

*Lithograph by Henry O'Neill, published in his 1857 book  
Illustrations of the Most Interesting of the Sculptured Crosses of Ancient Ireland*

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## The Celtic Cross

The cross with a circle has been popularly known as the "Celtic Cross" since around 1850. The form itself evolved between the 4th and 9th century. Also known as "The Iona Cross" or "The Irish High Cross" this type of cross is now associated with Celtic heritage. Use of the phrase "Celtic Cross" is an acknowledgement that the form is not only Irish, but was and is shared by Scotland, Wales, Cornwall and other regions that were influenced by early Celtic Christianity.

In 1853 casts of several historical High Crosses were exhibited with great success at the Dublin Industrial Exhibition. In 1857 Henry O'Neill published *Illustrations of the Most Interesting of the Sculptured Crosses of Ancient Ireland*. These two events stimulated interest in the Celtic Cross as a symbol for a renewed sense of heritage. New versions of the High Cross quickly became fashionable cemetery monuments in Victorian Dublin in the 1860s. From Dublin the revival spread to the rest of the country and beyond.

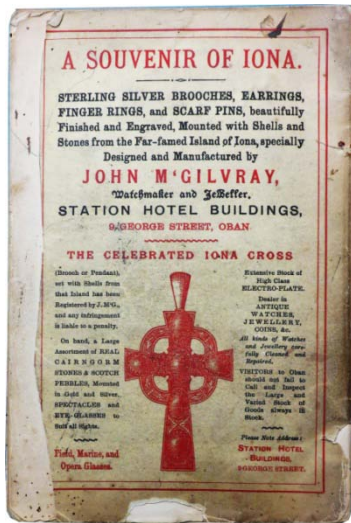
One of the last surviving circle headed crosses of the medieval tradition is the 15<sup>th</sup> century *MacLean's Cross* on the Isle of Iona. Decorated with interlaced design this monument and others like it can be said to represent an unbroken tradition that goes back to the earliest days of Christianity in the Celtic lands. From the time of the Protestant Reformation until the Celtic Revival, interlace decoration continued to be used on jewellery, weapons and furniture but appears to have ceased in stone carving. The creation of Celtic crosses almost ceases between 1516 and around 1850.

In Scotland, the Celtic cross has reappeared as a jewellery form by 1880. These pendants and brooches were based on the shape of stone monuments. The "Celebrated Iona Cross" on page 36 as well as the pebble cross on page 18 are both early examples. Mairi MacArthur tells of the enterprise named *Iona Celtic Art* begun in 1899 by Alexander and Euphemia beginning on page 39. The Ritchies produced many Celtic crosses as jewelry, wood carvings, embroidery and as table top or alter crosses. The survival of many splendid monuments on Iona served the Ritchies as a pattern book of historical Celtic design.

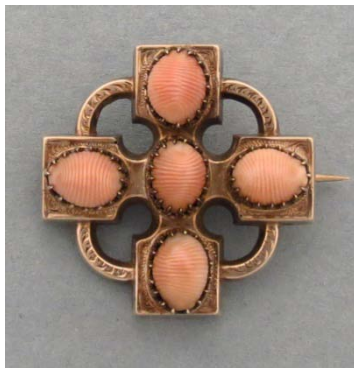
By the 1890s Celtic crosses began to appear in cemeteries and churches around the world, wherever there was a Scottish or Irish Diaspora population with pride in their origins. Irish cemeteries now seem to be choked with Celtic cross monuments. Inspection of the



*Maclean's Cross, lithograph. Antiquities of Iona by Henry Davenport Graham. Published by Day and Son, London 1850.*



Advertisement on the back cover of Royal Tourist Guides Iona & Staffa, 1882.



"The Celebrated Iona Cross" Silver and shell brooch. John M'Gilvray, Oban. The lozenge mark on the back indicates design registration for 1883.



dates inscribed on them shows few are more than 100 years old. Most of the elaborate crosses erected in Ireland prior to 1900 marked the graves of priests. After Irish independence a flood of Celtic cross monuments appear and the majority of the crosses seen today are from the 20th century.

Celtic Revival crosses are often decorated with Celtic interlace and other antique decoration but they are also frequently decorated with contemporary religious and national symbols. Harps and shamrocks decorate many of the earlier Celtic Revival examples. Sacred Hearts, messages such as "Rest in Peace" or "IHS" monograms are also evidence that these monuments were not merely imitations of historical sculpture, but have become a traditional form for expressing conventional fashions and sentiments.

In Ireland the majority of Celtic Crosses are created for Catholic patrons, but the Protestant Church of Ireland uses the Celtic Cross as well. Many other Protestants of Celtic heritage, especially those outside Ireland, also make use of the Celtic Cross. The Moderator of the Presbyterian Church USA has, as an emblem of his office, a silver pectoral Celtic cross that was acquired on Iona in 1946. The American Presbyterians have used the Celtic cross as a logo for many years, reflecting that denomination's historical connection to the Church of Scotland.

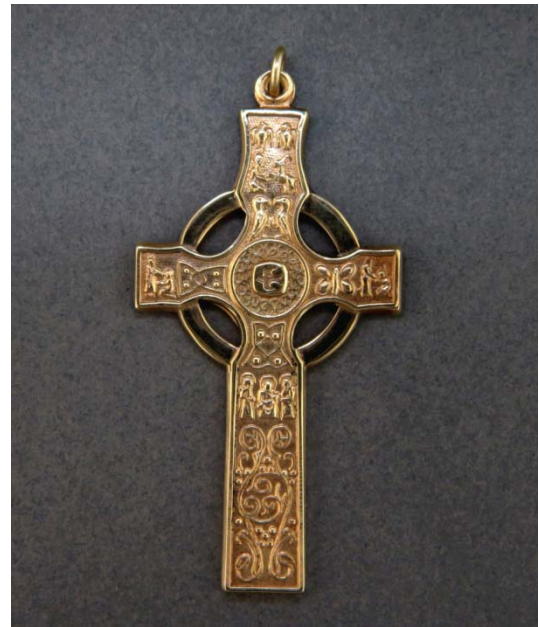
The symbolic significance of the circle has been the subject of much speculation. Folklore often endows the circle with a message of eternity, as a circle has no beginning or end. Alternatively the circle may represent a halo and convey a message of blessedness. Associations with Sun symbolism has been frequently suggested, as well as finding origins in the laurel wreaths of Roman imperial monograms or the Egyptian Ankh symbol. The very popular notion that there are pagan origins resonated with Celtic Revival beliefs that Celtic art was a pure native tradition. This point of view was strenuously argued by Henry O'Neill, although it was rejected by the more conventional scholars.

The shape of the negative space in the "arm pits" between the central intersection and the inside of the circle are frequently key-hole shaped on Celtic Revival crosses. This shape is occasionally seen in medieval versions, such as the Kilklispeen cross on page 23, however on most

medieval crosses the negative space is smaller and formed of two arcs. Pictish cross slabs tend to have four arcs that form not a perfect circle, but more of a squared cushion. The “Celebrated Iona Cross” on the previous page illustrates both of these peculiarities.

The Celtic cross is now one of the most popular emblems of Celtic design. The trend has gone from the impressive monuments of the early Celtic Revival, that like their medieval prototypes, were public statements of the art of the community, to rendering of the Celtic cross for personal expression of faith and heritage. Jewellery has replaced grave stones as the most common expression of this symbol. Craft objects for personal use, clothing and tattoos are all media where new versions of the Celtic cross are evolving in the continuum of this powerful symbol.

SAW



*Kildalton Cross, 2 inches long, die-struck 9 ct gold. The dies for this pendant were made for Scotia Jewellery in Dunoon in the 1970s, later manufactured by Angus Milne of Salen Silver on the Isle of Mull.*



CATHEDRAL — EAST FRONT  
IONA .

*Day & Son, Litho to the Queen*