History of the Celtic Cross

The **Celtic Cross** is one of the most recognized of the Irish symbols. It consists of a conventional cross with a ring around the intersection of the stem and the arms. Its origin is Gaelic and was probably introduced to Scotland, Wales and England by Irish missionaries.

The oldest Celtic Crosses were carved into large slabs of rock that laid flat on the ground and had arms that were completely inside the circle. Although they are strongly associated with Christianity today, this was not always the case. In fact, the Celtic Cross pre-dates Christianity, and has its origins in an older religion. As Ireland converted to Christianity, the cross remained an integral symbol and took on new meaning.

According to legend, during the time that St. Patrick was ministering to the pagan Irish, he combined the symbol of Christianity with the symbol of the sun. He wanted to impress upon the pagan followers the importance of the Cross of Christ by linking it with the idea of the life-giving properties of the sun. In other words, he sought to use symbols that the people were already familiar with, thus making the transition easier and more accepted. Other interpretations claim that placing the cross on top of the circle represented Christ's supremacy over the pagan sun.

As is the way of many legends, there is no evidence that this really happened. Rather, archaeological discoveries suggest the design of the cross predates the 5th century, which was the time frame of St Patrick's work in Ireland. Even so, it was the Christian monks who were largely responsible for most of the crosses that remain standing.

Most of the massive crosses found across Ireland today are **High Crosses**, or standing crosses. They stand in an upright position, with rock carved away from the cross. They represent Ireland's biggest contribution to European Art in the Middle Ages.

The Irish High Crosses were usually constructed to mark a holy or religious place such as a monastery or church, or were used as boundary or territorial markers. Outdoor religious ceremonies were likely to have been celebrated around these crosses. Sometimes they marked important non-religious places such as a market or in memory of someone important. Although the crosses that have lasted are made of stone, the earliest ones were made of metal or wood.

The beauty of these crosses is not only their basic shape, but also the intricate carvings found on

many of them. The level of detail and the quality of the artwork is something that is normally associated with treasured manuscripts. Panels were decorated with traditional Irish symbols, as well as significant scenes from the Bible, such as the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, and Adam and Eve. Initially the crosses were simpler and did not reflect the elaborate and intricate designs that we usually associate with them.

Most High Crosses were built in the 9th and 10th Century and by the end of the 12th century, were no longer common. Later, during the *Gaelic Revival* in the 1850's, **Memorial High Crosses** became popular again and were used primarily as headstones or monuments. They are not considered true High Crosses because they don't denote a sacred location, a boundary or exist to spread the Christian message, but they still honor the High Cross heritage.

Structure of the Celtic Cross

Construction of the Celtic cross usually starts with a heavy stone *base.* Often, the base had another life before being carved for the cross. The High Cross is seated into a carved socket in the stone base by means of a *tenon,* forming a very secure and strong joint. Most crosses are decorated with a series of *panels.* Traditionally, these panels are used to show important biblical scenes, or to highlight elements of Celtic design and art. At the *intersection*, the ring is added, giving the Celtic cross its classic and world-renowned look. Most crosses feature a pierced *ring,* but there are variations that do not have any open space at the intersection. An additional *tenon joint* is usually found above the ring, seating the capstone. The *capstone* is often depicted as a small house, complete with a roof. This forms the architectural *finial* of the cross. Sandstone and granite are the two most common stones used to construct these ancient crosses; unfortunately, both are susceptible to weather and the elements. This has left some crosses in varying stages of wear - ranging from the borderline pristine, to those in which determining the characters in the images is extremely difficult.
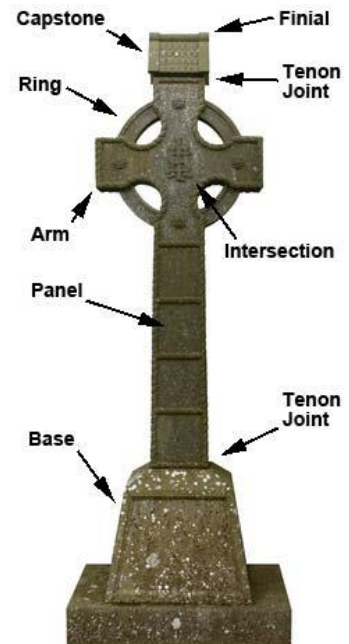
*Let the beauty of the L*ORD *our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands for us; yes, establish the work of our hands. Psalm 90:17*

Important Celtic Crosses in Ireland

The Ardboe Celtic Cross, County Tyrone

One of the finest Celtic crosses in Ireland is the high cross at Ardboe. It is made entirely of sandstone and stands over 18 feet tall. The sandstone has been badly weathered over time. Even still, it remains one of the best examples of carved biblical scenes. The cross was commissioned in the 9th or 10th century, and is now all that remains of a thriving monastery that used to occupy the nearby land.

The Muiredach Celtic Cross, County Louth

Another beautiful example is the Muiredach, named after Muiredach mac Domhnaill. He was responsible for its construction and died in 923. This cross is also 18 feet tall. The east face features Old Testament scenes, while the west side is more influenced by the New Testament.

Celtic Cross of the Scriptures, County Offaly

Located at the monastery in Clonmacnoise, this stunning cross was carved from a single piece of sandstone, sometime around the turn of the 10th century. It stands at just over 13 feet tall. Of the scripture based crosses, this is the most famous. The cross is beautifully decorated with the Last Supper, the arrest of Jesus Christ, the Crucifixion, the Guarding of the Tomb, and more.

The Ahenny High Crosses, County Tipperary

The two sandstone Ahenny 8th to 9th centuries and are ringed high crosses. The better condition than the from the North cross is no monument. Both crosses carved Celtic art in their biblical scenes that are on

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crosses date from the among the earliest of the South cross appears in North. Part of the ring longer part of the feature wonderful panels, as well as the base.

St. Kevin's Cross, County Wicklow

St. Kevin died around 618, but this beautiful Celtic cross in the glacial valley of Glendalough still bears his name. This particular cross features a ring that is unpierced, and it was designed as a plain cross, without the intricate panels seen on many others. Made from local granite, it remains relatively well-preserved. The cross dates to the late 6th or 7th century. Folklore has it that anyone who can wrap their arms fully around the cross and makes a wish will have that wish granted.

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Doorty Celtic Cross, County Clare

This cross, featuring a Bishop and two other clerics among its carvings, includes a crucifixion scene. Additionally, a two-headed bird is carved on the cross. It has an unpierced ring, and cross arms that are rather small compared to the overall size. It stands near the Kilfenora Cathedral, which was built between 1189 and 1200.

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Moone High Cross, County Kildare

The High Cross at Moone stands over 17 feet tall, but was not re-discovered until 1835. During some work in the graveyard, workers uncovered portions of the cross, but it would take another 60 years for all sections to be found. The cross is extremely well preserved. In addition to Celtic designs on the cross, there are also biblical references.

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Kilkieran Celtic Crosses, County Tipperary

The three Celtic Crosses located at Kilkieran represent some of the earliest examples of this cross style. They are thought to have been constructed in the 9th century, and are carved from sandstone. Primarily focused on intricate Celtic designs and symbols, these crosses feature some animals.

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Article adapted from the following websites:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Celtic_cross
http://www.godweb.org/celticcross.htm
http://www.irish-genealogy-toolkit.com/Irish-Celtic-cross.html
http://www.celticbydesign.com/index.cfm/feature/29/celtic-crosses.cfm