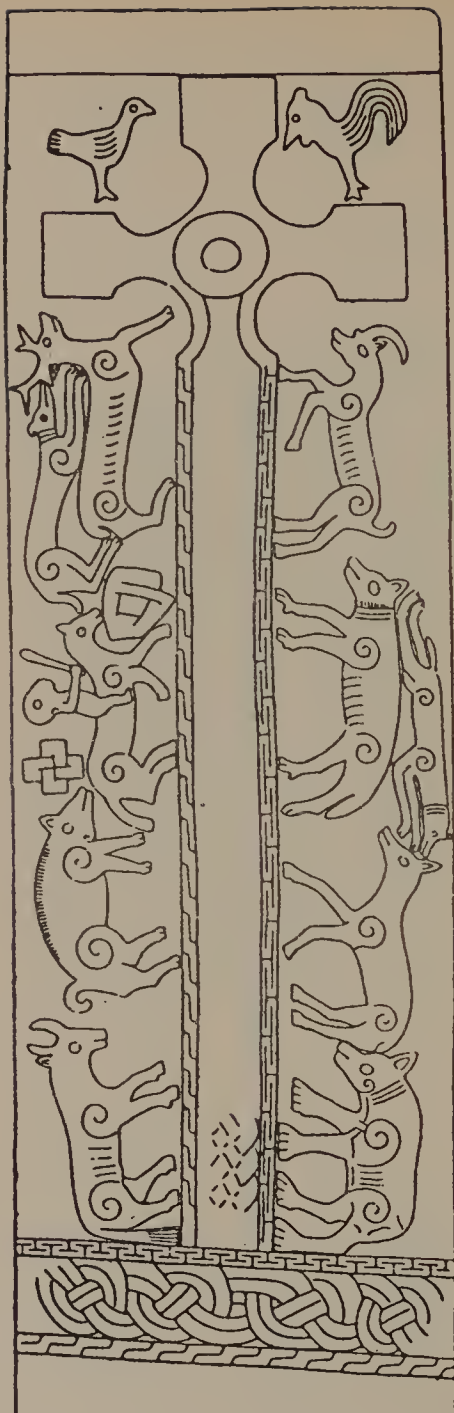


Part of cross in Braddan Churchyard

The cross at Kirk Andreas, Isle of Man, illustrated on the following two pages, has no outer circle, but there is one in the centre. Note the dove and cock on the arms of the cross; the cock announces the dawn and is thus associated with the sun. We shall return to this point later on. Around the cross, the slab is decorated with a hunting scene with stags and wild boars. Perhaps this kind of decoration was not always symbolic, but to attract the peoples' attention.



Cross of Arinborg at Kirk Andreas.



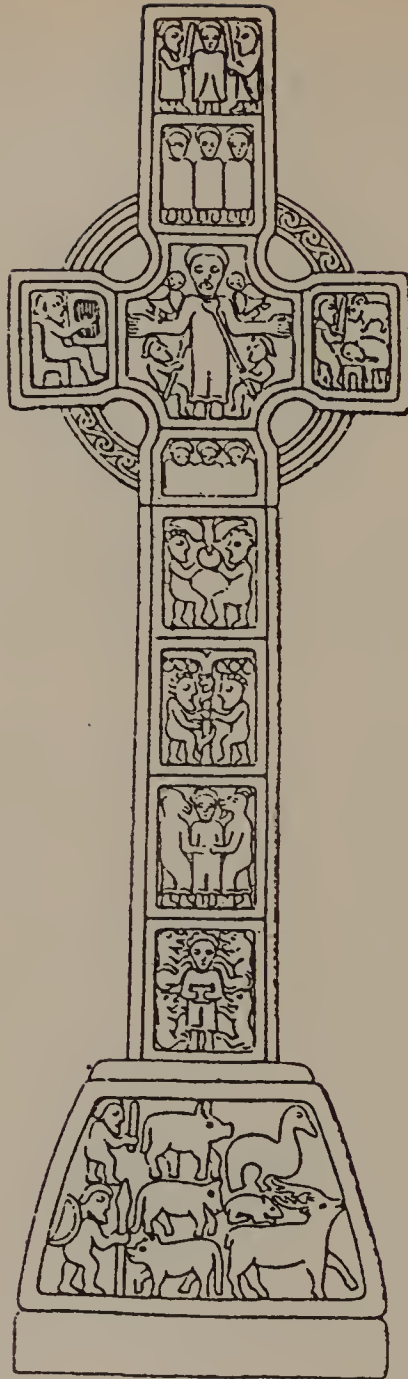
Reverse side of Cross of Arinborg.

Free-standing crosses

The most characteristic of the Celtic shaped crosses have a vertical ornamented axis with a wheel-cross on top, and a square base. They conform to the symbolism of typical market crosses, of a square earth linked to a round Heaven by a shaft symbolising the world-axis. The shaft, however has lost its octagonal section, being square or rectangular to provide suitable surfaces for the various types of developed Celtic ornamentation, itself often symbolic, and compensating for the loss of the symbolism of the directions of space. There is, however, wide variation in the forms of ornamented free-standing Celtic crosses, and many of those which are carved from a single block of stone have no special base. Crosses constructed from more than one block of stone generally have the parts united by mortice and tenon joints.

On the next page we illustrate the cross at Castledermot, co. Kildare, as an example of one of the high crosses of Ireland. The rectangular base block slopes inwards as it rises, retaining the idea of the stepped pyramid or primordial mound; it is decorated with a hunting scene which was probably intended to arouse the interest of the ordinary folk. The shaft is divided into decorated panels illustrating scenes from the bible, for this type of monument is rightly called a cross of the scriptures. The circle of the wheel-cross on top represents Heaven, and the central panel of the cross itself represents Christ by a portrayal of the crucifixion.

In Scotland, on the Isle of Iona, there is a cross known as St. Martin's. Its front is decorated in a



Cross at Castledermot

similar way to the Irish high crosses, with biblical scenes on the shaft, and the very centre of the cross has a representation of the Virgin and Child. The ornamentation on the back is, however, purely decorative. This cross stands on a square, stepped base.

We have now seen the highest Heaven represented in the centre of the cross by the crucifixion, the Virgin and Child, or, earlier, by one or more concentric circles. The cross at Ruthwell, Dumfries, Scotland gives us two more symbols in its centre. On the front, the centre is made up of a circle containing a triangle, symbol of the Trinity:



Upper part of Cross of Ruthwell (front)

The back of this cross shows, in its centre, a face radiating light, a solar symbol of Christ as

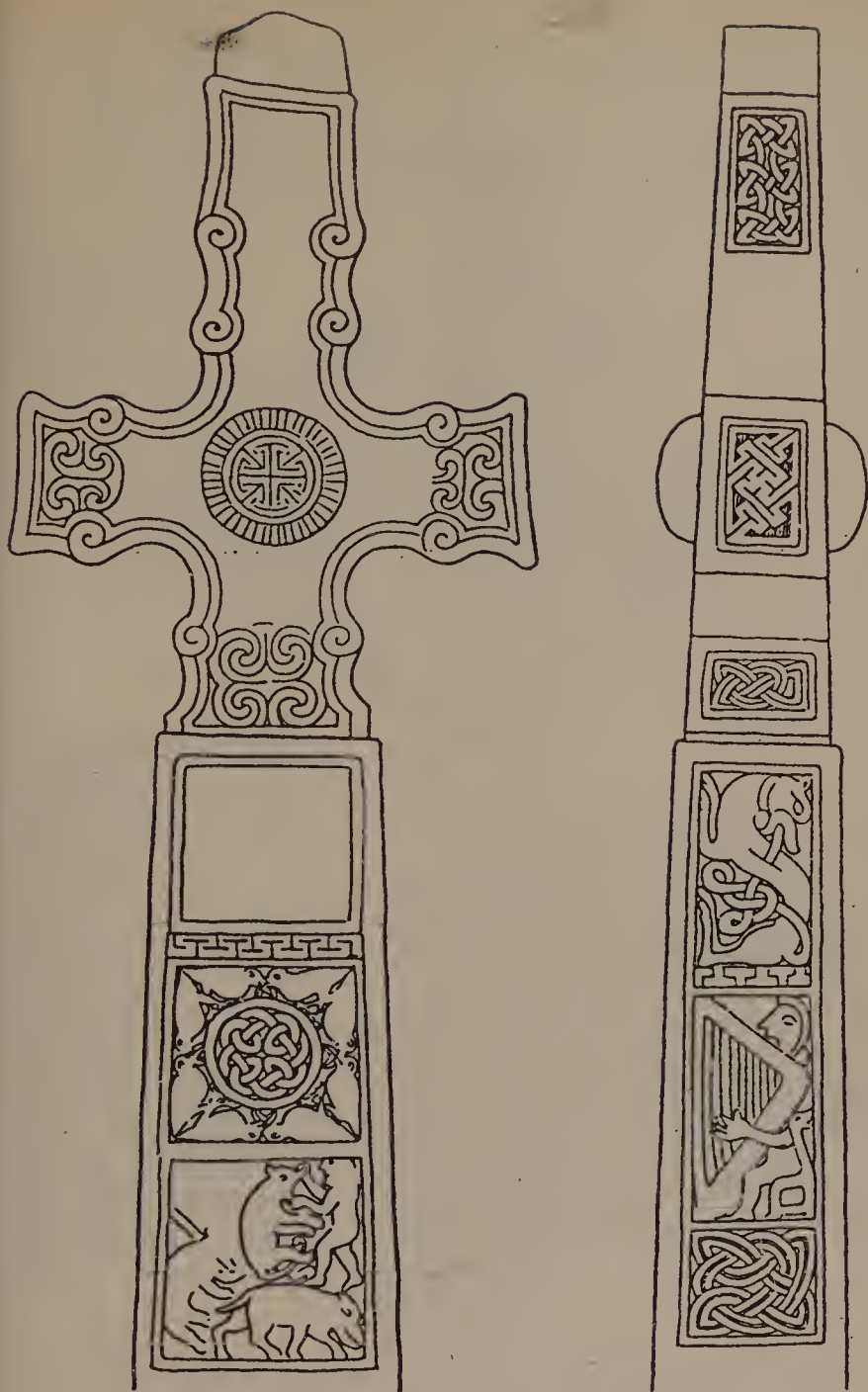
source of divine light:



Upper part of Ruthwell Cross (back)

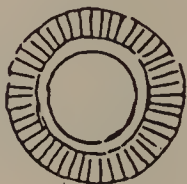
A cockerel on one of the arms of this cross may be associated with this solar symbolism, for it heralds the dawn and the rising sun. We have previously noted a cockerel on the Cross of Arinborg on the Isle of Man. Another solar connection of the cockerel is its frequent association with the colour gold. Also, on many traditional weather-vanes, the cockerel sits above the symbol of the directions of space, like the sphere above the octagonal shaft of many market crosses!

The free-standing Cross of Dupplin, like the previous one, is yet another Scottish example that does not have the outer circle. Perhaps the mason thought the detached outer circle too difficult to execute, or else that the inner circle was sufficient. This cross, illustrated opposite



Cross at Dupplin (front & left side)

has Celtic interlaced work, spiral designs, and key-patterns, as well as pictorial scenes. The very centre of this cross takes the form of a raised boss, decorated with what appear to be solar radiations, symbols of Divine light. Here is a drawing of the boss from the back of the cross:



Boss in centre of Dupplin Cross (back)

Some of the crosses from the Isle of Man, dating from the Scandinavian period, have single or concentric wreath-like rings in the centre:



Left: Cross in Treen Chapel near Ballaglass, Kirk Maughold. Right: figure on shaft.

The figure on the shaft of the Ballaglass cross is included without comment, and, to return from inner circles to outer, here is a fine Scottish example with an outer ornamented circle:



Free-standing cross at Kildalton, Islay (back).

Now we will look at some crosses from Wales, to see contrasts in symbolic emphasis, and some fine examples of Celtic ornamentation.

At one extreme we have the Neuadd Siarman Cross from Brecknockshire. This cross emphasises the symbolism of the world-axis, being made like a pillar with no projections from the wheel-cross at the top, which merges imperceptibly with the shaft. It is decorated entirely with interlaced work.

At the other extreme, we have the great wheel-cross at Margham. In this cross, which is constructed from blocks of stone, there is a massive rectangular base linked by a short shaft with an equally large solid stone wheel. The emphasis here is on the wheel-cross at the expense of the symbolism of the world axis.

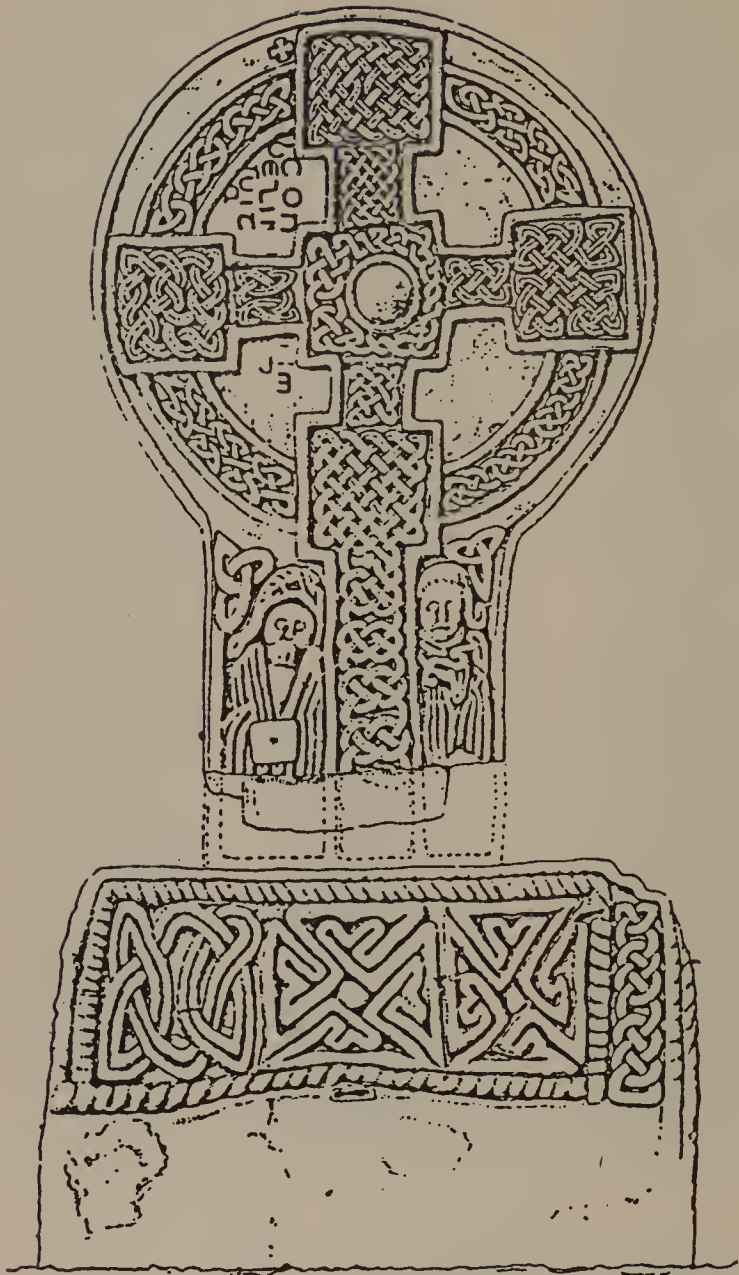
Many of the intact crosses of Wales, however, fall between these two extremes. The cross at Nevern, Pembrokeshire, is a typical example in which the overall shape stresses the symbolism of the world-axis, yet the wheel-cross is distinct. The same is true of the cross at Carew. The one at Penally is interesting because the plaitwork on the lower part of the shaft changes into a pattern of conventional foliage just over half-way up, reminding us of the ancient link between the stone world-axis and the Tree of Life.

The cross at Llanbadarn Fawr, near Aberystwyth, has, like two of the Scottish crosses we looked at, no outer circle.

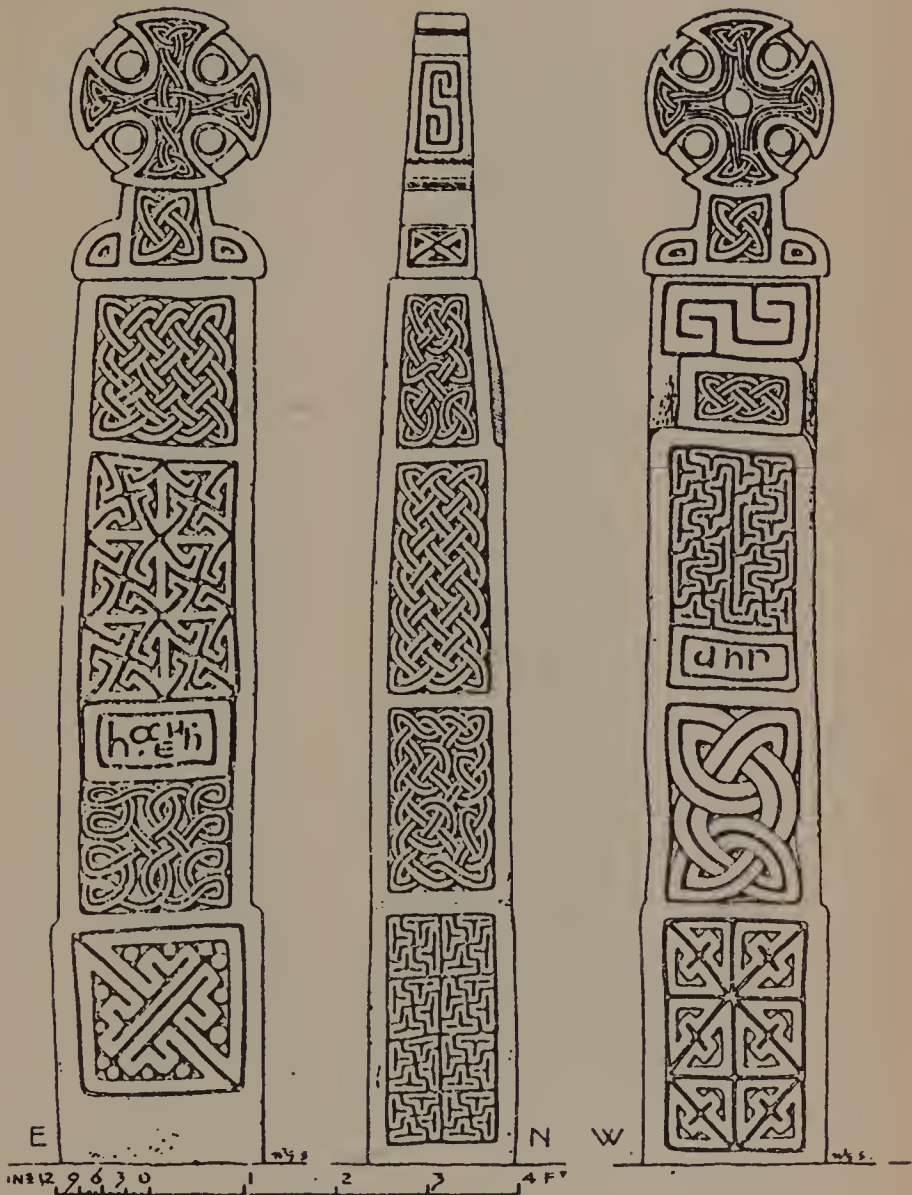
These crosses are illustrated, in order, on the following pages.



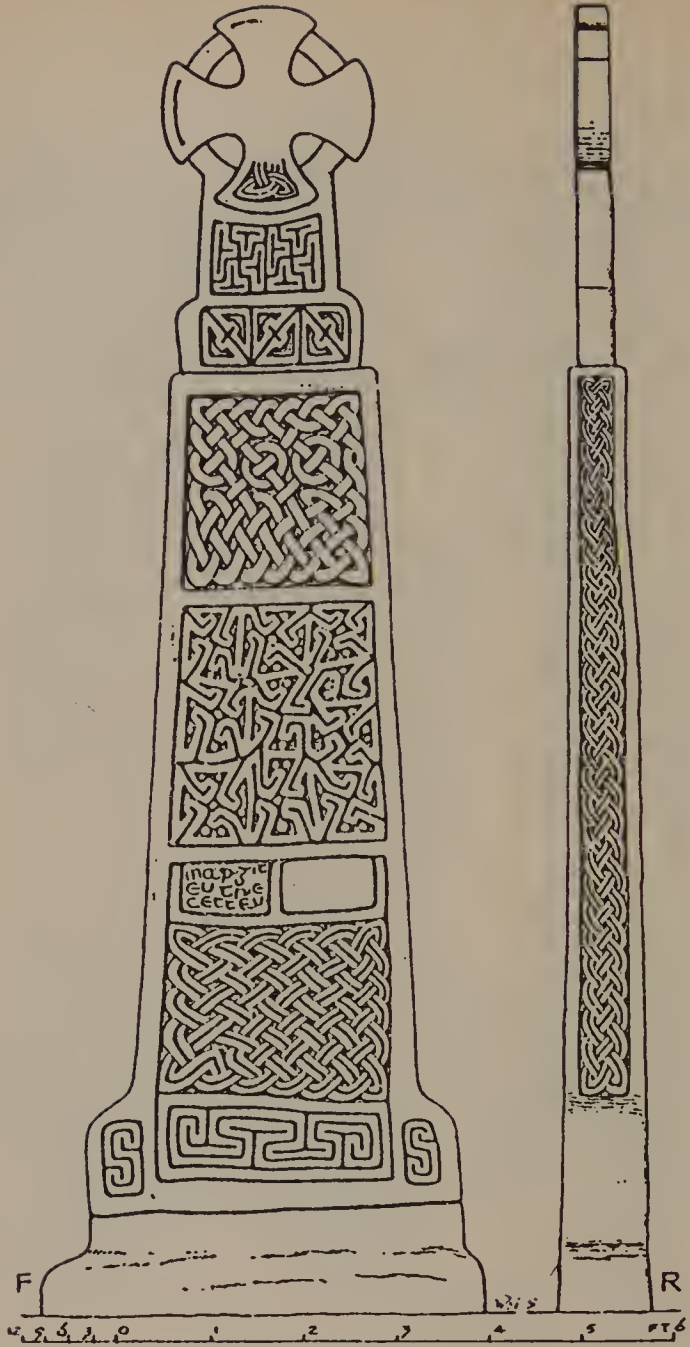
Neuadd Siarmann Cross



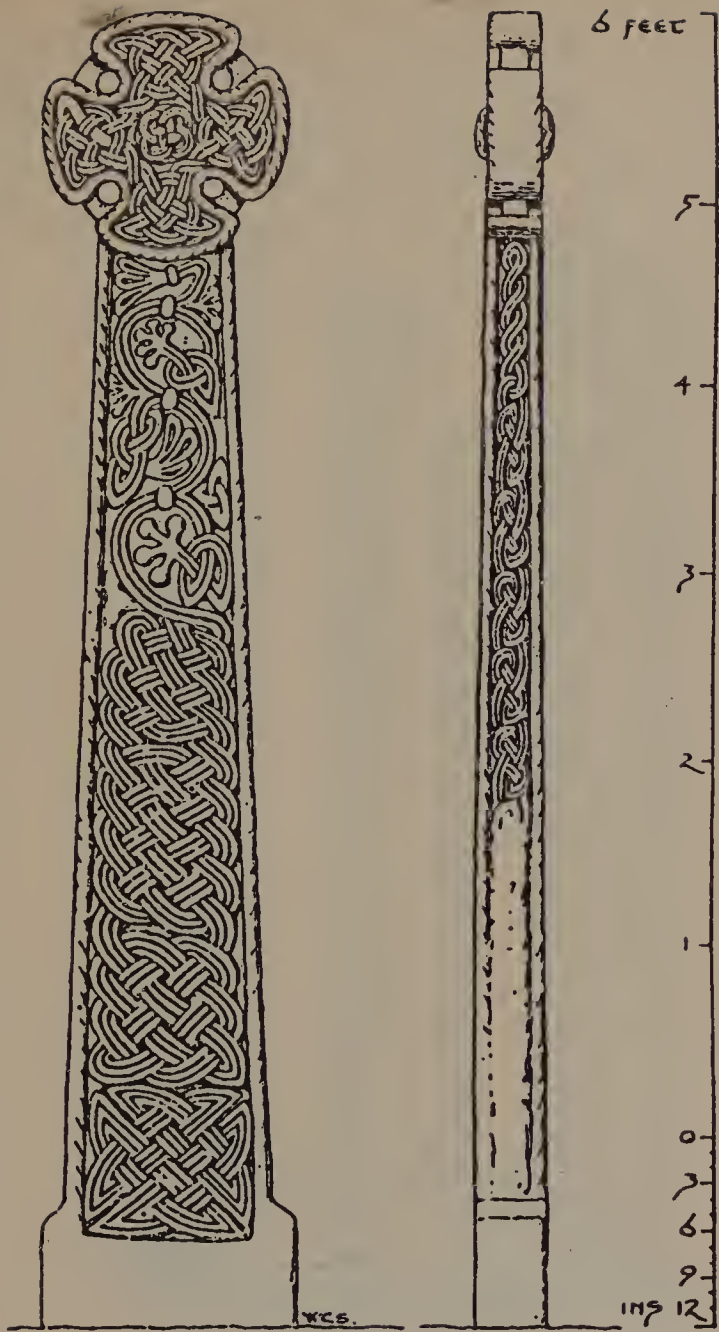
Great Wheel-Cross of Conbelin at Margham



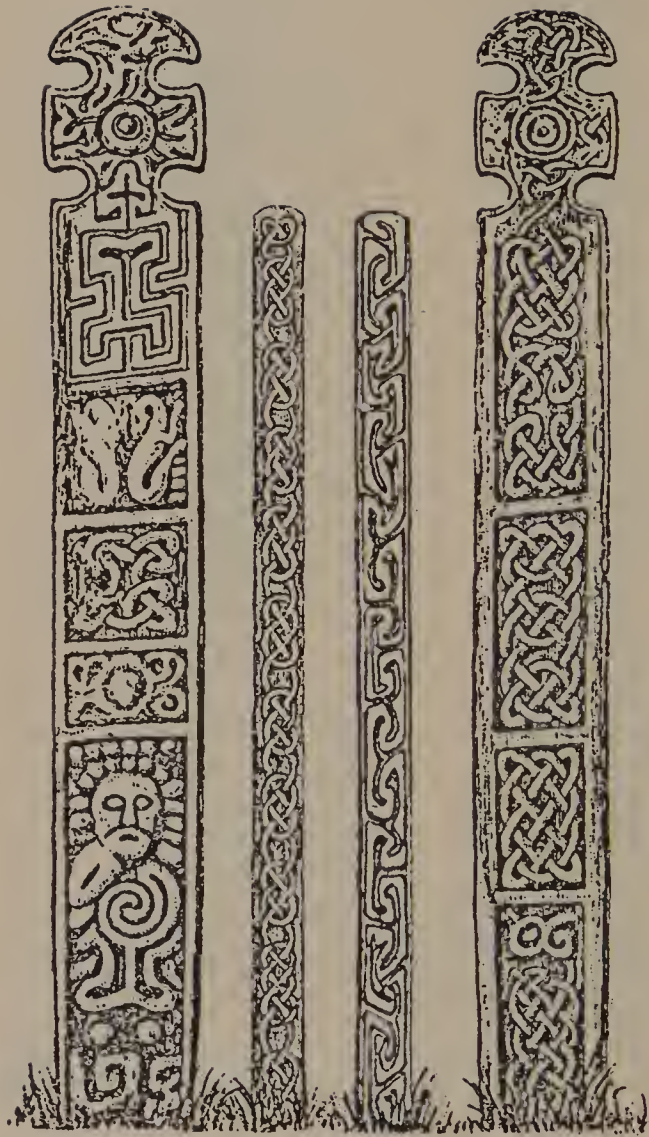
Nevern Cross



Carew Cross

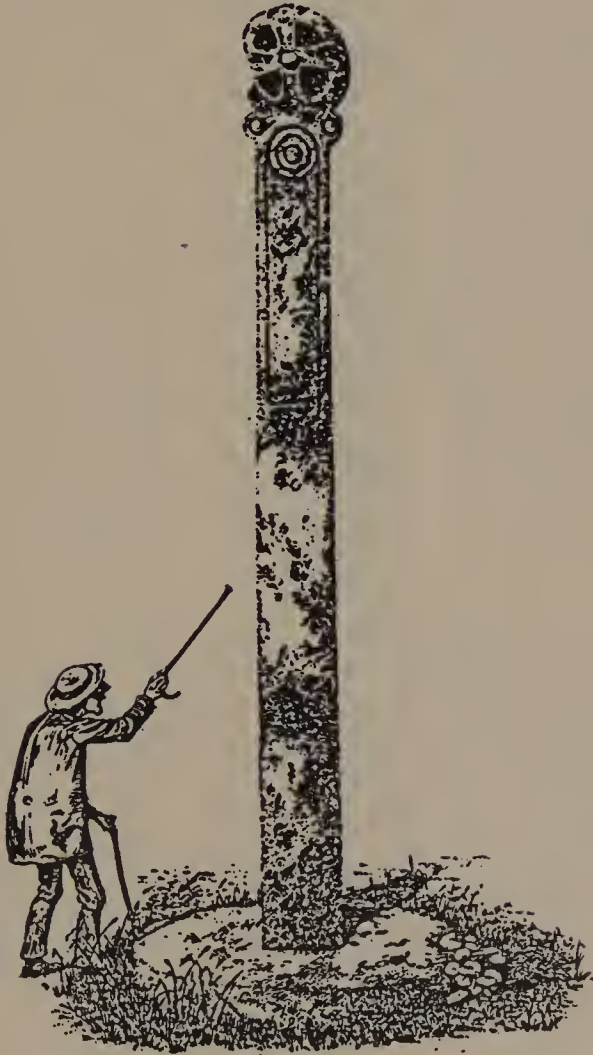


Penally Cross

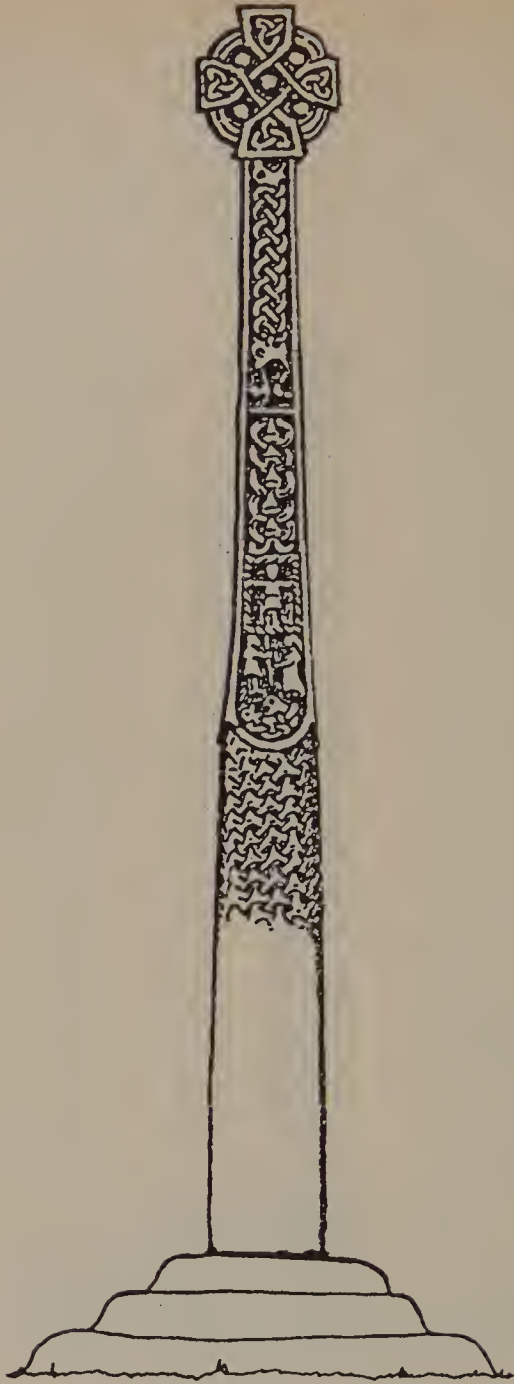


Cross at Llanbadarn Fawr

The next two crosses emphasise the symbolism of the world-axis by having greatly elongated shafts. First, we give Mr. Byam Shaw's drawing of the cross in Mylor Churchyard, Cornwall, with a local resident, Mr. John Tregenza, standing alongside it. It was found half-buried with its head in the ground, in 1870. It is 17' 6" high, but part of it is sunk in the ground.



Cross, Mylor churchyard



The Gosforth Rood

Finally, we come to the churchyard cross of Gosforth in Cumberland, which stands about fifteen feet high, making it tall and slender like a tree. The stepped base was discovered by excavation in the 1880s. This cross is often described as Anglo-Nordic, but Gosforth was within the sphere of influence of the Northumbrian Church, with its Celtic origins. The local population there was still largely Celtic mixed with Norse settlers. It is said that even today some of the older shepherds in the Lake District still count their sheep in Welsh! The ornamentation of this cross seems, however, to have been designed to suit the Norse element in the population. It dates from the late tenth, or early eleventh century. W. G. Collingwood, in his *Northumbrian Crosses*, thought that the mason had followed a model carved in wood. We give Collingwood's drawing of it, with the base added from a Drawing made by C. A. Parker at the time of the excavation. Note the pattern on the lower part, which gives the impression of bark, linking it with the Tree of Life; also the stepped base similar to those beneath typical market crosses.

The Gosforth Cross, standing on a stepped pyramid, has brought us full circle; back to the ancient pillar stones, Silbury Hill (which was built as a seven-stepped pyramid), and the pagan market crosses at the beginning of this book. All we wish to add here, is that in the Celtic cross there is no question of paganism infiltrating Christianity, but simply of Christianity adopting a form of symbolism which is universal.

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St. Columb Cross, Cornwall.



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SYMBOLISM OF THE CELTIC CROSS

Ancient pillar-stones, market crosses, and ornamented Celtic crosses all share a common basic symbolism, that of the world-axis or link between Heaven and earth. The main Christian feature of the ornamented Celtic cross, the wheel-cross on top, is not derived from the crucifixion but from a more ancient symbol, the Chi-Rho monogram, a cross made by combining the first two letters of the name of Christ in Greek; Chi (X) and Rho (P).

The book is illustrated by drawings, mostly of Scottish and Welsh crosses, but with a few from the Isle of Man, Cumbria, and Ireland. The drawings of Pictish/Scottish and Welsh crosses are by J. Romilly Allen; many of them have only been published previously in very limited editions; they give an advantage over photographs by presenting the reader with some idea of what the crosses looked like when they were new.

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