
Celtic Cross History and Symbolism

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Descriptions of specific
Historic Celtic Crosses
Cross Pendants

Colum Cille Cross History and Symbolism

of Celtic KnotworkIs the Celtic Cross Pagan?Reading List Recommended

Links and Books Celtic Liturgical Arts What is the symbolism of the Celtic Cross? is a question I am often asked. As a craftsman and jewelry designer in the Celtic tradition I bring some very ancient symbols to a contemporary audience. The answer is not as straightforward as one might hope. The history of this powerful symbol is ambiguous. There are many variations of interpretations and legends about the original meaning that are commonly repeated even today. The Presbyterian and Catholic are often startled to learn that the other considers this symbol their own. In our modern multicultural world the ringed cross is as much a symbol of ethnic heritage as it is of faith and it is often used as an emblem of one's Irish, Scottish or Welsh identity.

If you spend much time rooting around in the history of the Celtic lands you are sure to have many explanations and historical anecdotes offered to you in forms ranging from casual explanations from individuals to historical markers, tour guide banter, grandmother's family lore and souvenir shop hang tags. This variety of sources of information is available on many topics of history, customs, superstition and when the subject is Celtic Art I have found that the popular and casual sources of information are very generous. Conversely the academic and scholarly sources of information are very cautious to the point of being truly a disappointment if you seek confirmation of the meaning of mysterious ancient symbols.

The Irish Catholic priest will have no hesitation telling you that the circle of the Celtic Cross is a symbol of eternity that emphasizes the endlessness of God's love as shown through Christ's sacrifice on the cross. That is unless he says the circle is a halo. He may go on to explain that the crucifixion is important not just as an event at a certain point in time but, as the circle symbolizes, as the unending mystery of how through the crucifixion and resurrection Christ continues to offer the hope of salvation to the faithful throughout all time. At the pub when the subject comes up you might just as likely hear the explanation that the great stone Celtic Crosses were carved from the standing stones of the Druids and were originally phallic symbols, just carved into crosses to disguise their original purpose. No proof of this theory is offered and the in-your-face delivery of this information will probably intimidate you from asking for any. The barroom iconographer will swear on the graves of all his ancestors that it is true. With the rise of interest in the occult and pagan ideas in recent years you are likely to read New Age interpretations about how the cross in the circle is a symbol of the Sun that was worshipped by the Druids and that this symbol was appropriated by the Christians. Look for these sorts of explanations on the cards that accompany jewelry and head shop bric-a-brac. Born Again Pagans are enthusiastic about Celtic designs and are successfully appropriating Christian symbols back to their supposed primal meaning. Just how much of this is fantasy and how much is based in historical fact is difficult to sort out since the academic keepers of the facts are so reluctant to discuss symbolic meaning.

There is a legend of how St. Patrick when preaching to some soon-to-be converted heathens was shown a sacred standing stone that was marked with a circle that was symbolic of the moon goddess. Patrick made the mark of a Latin cross through the circle and blessed the stone making the first Celtic Cross. This legend implies that the Saint was willing to make ideas and practices that were formerly Druid into Christian ideas and practices. This is consistent with the belief that he converted and ordained many Druids to live as Christian priests.

These and many other stories and beliefs are the sort of folk lore history that cannot be substantiated by the academic convention of looking back into the written record for early citations or for iconographic precedence that contains enough supporting evidence of what the artist is really trying to say. What we have from the modern scholars and archeologists about Celtic art from early times are careful descriptions and comparisons. The questions the scholars attempt to answer are about dates and the migration of ideas. Which came first? Who was exposed to which prototypes? Figurative panels are often easier to interpret such as the scene of a Samson striking a Philistine with the jaw of an ass as depicted on the back of the Inchbraoch Stone. The knotwork, spirals and key patterns on the carved cross side of this 7th or 8th century Pictish monument are usually treated by scholars as a subject that can be described and classified but is rarely interpreted. When the meaning of the decorative elements are attempted the academic scholar tends to be very cautious and will often cite obscure references in ways that make their text difficult to understand.

George Bain, in 1951 in the preface his excellent book Celtic Art; the Methods of Construction wrote the following about meaning:

"After consultation with an eminent prehistorical Archaeologist, his advice to publish the meanings that the evidences

suggest was accepted, with the qualification that if others could bring evidences to prove other meanings, agreement to such would benefit truth. In such a way, the art which was communicative and ornamental might regain its original communicative purpose."

That statement sounds sensible enough but it is neither followed nor preceded by more than the vaguest of hints of what the original communicative purpose might have been. Frustratingly this is just about all Bain has to say that even suggests that his subject even has any meaning. Bain's book is a text book on how to construct Celtic Art. By following his instructions the student of Celtic Art learns a lot. By learning the creative process of construction one comes to feel a sense on knowing on an intuitive level what this is all about. In this way Bain succeeds brilliantly in communicating his message. What he writes is rather typical of the scholar who is concerned about being right in a way that can be defended with the proof of facts. If the reader expects a code book to interpret ancient symbols, Bain does not offer any convenient, quotable explanations.

It seems that most people who know about Celtic Art as part of their personal heritage have the sort of knowledge that the academic cannot cite as fact since the source is mainly oral tradition. This does not prevent common knowledge from being strongly, even passionately believed nor does it mean that it is not true. Where the scholar fears to venture writers who are more interested in satisfying fantasy views of history and mysticism have fewer qualms. The popularity of Celtic images and symbols has produced plenty of blurb cards that give the buyer of gift ware designs the sort of meaning they want to hear. The scholarship and authenticity of these statements ranges from very responsible to outright quackery. Right or wrong all this information adds to the modern folk lore of what Celtic Art means.

19th century Celtic Revival Cross
Glasnevin Cemetery, Dublin
[More about Celtic Revival Crosses](#)

The Cross did not become a common symbol of Christianity until the 4th century. Images of the cross were in fact quite rare before the Golden Legend became popular and the "discovery" of the "True Cross" promoted fragments of the "True Cross" as powerful relics.

There are in Britain stone monuments that may be the ancestor of the Celtic Cross. The Chi-Rho symbol, the monogram of Christ was a commonly used symbol of Christianity in the 4th century Roman Empire. The Emperor Constantine who made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire used as his emblem the Chi-Rho in a laurel wreath. Thus combined were a pagan Imperial symbol of Rome with a symbol of the new faith. The diagonal cross members of the Chi were eventually conventionalized to a single horizontal cross member that made its cross with the vertical stem of the Rho and the wreath was conventionalized into a simple circle. There are examples of this where the loop of the Rho is also conventionalized into a shepherd's crook. One can easily see how the curved crook of the staff could disappear to leave just a cross in a circle as is common in many Welsh crosses of the early Celtic Christian period which followed the Roman withdrawal from Britain.

New book

by Courtney Davis

and Stephen Walker Constantine used the Chi-Rho as a military insignia and victory symbol as well. The cross symbolizes Christ's victory. Military use of the cross as a favorite element of heraldry descends from the shields and standards of the Roman Empire.

The early circled cross stone monument as it survives in Ireland and Scotland exists in two forms, the incised slab and the free standing cross. The slab form has a cross carved in relief where the free standing cross has the stone cut away so that the shape of the ringed cross is carved in the round. In both types there are examples that range from crude and primitive to the very ornately decorated. In many cases the most highly decorated have carving on all the surfaces, even the edges of the ring and ends of the arms. The carvings fall into several categories, with several or all of these present on any example. Human figures representing Biblical stories or the crucifixion offer the most obvious meaning. Endless knotwork, spirals, meanders and "key patterns" and zoomorphic animal patterns make up the majority of early cross carving subjects. These are the same elements that are used in much the same way in metalwork and in Gospel illumination. The term insular is used to describe this style. There are many regional variations. The Iona group crosses are distinctive in their shape. Many of the Irish High crosses of the 10th century are capped with a pitched roof or "house cap" that are similar to reliquaries made to resemble a Celtic oratory.

[Click for link](#)The Celtic Cross offers endless possibilities for new designs. This pendant was made by Walker Metalsmiths, 2004

The monumental stone crosses by the nature of their size and material still stand in many cases where they were placed 12 centuries ago. These often served as prototypes for newer monuments down through the ages into modern times. Styles and decorative motifs changed with time. During the middle ages foliage designs, often referred to now as Tree of Life designs became increasingly common. In old Irish or Scottish church yards most of the stone crosses are relatively modern. Some of the stone crosses even back to some of the earliest ones have inscriptions that dedicate them to the memory of certain individuals. While many of these were not specifically grave markers, some quite likely were and in this way the purpose of the monumental stone Celtic Cross has remained constant since the beginning. What these crosses mean to us today and what they meant when Christianity was new to Celtic Britain and Ireland are in some ways the same and in some ways different. The cross either vertical or diagonal with equal length arms is a universal mark. It is so primal that it exists in all cultures as does the circle. There are no human cultures that have no art or symbols and there are no systems of symbols that do not include circles and crosses. These marks are opposites. The circle contains and is unending while the cross both reaches out and marks a specific, finite point at the center. Contemplation of this yields many possibilities and in this way tempts the designer or the viewer to find personal meanings besides the traditional ones. A plain circle is often a symbol for the moon and a circle with a cross within or the arms of a cross without are universal symbols for the sun. The swastika is a related sun symbol. The Druids did indeed worship the sun and moon. These were important symbols to them. The cross by itself relates to other ideas. The four directions or the four corners of the Earth, the vertical and the horizontal coming together imply the joining of forces such as Heaven and Earth. Just as since the swastika became associated with the Nazis and became a symbol for anti-Semitism and hate the strength of that association supersedes its older meaning. The cross likewise when it became the predominate symbol of Christianity is no longer thought of by most people as a symbol for anything else. The older meanings do not entirely vanish. They are waiting to be rediscovered.

It is my opinion that the story of St. Patrick making the cross over the circular pagan symbol is in itself symbolic of the way things really happened. Celtic Christianity used symbols and ideas that were familiar to the Druids to bring them to Christ. The Celtic monks of the early Church practiced a simple life, close to nature that found joy in the love of God's creation. This was what the Druids already sought in their worship of nature so the missionaries were able to build on what they already had in common with the Druids to convert them to Christianity.

That the cross within a circle also evolved from the Chi-Rho coincides with the emergence of the cross as a symbol throughout Christendom at a time when the Gospel was being delivered to a sun worshipping culture presents just the kind of multiple choice mystery that is characteristic of Celtic history. Which of these three possibilities are true? They all are.

The Celtic Cross is visually a very appealing shape. Unlike the crucifixes of Southern Europe that display Christ's suffering the Celtic Cross, be it plain or highly ornamental is made to be visually beautiful. When human figures appear on the cross they are usually quite simple in contrast to highly complex and sophisticated ornamental patterns that complete the design. When the body of Christ is depicted in crucifixion it is usually robed in colobium along the Byzantine model and the overall effect is less about pain than it is about beauty. The Roman model of the corpus semi-naked in only a loin cloth occurs also but less frequently on early crosses and even then it is usually part of a larger ornamental program. On several crosses, notably the Cross of Muiredach at Monasterboice and the Cross of the Scriptures at Clonmanois, both in Ireland Christ is enthroned in Glory at the center of the cross.

If the Celtic Cross borrowed a pagan sun symbol, just as the Chi-Rho borrowed the pagan imperial laurel wreath, applying these to a Christian symbol were expressions of honor and reverence that should be seen in the context of the cultures that brought them forth. There are Christians who unfortunately see these vestiges of paganism as unholy. They ought to be regarded as the reverent tributes they were as these great cultures accepted the Gospels. The Celtic Crosses made at Iona and elsewhere from the 6th century onwards were made by Christians for the Glory of God. Like much of what they did and believed, their pagan heritage influenced their art. The early Christians certainly were erecting neither phallic symbols nor pagan monuments in their own minds when they carved these splendid creations.

The circle on the ringed crosses have been explained as a symbol of eternity as long as anyone can remember. It has meant that as long as the ringed cross has had meaning as a Celtic Christian symbol. But this is only the most common of several meanings.

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Note: I am very flattered that this article has become such a popular reference on the net. Lately it has been the most popular page on my website, which is mainly an on-line catalog of my Celtic jewelry. Since I wrote this piece 10 years ago, it has been quoted extensively on other sites, in some cases even copied entirely. My understanding of the subject

is a work in progress. I have learned a lot in the several years since this article was first published. Check out the links below for some updates. SAW April 18, 2006

Crosses of the Celtic Revival

Article with photos about the rediscovery of the Celtic Cross in modern times. Is the Celtic Cross a Pagan Symbol?