

The Capstones of the Irish High Crosses

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I confirm that the work submitted is my own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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## Abstract

While Ireland's high crosses have been extensively studied as vehicles of religious instruction, artistic innovation, and political messaging, their capstones have attracted little sustained analysis. Too often dismissed as structural remnants or incidental ornaments, they have been overshadowed by the figural iconography that dominates these monuments. This thesis re-evaluates the role of capstones within the iconographic and theological programme of the high crosses, arguing that they were purposefully crafted symbolic devices integral to the articulation of sanctity, kingship, and sacred space in early medieval Ireland.

Two principal capstone types are identified: house-shaped and beehive-shaped. The former evokes reliquary shrines and ecclesiastical architecture, resonating with institutional sanctity and the authority of the commemorated holy dead. The latter recalls the beehive huts (*clocháin*) of Irish ascetics, but also invokes the domed form of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. In this way, beehive capstones simultaneously encode ideals of local eremitic withdrawal and universal claims of proximity to the sacred geography of Christ's Resurrection. Interpreted through semiotic theory, capstones emerge as polyvalent signs—iconic in their architectural form, indexical in their summit placement, and symbolic in their evocation of divine mediation.

Capstones must also be situated within the broader monumental landscapes in which they were embedded. Boundaries, routes, and vistas often attracted monuments for diverse and overlapping reasons, a phenomenon of equifinality that complicates interpretation. To address this, comparative epigraphy and ecclesiastical topography are employed to distinguish intentional siting from happenstance. Crosses combining capstones with royal inscriptions—especially those naming Uí Néill kings—demonstrate a

deliberate fusion of dynastic authority with sacred symbolism. Here, capstones acted not only as reliquary analogues but also as anchors of political theology, rooting claims of sovereignty in stone. Finally, the analysis situates capstones in dialogue with the wider iconographic programmes of the crosses, including scenes such as David's anointing and the *Traditio Clavium*. These images, when read in conjunction with the crowning presence of the capstone, reinforce the high cross as a monument where sanctity, sovereignty, and sacred geography were co-articulated. Ultimately, this study reframes the capstone not as a decorative finial, but as a visual and theological key to understanding the layered symbolism of Ireland's most iconic monuments.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

‘It is still not unmistakably clear who were the makers of the high crosses, what purposes they served, and what their images were intended to express. In spite of attempts to relate the morphology and iconography of these crosses to the kinds of monuments in various media from across Continental Europe, they remain as enigmatic and idiosyncratic as ever.’<sup>1</sup> — Kees Veelenturf, *Dia Brátha, Eschatological Theophanies and Irish High*

### Crosses

These words by Kees Veelenturf capture with striking precision the enduring debate that surrounds Ireland’s high crosses: despite extensive scholarly attention, and the sheer magnetism these monuments have exerted on historians, archaeologists, and art historians alike, their makers, meanings, and intended functions remain tantalisingly out of reach. They stand as some of the most iconic creations of the early medieval world, yet their interpretive core persists in resisting resolution. This thesis takes that enduring enigma as its point of departure. Rather than attempting to solve the puzzle in its entirety, it turns deliberately to one of the most overlooked yet potentially illuminating elements found on only a small fraction of these monuments: the capstone. By examining this modest but intriguing architectural feature, the study seeks to open a new avenue into understanding how high crosses were conceived, constructed, and perceived within their early medieval contexts.

Irish crosses comprise a corpus of around 300 known monuments, though this

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<sup>1</sup> Kees Veelenturf, *Dia Brátha, Eschatological Theophanies and Irish High Crosses* (Stichting Amsterdamse Historische Reeks, 1997), 11.

number does depend on what is specifically defined as a high cross.<sup>2</sup> Of these, around sixty to sixty five feature figural iconography, and of this group, only around ten retain their capstones, or structural indications, such as tenons, that these features were once included.<sup>3</sup> The extant capstone bearing examples are focused around key ecclesiastical and dynastic sites, such as Ahenny, Durrow, Kells, Clonmacnoise and Monasterboice, and can be divided into two main types: the so-called Ahenny group, comprising of the crosses at Ahenny North and South, Kilkieran, Kilree and Killamery, which, with the exception of Killamery, feature capstones in domed beehive shapes, and the so-called Scripture crosses, present at Kells, Durrow, Clonmacnoise, and Monasterboice, all of which have capstones visually resembling house-shaped reliquaries, or small ‘shrine chapels’ built to house the relics of saints.<sup>4</sup> Dating the high crosses remains a challenge due to a number of factors, including limited archaeological excavation, lack of surviving evidence, the damp environment of rural Ireland, the potential mobility of the monuments, many of which may not be in situ, and stylistic overlap across centuries: as a result, most dating relies on relative stylistic comparisons and broader historical context.<sup>5</sup> Epigraphic and dynastic references may provide some anchors, such as those to Máel Sechnaill Máele Ruanaid and his son, Flann

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<sup>2</sup> Roger Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture and the Art of the High Crosses* (Yale University Press, 2020), 2; Dorothy Kelly, “Irish High Crosses: Some Evidence from the Plain Examples,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 116 (1986): 54.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland: An Iconographic and Photographic Survey*, 3 vols (Habelt, 1992), 2.

<sup>4</sup> Tomás Ó Carragáin, *Churches in Early Medieval Ireland* (Yale University Press, 2010), 85.

<sup>5</sup> Ragnháll Ó Floinn, “Patrons and Politics,” in *Pattern and Purpose in Insular Art: Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on Insular Art, 1998*, ed. by Mark Redknapp, Nancy Edwards, Susan Youngs, Alan Lane, and Jeremy Knight (Oxbow Books, 2001), 11; Helen Roe, *The High Crosses of Western Ossory* (Kilkenny: Kilkenny Archaeological Society, 1976), 9-10; Françoise Henry, *La sculpture irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles de l’ère chrétienne* (Leroux, 1933); Henry S. Crawford, *Irish Carved Ornament from Monuments of the Christian Period* (Royal Society of Antiquaries, 1926), 4; Hilary Richardson and John Scarry, *Introduction to High Crosses* (Mercier Press, 1986), 17; Nancy Edwards, “An Early Group of Crosses from the Kingdom of Ossory,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 113 (1983): 31–32; Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 13.

mac Máel Sechnaill, but establishing chronological clarity remains a challenge.

While Ireland's high crosses have been extensively studied as vehicles of religious instruction, artistic innovation, and political messaging, their capstones have attracted little sustained analysis (Figure 1 and Figure 2). Too often they are dismissed as structural remnants or treated as incidental decorative features, overshadowed by the elaborate figural iconography that dominates these monuments. This thesis re-evaluates the role of capstones within the wider iconographic and theological programme of the high crosses, arguing that they were not accidental additions or afterthoughts, but purposefully crafted symbolic devices. Far from being marginal details, the capstones visually and spiritually articulated connections between sanctity, kingship, and sacred space, connecting heaven and earth through their resemblance to reliquary architecture. The two types of capstones — house-shaped and beehive-shaped — are interpreted here as architectural metaphors: both forms evoke relics and sanctuaries: reliquary shrines and containers, and the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem respectively, and this resemblance charged them with associations of presence, intercession, and divine authority. Positioned at the highest point of each monument, the capstones crowned and framed the crosses' theological narratives, functioning as elevated markers of holiness. Most strikingly, crosses that combine capstones with royal inscriptions — above all those naming Uí Néill kings — demonstrate a deliberate fusion of political authority and sacred symbolism. In such cases, the capstone becomes more than a reliquary analogue: it anchors dynastic claims in stone, transforming the cross into a territorial marker, a surrogate shrine, and an instrument of political theology within the sacred landscapes of early medieval Ireland.



*Figure 1: Example of a capstone on the north cross at Ahenny*



*Figure 2: Example of a capstone on Muiredach's Cross at Monasterboice*

Understanding the significance of the high crosses requires not only an examination of their political and ecclesiastical contexts, but also of their geographic distribution. By the tenth century, Ireland was still a mosaic of small kingdoms (or túatha) each ruled by their own king (or ri).<sup>6</sup> While, according to Bishop Tírechán, St Patrick recognised only one man as king, Lóegaire mac Néill, King of Tara, modern historians believe that there were over a hundred such kingdoms across Ireland.<sup>7</sup> Within this system, certain dynasties had extended their influence into provincial overkingdoms.<sup>8</sup> The Uí Néill, in particular, claimed ideological supremacy through their association with Tara, the ancient royal centre, and through their partnership with the Patrician church at Armagh.<sup>9</sup> During this period, control of key ritual and symbolic sites was central to sacral kingship: rulers who could commission monuments at these locations made visible claims to political power underpinned by religious legitimacy. As a result, the capstone crosses are not randomly dispersed; they cluster at high-status ecclesiastical sites, often under the patronage of powerful dynasties such as the Uí Néill. The Ahenny group lies in the southern midlands (Tipperary/Kilkenny), then known as Munster, within the sphere of Eóganacht and Osraige influence, while the Scripture Crosses are located in Meath and Offaly, the heartlands of Uí Néill royal and ecclesiastical authority.<sup>10</sup> Further north, Monasterboice and Kells occupy politically sensitive corridors along the Boyne and Blackwater rivers, linking inland dynasties to the Norse-controlled coast.

Mapping the distribution of these crosses across the eighth, ninth, and tenth

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<sup>6</sup> Dáibhi Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland 400-1200* (Routledge, 2016), 132.

<sup>7</sup> F. J. Byrne, *Irish Kings and High Kings* (Four Courts Press, 1973), 7.

<sup>8</sup> T.M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 13.

<sup>9</sup> Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 34-5.

<sup>10</sup> Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland 400-1200*, 80; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 16.

centuries highlights how their locations intersect with both political and ecclesiastical power centres. Figures 3, 4, 5 and 6 illustrate the territories of major dynasties during the medieval period, with the Southern Uí Néill emerging as particularly significant for this study. When the dynastic map is overlaid with the distribution of crosses, the relationship between cross placement and zones of political control becomes clear (Figures 7 and 8). Notably, the Ahenny group occupies a liminal frontier between the Eóganacht kings of Munster and their Osraige rivals. The distinctive beehive-shaped capstones of the Ahenny and Kilkieran crosses—evoking the form of the Holy Sepulchre—functioned as sacral claims at dynastic borders: assertions of territorial identity framed in the language of sanctity. At Killamery, the only cross in the Ossory group with a house-shaped capstone, this frontier symbolism was sharpened by the inscription naming Máel Sechnaill mac Máele Ruanaid, binding political authority to a monument whose form already resembled reliquary and architecture and, by extension, a link to saints and intercession. Further north, in the Uí Néill heartlands, house-shaped capstones dominate. At sites such as Clonmacnoise, Monasterboice, Durrow, and, presumably, Kells, these monuments contain more complex iconography, combining Petrine imagery like the *Traditio Clavium* with images of Resurrection, Ascension and biblical typologies, alongside more examples of inscriptions naming rulers such as Máel Sechnaill and his son Flann Sinna. Here the connection between royal power and apostolic authority is explicit: by placing their names beneath images of Peter receiving the keys, of David acting as king, of images of Resurrection and Ascension, and of capstones which, by their very appearance, evoked ideas of saints and intercession, the Uí Néill kings were inscribing themselves into the very structure of ecclesiastical legitimacy. We must also note that boundaries shifted over time — a monument now in Eóganacht territory may have been commissioned decades earlier under Uí Néill influence, or vice versa. This fluidity further complicates secure dating

based on style or location alone.

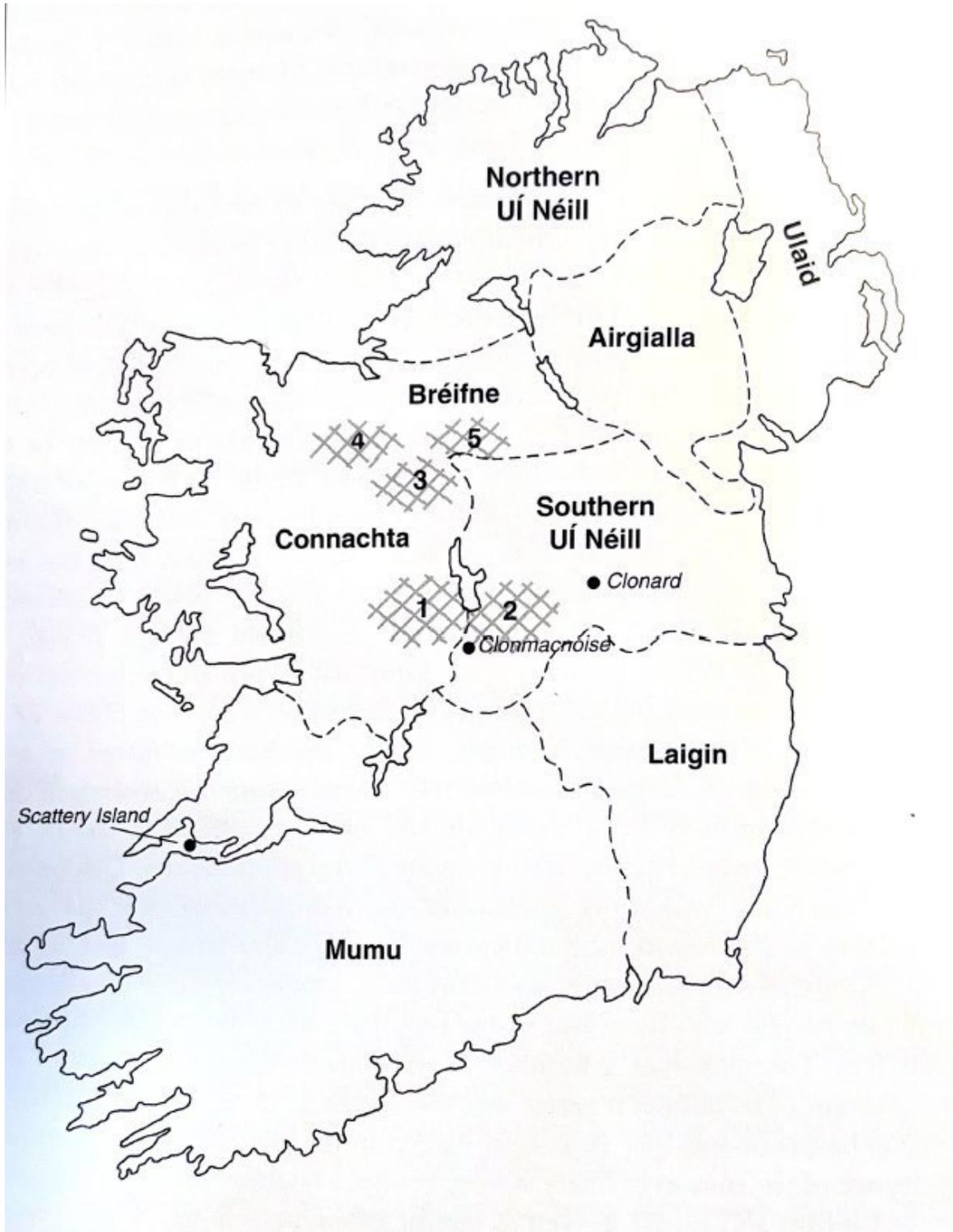


Figure 3: Map of Ireland AD 800



Figure 4: Map of Ireland Kingdoms and Ecclesiastical Networks 9th-10th century



Figure 5: Map of Ireland showing modern counties and medieval ecclesiastical sites



*Figure 6: Map of major political territories of medieval Ireland*

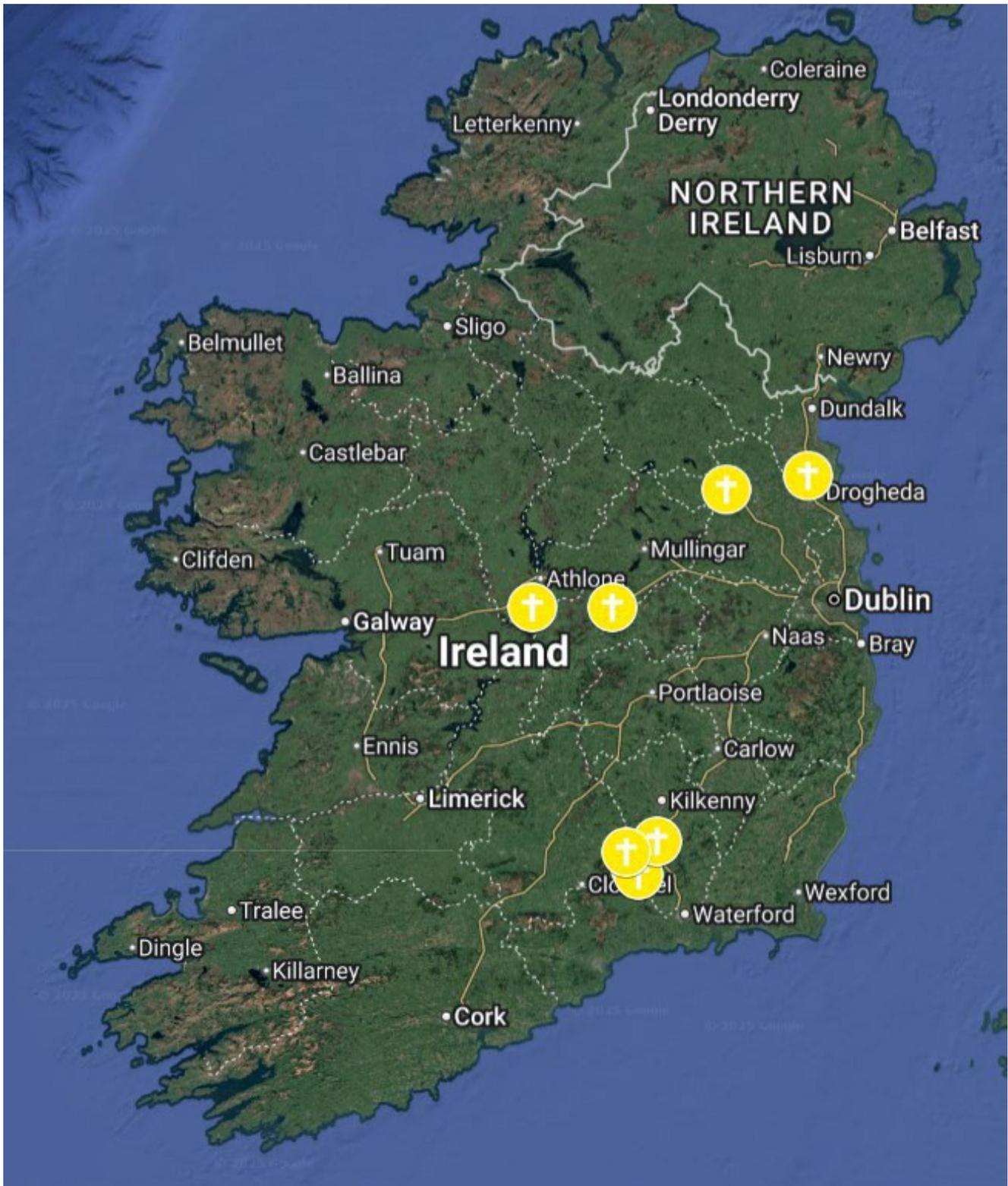


Figure 7: Location of high crosses with capstones

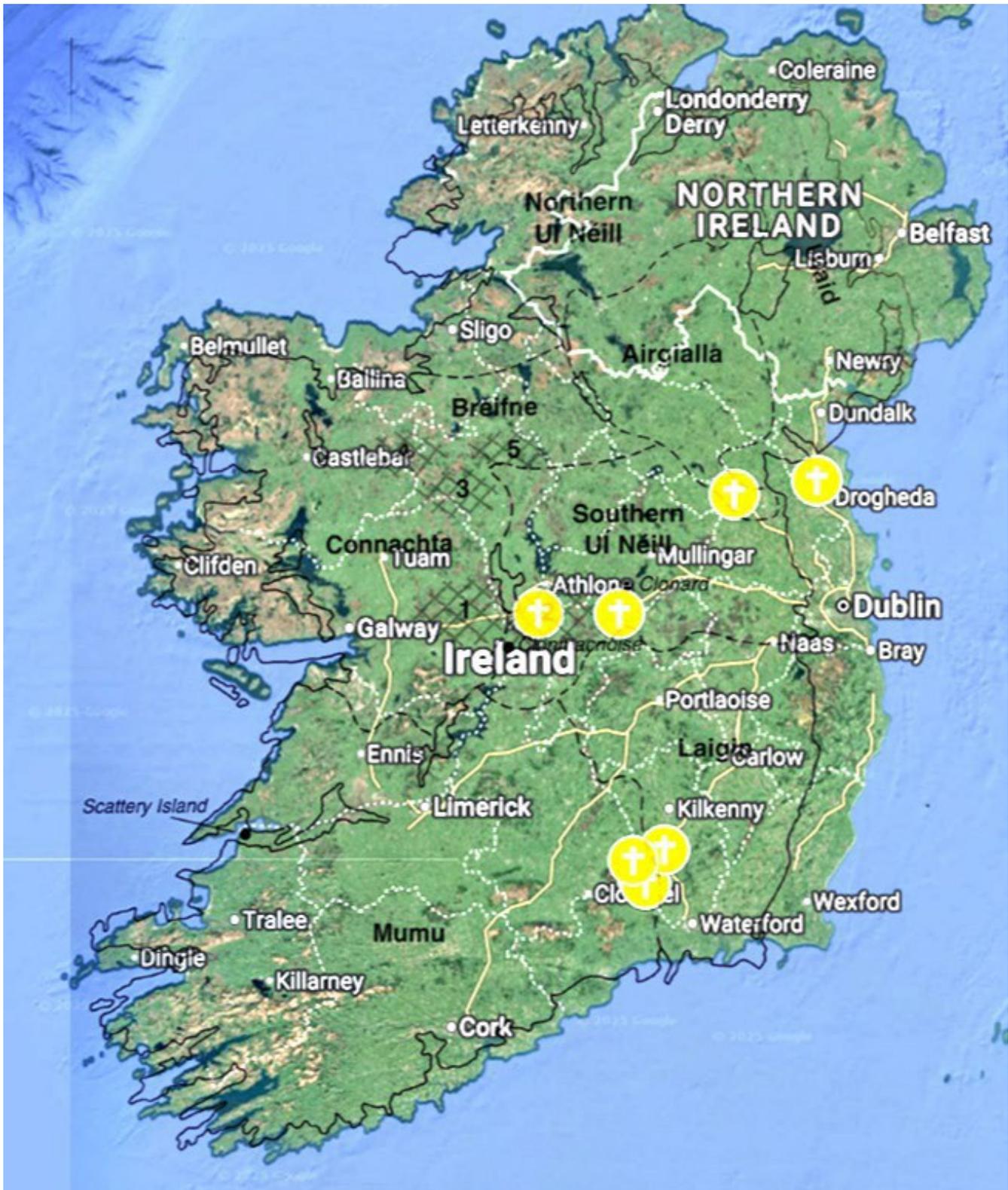


Figure 8: Distribution of high crosses with capstones in relation to the principal dynastic territories of early medieval Ireland, illustrating the intersection of ecclesiastical monuments with zones of political control.

The high crosses must be understood within this shifting geographical and political landscape: they were never passive features of their surroundings, but active instruments of both ecclesiastical and secular authority. Their imposing scale and visual prominence allowed them to command the spaces they occupied, while their carved programmes articulated sophisticated theological messages intertwined with dynastic ambition, addressing monastic and lay audiences alike. Capstones crystallised these functions. Their elevated, reliquary-like forms—often embellished with, or situated near, imagery of saints or of Peter—transformed the cross into a monumental shrine. They rendered the monument not only a didactic tool for instruction and devotion, but also a tangible mediator between the earthly and the divine. Acting simultaneously as crown and reliquary, the capstone drew the gaze upward, signalling that the monument's authority culminated in divine sanction and intercession. Inscriptions naming kings and abbots further reinforced this dual role, explicitly binding the cross's theological claims to the identities and ambitions of its patrons. Equally significant was the strategic placement of these monuments: whether erected at dynastic borders, positioned at the centres of royal estates, or set along rivers and trade routes, high crosses were sited at points of maximum visibility and symbolic resonance. In these contexts, capstone-bearing crosses proclaimed not only the sanctity of place, but also the legitimacy of secular power expressed in Christian terms.

Landscape, too, was integral to this programme. Strikingly, more than four-fifths of the capstone crosses are set along major waterways: at Clonmacnoise, the Shannon served as the primary artery linking the midlands with Connacht and Munster, while at Monasterboice and Kells the Boyne and the Blackwater connected these ecclesiastical centres to the Irish Sea, where Norse settlements were becoming increasingly influential. Such riverside placement ensured that the monuments were visible not only to local congregations but also to travellers, pilgrims, traders, and raiders moving along these

strategic routes. Their significance becomes even more apparent when considered against the backdrop of Viking incursions. From the burning of Iona in 795 to the repeated sackings of Irish monasteries through the ninth century, Norse raiders consistently targeted precisely the very religious centres that erected these monumental crosses.<sup>11</sup> The annals describe attacks on Clonmacnoise, Monasterboice, and Ossory, and in 878 the relics of St Columba were translated to Kells for protection, combining two previously rival ecclesiastical foundations.<sup>12</sup> Within this climate of instability, the monumental commissions of Máel Sechnaill and Flann Sinna emerge as deliberate assertions of divine protection and sacral kingship—statements made all the more potent by the presence of the capstones. Through the combined force of inscriptions, capstone forms, and biblical imagery, these crosses proclaimed that their patrons were guardians of the Church, as well as rulers whose authority was endorsed by heaven. The capstones intensified this proclamation: as elevated, reliquary-like structures, they visually and symbolically affirmed the fusion of dynastic power, ecclesiastical prestige, and divine sanction.

Far from functioning as neutral devotional objects, then, the capstone crosses actively participated in the negotiation of power, sanctity, and identity in early medieval Ireland. Their geographic distribution, when mapped against shifting political landscapes, reveals them as carefully positioned instruments of political theology: monuments that sanctified borders, memorialised patrons, proclaimed dynastic authority, and responded to the destabilizing disruptions of Norse incursions. They embodied a deliberate fusion of ecclesiastical patronage and royal ambition, embedding dynastic claims directly into Ireland's sacred geography, and offering those individuals who inscribed their names on the cross a direct link to heavenly intercession. To situate this argument, however, requires

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<sup>11</sup> *The Annals of Inisfallen*, trans. by Seán Mac Airt and Gearóid Mac Niocaill (CELT: The Corpus of Electronic Texts, 2010), 119, <https://celt.ucc.ie/published/T100004.html> (accessed February 24, 2025).

<sup>12</sup> *The Annals of Ulster AD 1379–1541*, <https://celt.ucc.ie/published/T100001C/index.html> (accessed February 24, 2025).

careful engagement with the history of scholarship. The following literature review traces the development of high-cross studies—from early nationalist and antiquarian writings, through debates surrounding chronology, iconography, and supposed ‘pagan survivals,’ to more recent approaches centred on visual exegesis, liturgy, and sacred topography.

Mapping this historiography not only reveals how capstones have been repeatedly marginalised within the literature, but also clarifies the ways in which this thesis builds upon and extends existing insights into Insular art, kingship, and theological architecture.

## 1.1 Methodology and Literature Review

The study of Irish high crosses has developed through distinct historiographical phases. Early descriptive catalogues by Henry Crawford and George Petrie provided the important evidential backbone for later work, though both were overly shaped by romantic-nationalist agendas. Working in the same antiquarian and early Celticist milieu, Margaret Stokes, R.A.S. Macalister, and Arthur Kingsley Porter likewise treated the crosses as monuments of a specifically Irish so-called Golden Age, foregrounding monastic scholarship, high-kingship, and artistic ingenuity. Their publications, lectures, and popular writings fed directly into the Celtic Revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in which high crosses were appropriated as visible emblems of Irish creativity, heritage, and distinctiveness. In this register, the crosses functioned not only as archaeological data but as cultural icons, mobilised to assert a continuous national tradition. This tendency is most pronounced in Arthur Kingsley Porter’s *The Crosses and Culture of Ireland*, which framed the monuments as products of an isolated Irish spirituality,

opposing continental influence and privileging native mythological interpretation.<sup>13</sup> Porter's work drew attention to the crosses' symbolic potential but neglected their materiality — most notably omitting capstones entirely. Maggie McEnhroe Williams has offered the most sustained analysis of this reception-history strand, tracing how high crosses have been repeatedly reimagined as symbols of Irish identity—from medieval devotional objects to Celtic Revival motifs, tourist branding, and diasporic markers. Williams demonstrates that antiquarians and revivalists such as Petrie, Stokes, Macalister, and Porter did not simply *study* the crosses; they helped recast them as icons of so-called Irishness, celebrated for their artistic sophistication and pressed into service as proof of Irish ingenuity and nationhood.<sup>14</sup> Her work is crucial in showing that high crosses operate on a double plane: as medieval artefacts and as modern cultural emblems. Yet even within this rich reception-oriented scholarship, the capstone features only implicitly, folded into the general silhouette of the cross rather than examined as a distinct carrier of meaning.

The discourse quickly took a decisive shift with the publication of Françoise Henry's thesis, which critiqued insular isolationism and argued for Carolingian influence, traced through stylistic parallels with ivory panels.<sup>15</sup> Henry's

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<sup>13</sup> Carol Neuman de Vegvar, "In the Shadow of the Sidhe: Arthur Kingsley Porter's Vision of an Exotic Ireland," *Irish Arts Review Yearbook* 17 (2001): 49; Arthur Kingsley Porter, *Crosses and Culture of Ireland* (Yale University Press, 1931), 3-4, 88-89; Papers of Arthur Kingsley Porter, 1863-1957, letters of May 23 and August 31, 1927, Harvard University Archives, Pusey Library, HUG 1707.102; Philip O'Leary, *The Prose Literature of the Gaelic Revival* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), 478-81; Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature*, Maynooth Monographs 3 (An Sagart, 1990), 1-28.

<sup>14</sup> Maggie McEnhroe Williams, "The Sign of The Cross: Irish high crosses as cultural emblems," (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2000); Caitlin Hutchison, "The Multivocality of the Cross of the Scriptures: Claiming Victory, Kingship and Territory in Early Medieval Ireland," (PhD diss., University of Delaware, 2019), 21.

<sup>15</sup> Françoise Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period (to 800 AD)* (Methuen, 1940); Françoise Henry, *Irish High Crosses* (The Three Candles Ltd, 1964); Françoise Henry, *Irish Art during the Viking Invasions 800-1020 AD* (Methuen, 1974); Françoise Henry, *Irish Art during the Romanesque Period 1020-1170 AD* (Methuen, 1970); Françoise Henry, *Sculpture and Architecture*, vol. 3 of *Studies in Early Christian and Medieval Irish Art* (Pindar Press, 1985); Françoise Henry, "Les origines de l'iconographie irlandaise," *Revue archéologique*, 5th ser., 32.2 (1930): 80-109.

chronological model, though influential, imposed a linear narrative that later research complicated with evidence of contemporaneous regional diversity. Peter Harbison extended Henry's continental emphasis, suggesting stucco plaques as more likely iconographic sources.<sup>16</sup> His 1992 text, *High Crosses of Ireland: An Iconographic and Photographic Survey* remains the most systematic catalogue and iconographic survey to date, yet even here capstones appear only as brief structural notes, without symbolic analysis.<sup>17</sup> From the 1980s, the field moved beyond rigid chronology: Roger Stalley stressed the influence and significance of regional workshops, patronage networks, and site-specific meaning in the development of the crosses, noting that 'differences in style or form owe as much to geography as to date.'<sup>18</sup> Robert Stevick's geometric analyses identify coherent proportional systems in cross-heads, reframing formal choices as deliberate, rule-governed design rather than mere decoration.<sup>19</sup> Alongside these approaches came methodological critiques: Kees Veelenturf has criticised the excessive reliance on formal comparison and the tendency to measure Irish monuments against putative 'origins' and 'deviations,' rather than appreciating their local dynamics.<sup>20</sup> Jane Hawkes has likewise warned against isolating iconography from its monumental setting, arguing that such an approach 'is not one that would be recognised in art historical circles elsewhere.'<sup>21</sup> These developments represent a crucial shift toward contextual interpretation, yet

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<sup>16</sup> Peter Harbison, "The Carolingian Contribution to Irish Sculpture," in *Irish and Insular Art, A.D. 500–1200*, ed. M. Ryan (Royal Irish Academy, 1987), 105–110.

<sup>17</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*; Peter Harbison, *Irish High Crosses with the Figure Sculptures Explained* (The Boyne Valley Honey Company, 1994).

<sup>18</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Stevick, "Shapes of Early Sculptured Crosses of Ireland," *Gesta* 38, no. 1 (1999)

<sup>20</sup> Veelenturf, *Dia Brátha: Eschatological Theophanies and Irish High Crosses*, 11.

<sup>21</sup> Jane Hawkes, "Studying Early Christian Sculpture in England and Ireland: The Object of Art History or Archaeology?" in *Anglo-Saxon/Irish Relations Before the Vikings*, ed. by James Graham-Campbell and Michael Ryan (Oxford University Press, 2009), 398–99.

capstones continue to be marginal within this historiography.<sup>22</sup> Their neglect signals a deeper methodological constraint—the persistent treatment of high crosses as primarily stylistic objects rather than as participants in a richly articulated visual–theological culture. Overcoming this limitation demands approaches that restore the exegetical, liturgical, and monastic dimensions of Insular art, and it is within this expanded interpretative framework that the present study situates itself. These developments represent a crucial shift toward contextual interpretation, yet capstones continue to be marginal within this historiography. Their neglect signals a deeper methodological constraint—the persistent treatment of high crosses as primarily stylistic objects rather than as participants in a richly articulated visual–theological culture. Overcoming this limitation demands approaches that restore the exegetical, liturgical, and monastic dimensions of Insular art, and it is within this expanded interpretative framework that the present study situates itself.

It is within this broader contextual turn that Jennifer O’Reilly’s work has been decisive for both manuscripts and monuments. She demonstrated that early medieval visual culture operated within a patristic exegetical horizon, where texts and images functioned like *catena*—chains of authoritative commentary designed to open, rather than close, meaning.<sup>23</sup> This was not a dead patristics but a living commentary tradition: monastic reading, liturgy, and image-making all drew upon the same typological and allegorical logics. In this register, images were not passive illustrations but visual glosses, prompts for layered interpretation across the literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical senses. Gregory the Great had already articulated

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<sup>22</sup> Christina Cowart-Smith, “Crossing Britain: The British ‘High’ Cross in Context and Development, AD 600-1100,” (PhD diss., Durham University, 2023) also covers the concept of archaeological contextualisation in the development of the free standing crosses in this period, but this work is currently embargoed at the time of this thesis.

<sup>23</sup> Jennifer O’Reilly, *Early Medieval Text and Image*, vol. 1, ed. by Carol A. Farr and Elizabeth Mullins (Routledge, 2019), xxvii.

this principle in the sixth century, insisting that pictures in churches provided a ‘*living reading*’ of scripture for the illiterate, teaching them to ‘read by seeing on the walls what they could not read in books.’<sup>24</sup> Medieval audiences, then, were trained to treat visual signs as sacred texts. They encountered images not as static decoration but as active theology—designed to stir devotion, guide prayer, and embody doctrine.

Bede’s testimonies make this hermeneutic tangible; his account of Caedmon as a ‘clean beast’ ruminating on scripture, and his description of typologically paired wall paintings at Wearmouth-Jarrow both illustrate how images were read as doctrine and worship, not as linear narrative.<sup>25</sup> O’Reilly’s analysis of the Book of Kells confirm this practice in Insular art: the Jonah–Columba figure, for example, is on one level Jonah, swallowed and released by the fish; yet for patristic exegetes Jonah also prefigured Christ’s burial and resurrection after three days. At the same time, the figure recalls the dove (Hebrew *iona*), symbol of the Holy Spirit at Christ’s Baptism, and St Columba (*columba* = dove), the patron of Iona, embodying continuity of the apostolic mission in an Irish context. Read sacramentally, the image evokes Baptism itself: descent into the water and rising again into new life. The Temple miniature (fol. 202v) is equally multivalent. On its surface an architectural vignette, it resonates with John 2:19–21 (‘the temple of his body’),

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<sup>24</sup> O’Reilly, *Early Medieval Text and Image*, xxvii; Henry Maguire, *Art and Eloquence in Byzantium* (Princeton University Press, 1981), 9–12; Paul Meyvaert, “Bede and the Church Paintings at Wearmouth-Jarrow,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 8 (1979): 68–69; L. M. Hartmann, *Gregorii I Papae Registrum Epistolarum*, vol. 2, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Epistolae* (MGH, 1978), 195, 270; *Historia abbatum*, 6, in C. Plummer, *Beda Opera Historica* (Clarendon Press, 1896), 369–70; Pierre Riché, *Education and Culture in the Barbarian West* (University of South Carolina Press, 1978), 489–90; George Henderson, *Bede and the Visual Arts* (Jarrow Lecture, 1980), 13–17; C. R. Dodwell, *Anglo-Saxon Art: A New Perspective* (Manchester University Press, 1982), 84–92; John Higgitt, “Words and Crosses: The Inscribed Stone Cross of Early Medieval Britain and Ireland,” in *Early Medieval Sculpture in Britain and Ireland, British Archaeological Reports 152*, ed. by John Higgitt (Oxford University Press, 1986), 125–52.

<sup>25</sup> Jennifer O’Reilly, “Early Medieval Text and Image: The Wounded and Exalted Christ,” in *Early Medieval Text and Image*, vol. 1, ed. by Carol A. Farr and Elizabeth Mullins (Routledge, 2019), 1; Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 4.24, 215–18; O’Reilly, ‘The Wounded and Exalted Christ,’ 1; Bede, *Historia abbatum*, 9.

with the Church as the temple of living stones, and with the Eucharistic altar. Positioned precisely between Christ's genealogy and the Temptation narrative, the Temple becomes a meditation on priesthood, kingship, and the presence of Christ in the Church's liturgy.<sup>26</sup> A single miniature, therefore, whether the Chi-Rho or the Lucan genealogy, can simultaneously gather Christology, sacramental theology, and local monastic identity.<sup>27</sup> In this way, the image becomes a node in a wider exegetical network, linking scripture, liturgy, and community memory.

The close relationship between manuscripts and monuments becomes still clearer when the so-called Iona School of sculpture, raised by Douglas Maclean in his analysis of the sculpture of the west Highlands and islands of Scotland, is brought into view. The free-standing ringed crosses of Iona introduced into stone the very formal and iconographic language that would later define the Irish high crosses: the ringed cross form itself, a repertoire of biblical scenes such as the Virgin and Child, Daniel in the Lions' Den, Cain and Abel, and the Sacrifice of Abraham, and an ornamental vocabulary of interlace, spirals, key-patterns, serpents and bosses developed in dialogue with Insular metalwork and illumination.<sup>28</sup> The stylistic and iconographic affinities between the Iona crosses and the Book of Kells have long been noted, suggesting a shared workshop tradition in which manuscripts and sculpture participated in the same exegetical project.<sup>29</sup> Yet, while this Iona-Ireland nexus has been widely discussed in relation to cross-forms, figural panels, and ornament, capstones have scarcely entered the conversation. By extending this Insular comparative frame to the architectural summit of the Irish crosses, the present study

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<sup>26</sup> O'Reilly, *Early Medieval Text and Image, Vol 1*, xxvii

<sup>27</sup> Jennifer O'Reilly, "Exegesis and the Book of Kells: The Lucan Genealogy," in *Early Medieval Text and Image*, vol. 2, ed. by Carol Farr and Elizabeth Mullins (Routledge, 2019), 151.

<sup>28</sup> Douglas Maclean, "Early Medieval Sculpture in the West Highlands and Islands of Scotland." (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 1985), 316, 322, 478-9.

<sup>29</sup> Maclean, "Early Medieval Sculpture in the West Highlands and Islands of Scotland," 366.

asks how far the symbolic aspirations evident in the Iona corpus—above all the fusion of architectural form, biblical narrative, and devotional ornament—also shaped the conception and reception of capstones on Irish soil.

Carol Farr complements this by showing that Insular ornament, such as spiral, interlace, and colour, also worked exegetically. Far from decorative excess, such complexity deliberately slowed perception, redirecting the viewer into contemplative practice.<sup>30</sup> Non-figural elements therefore reinforced the same theological work as figural panels. Read together with O'Reilly, this establishes a robust methodological frame: Insular art (manuscript and monumental) was multivalent, designed for typological thought, liturgical use, and graduated audiences. Éamonn Ó Carragáin extends this hermeneutic to the high crosses themselves. Irish and Anglo-Saxon crosses, he argues, are exegetical monuments arranged to expound Scripture and doctrine in place.<sup>31</sup> Pairings such as Crucifixion and Last Judgement work typologically, recapitulating salvation history and orienting the viewer toward eschatological hope.<sup>32</sup> Crucially, for Ó Carragáin, images were lived with in monastic space—read in procession, addressed in daily prayer, and encountered across patterned routes and shifting light.<sup>33</sup> Crosses were thus open books in the landscape, where image, inscription, and siting were mutually constitutive.

The most contested pieces in this hermeneutic are the so-called 'secular' panels (horsemen, chariots, decapitations). Early interpreters such as Porter and, in

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<sup>30</sup> Carol Farr, "Liturgical Influences on the Decoration of the Book of Kells," in *Studies in Insular Art and Archaeology*, ed. by Catherine Karkov and Robert Farrell (Oxford University Press, 1991), 131–37. See also: Carol A. Farr, *The Book of Kells: Its Function and Audience* (British Library, 1997).

<sup>31</sup> Éamonn Ó Carragáin, "Recapitulating History: Context for the Mysterious Moment of Resurrection on Irish High Crosses," in *Making Histories: Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference on Medieval Art*, ed. by Jane Hawkes (Shaun Tyas, 2013), 246.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Ó Carragáin, "Recapitulating History," 247.

her earlier writings, Françoise Henry, saw in these motifs survivals of Celtic heroic tradition, including the cult of the severed head.<sup>34</sup> Later scholars, including Máire and Liam de Paor, Carola Hicks, and Nancy Edwards, continued to emphasise saga resonances with the *Táin* and with raven-goddesses of war.<sup>35</sup> This ‘nativist’ line has been increasingly challenged: Helen Roe has already insisted that such imagery derived from Late Antique visual sources, assimilated into a Christian moral frame, and more recent work by scholars such as McCone, Ó Cróinín, Mytum, and especially Catherine Herbert has dismantled the entire pagan/Christian opposition, challenging the opposition as a false binary: monastic culture neither preserved pagan cultic survivals nor needed to compromise with them.<sup>36</sup> Within an exegetical and liturgical frame, such panels read more coherently as Davidic typology—David the warrior-king and psalmist as prototype of just rule under God and type of Christ.<sup>37</sup> On this reading, the Ahenny procession, for instance, aligns with the pervasive Psalter culture of Irish monasticism rather than with extra-ecclesial heroics. This is not to deny multivalence; rather, it locates multivalence inside Christian exegesis, where royal ideology, biblical exempla, and visual traditions of power interlock.

Such traditions of visual exegesis also frame the Clonmacnoise crosses. On the east face of the Cross of the Scriptures, the foundation panel depicts a cleric and a secular figure raising a stake, and scholars debate whether these represent Abbot

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<sup>34</sup> Porter, *Crosses and Culture of Ireland*; Henry, *La sculpture irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles de l'ère Chrétienne*, 1:118; Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period*, 155.

<sup>35</sup> Máire de Paor and Liam de Paor, *Early Christian Ireland* (Thames and Hudson, 1958), 144; Carola Hicks, *Animals in Early Medieval Art* (Edinburgh University Press, 1993), 184; Edwards, “An Early Group of Crosses from the Kingdom of Ossory,” 28–29.

<sup>36</sup> Catherine Herbert, “Psalms in Stone: Royalty and Spirituality on Irish High Crosses.” PhD diss., University of Delaware, 1997, 8, 20.

<sup>37</sup> Herbert, “Psalms in Stone,” 20.

Colman and King Flann (tenth century) or St Ciarán and Diarmait (sixth century).<sup>38</sup> The Vita of Ciarán recounts precisely such an episode, with the saint placing his hand over Diarmait's, declaring, 'Warrior suffer my hand to be over thy hand, and thou shalt be over the men of Ireland in high kingship.'<sup>39</sup> Read multivalently, the panel deliberately conflates both traditions, aligning Colman and Flann with their saintly predecessors, and binding dynastic memory to biblical and hagiographical typology.<sup>40</sup> The Hand of God at Clonmacnoise works in similar fashion. Carved beneath the cross-arm, it occupies a liminal position at the juncture of shaft, ring, and sky. Suspended over the audience, it is at once benedictory and protective, inviting each viewer to imagine themselves addressed by God.<sup>41</sup> Its ambiguity—left hand lowered to earth or right hand raised to heaven—collapses temporal distinctions, conveying God's omnipresence in heaven, on earth, and among the dead awaiting resurrection.<sup>42</sup> Animated by shifting light and shadow, the Hand echoes the shimmering instability of manuscript ornament such as the Chi-Rho page or the *Codex Aureus*, producing a cognitive sense of divine mystery. By day, it casts its shadow over the angelic shelter below, recalling Exodus 33:22 and psalms that describe God's hand and wings as protection. Together, these panels demonstrate how Irish high crosses staged a multivalent visual programme: part biblical exegesis, part dynastic claim, part liturgical presence.

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<sup>38</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 169.

<sup>39</sup> Heather Pulliam, "Between the Embodied Eye and Living World: Clonmacnoise's Cross of the Scriptures," *The Art Bulletin* 103, no. 1 (2020): 6.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Pulliam, "Between the embodied eye and living world," 18; Robert Macalister, *The Latin & Irish lives of Ciaran* (Macmillan, 1921), 91; Whitley Stokes, *Lives of Saints from the Book of Lismore* (Clarendon Press, 1890), 130.

<sup>42</sup> Pulliam, "Between the embodied eye and living world," 18

### **Bede's Temple and Tabernacle: Architecture as Ecclesiology**

While these scholars establish the exegetical, liturgical, and dynastic frameworks through which high crosses were read, their focus remains largely on figural panels and ornament. Yet the crosses are not only images but buildings in miniature: to understand the capstone's architectural and theological function, we must turn to the early medieval tradition of reading sacred architecture exegetically. For early medieval writers, architecture itself was a scriptural medium, and no author articulates this more comprehensively than Bede. His companion treatises *De Tabernaculo* and *De Templo* offer a complete model of how sacred buildings were understood as symbolic structures revealing the mysteries of the Church, the Incarnation, and the heavenly Jerusalem. Bede opens *De Templo* with a striking assertion: the building erected by Solomon 'was made as a figure of the holy universal Church,' a Church stretching 'from the first of the elect to the last to be born at the end of the world,' partly still 'in pilgrimage on earth' and partly already reigning 'in the heavenly fatherland.'<sup>43</sup> For Bede, the material temple signifies Christ himself—the temple of his body—as well as the faithful, who become the 'living stones' built upon him, the precious cornerstone.<sup>44</sup> Crucially, Bede insists that the building's features can signify different subjects in different respects: in some respects the temple prefigures Christ; in others, the elect; in others, the angels, in others again, human moral struggle and 'the invincible patience of mankind.'<sup>45</sup> Architecture, then, is a system of layered significations in which multiple referents coexist—a conceptualisation entirely consonant with the multivalent visuality that O'Reilly has identified in Insular illumination.

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<sup>43</sup> Bede, *On the Temple*, trans. by Seán Connolly (Liverpool University Press, 1995), 5 (Book 1.1).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Bede, *On the Temple*, 6 (Book 1.1).

In Bede's parallel treatise on the Tabernacle, the same symbolic logic is extended to the mobile sanctuary of Exodus. The tabernacle acted as a 'portable shrine that served as the principal sign of God's presence', and was a contrast to the temple: Bede treated these two structures as types, respectively, of the Church militant and the Church triumphant; the former was carried through the wilderness, while the latter remained stationary in the promised land of Jerusalem.<sup>46</sup> Their difference is therefore not one of essence, but of temporal and spatial mode: the tabernacle as Church-in-motion; the temple as Church-at-rest. This distinction has particular resonance in the Irish context, where founder-saints' portable shrines, bells, and books enacted a tabernacle-like sanctity in motion, circulating between boundaries, fairs, and ritual assemblies, while monumental stone crosses functioned as fixed, temple-like anchors of presence in ecclesiastical and dynastic centres. Bede's model provides a crucial methodological precedent for interpreting the high crosses. If the Temple is simultaneously Christological, ecclesiological, angelological, moral, and eschatological, with its upper sanctuaries figuring heavenly rest while its lower courts signify earthly struggle, then the formal and architectural elements of the Irish high crosses can likewise be understood within a vertically organised symbolic hierarchy. Their decorated shafts, crowded with Passion cycles, Davidic kingship, apostolic authority, and local hagiography, align with Bede's vision of the Church in pilgrimage: the arduous passage toward salvation, marked by conflict, temptation, and divine aid. The capstone, by contrast, corresponds to the upper sanctuary of Bede's temple: a point of concentrated presence and intercession, visualising the heavenly Jerusalem, the rest of the saints, and the culminating unity of the Church. Whether in the domed, Sepulchre-evoking

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<sup>46</sup> Bede, *On the Tabernacle*, trans. by Arthur G. Holder (Liverpool University Press, 1994), xix.

beehive caps of Ahenny or the shrine-like house caps of Clonmacnoise and Monasterboice, the capstone operates as the architectural locus where pilgrimage becomes fulfillment, where the earthly shaft ascends into an image of celestial stability.

In this way, Bede confirms that what Hilary Richardson described as the capstone's 'architectural theophany' is not an eccentric modern attribution but a recognisably early medieval hermeneutic. The high cross is not merely an iconographic programme carved in stone but an architectonic exegesis: a three-dimensional commentary on the same ecclesiological realities Bede finds in the Tabernacle and Temple. The capstone, crowning the monument, becomes the visible sign of this theological climax—a petrified Holy of Holies in the open air, where the Church's heavenly identity is most forcefully declared.

Taken together—O'Reilly's exegetical multivalence, Farr's devotional ornament, Ó Carragáin's liturgical monumentality, and Herbert's Davidic re-reading—establish the interpretative scaffolding for what follows. Their combined insights show that high crosses function not as static illustrations but as dynamic sites where text, image, and liturgy converge into a multivalent commentary. Yet these readings, for all their richness, operated within specific historical landscapes: if the exegetical frame explains *how* images were read, the ecclesiastical and political frameworks explain *why* certain programmes were chosen and monumentalised. Panels of David as warrior-king, or apostles transposed into Insular bishops, did not arise in a vacuum: they intersected with the rival claims of Ireland's great paruchia. The federations of Armagh, Iona/Columba, and Clonmacnoise offered competing frameworks of sanctity and legitimacy, shaping monumental programmes as much as they shaped texts, liturgy, and cult. The Iona

School crosses belong within this same landscape: monumental statements of Columban authority in a key nodal monastery, demonstrating how sculptural form, biblical iconography, and ornamental richness materialised paruchial claims in stone. The subsequent development of the Irish high crosses—and especially capstone-bearing examples in territories contested between Columban, Patrician, and other networks—must therefore be understood not in isolation, but as part of a wider Insular conversation in which Iona played a formative role.

To understand the capstone crosses, therefore, we must first situate them within this wider ecclesiastical context. Alongside dynastic kingdoms, the early Irish church was structured by powerful federations of monasteries known as *paruchia*.<sup>47</sup> Unlike later diocesan parishes, these were trans-regional networks bound to the authority of a founding saint, most notably Patrick, Columba, Brigid, and Ciarán. As T. M. Charles-Edwards and Colmán Etchingham have shown, these federations were as much political as spiritual, offering rulers prestige and legitimacy while securing wealth and protection for the churches they patronised: Charles-Edwards noted how ‘a great church and a great saint could offer a powerful focus of unity, capable of sustaining widely scattered people.’<sup>48</sup> Kings sought monastic endorsement to strengthen their claims, while monasteries, in turn, mobilised hagiography, relics, and monumental art to assert authority within Ireland’s fragmented political landscape. This framework of overlapping dynastic and ecclesiastical networks is essential for reading high crosses, which function not

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<sup>47</sup> Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland*, 166; Richard Sharpe, “Some Problems Concerning the Organisation of the Church in Early Medieval Ireland,” *Peritia* 3 (1984): 241; Colmán Etchingham, ‘The Implications of Paruchia,’ *Ériu* 44 (1993): 139.

<sup>48</sup> Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 14; Etchingham, “The Implications of Paruchia,” 147.

only as exegetical monuments but also as statements of patronage within rival spheres of power. It is in this light that the significance of the capstone becomes most visible; crowning the monument with a form that evoked the Holy Sepulchre, or a reliquary shrine was never a neutral gesture. The capstone condensed and materialised the very negotiations outlined above: rival paruchia, dynastic sponsorship, links to saints, and exegetical multivalence were gathered and declared at the summit of the cross. Before turning to detailed analysis of the crosses themselves, then, we will discuss how the capstone crystallised the intersection of exegesis and ecclesiastical rivalry, providing the architectural and theological ‘crown’ through which sovereignty and sanctity were most forcefully proclaimed.

Alongside exegetical and iconographic approaches, a further strand of scholarship reframes early medieval devotion as the making of sacred space through ritual, relics, and movement. Karen Overbey’s notion of sacral geographies—indebted to Lefebvre’s triad of spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces—argues that Irish holy places were not merely sites on a map but performed environments produced by processions, oaths, circuits, and stories (pilgrimage rounds, translations, foundation narratives): in other words, shrines, monasteries and churches get their meaning through how they are used and understood, rather than purely through their physical form.<sup>49</sup> In this view, shrines, reliquaries, and their replicas did not simply occupy space; they generated it, structuring approach, access, and authority through repeated use and communal memory. This framework clarifies why the Irish cult of saints, while linked to Rome through imported apostolic relics (e.g., Peter and Paul), developed a distinctive emphasis on founder-saints (Patrick, Brigit, Columba, Ciarán) and on associate or

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<sup>49</sup> Karen Overbey, *Sacral Geographies: Saints, Shrines, and Territory in Medieval Ireland* (Brepols, 2012), 9, 49, 82.

portable relics (bells, books, crosiers, shrines).<sup>50</sup> As Bitel and others have shown, founders' shrines functioned as loci of ongoing presence, often integrated architecturally into liturgical space, as seen at Kildare, so that the saint's body—and by extension the community formed around it—mediated between altar and laity.<sup>51</sup> Crucially, because relics and shrines were mobile as well as fixed, Irish sacred landscapes remained fluid: holy power could be enacted at boundaries, fairs, and processional stations as much as at the altar itself.<sup>52</sup> These dynamics of sacred space—its mobility, permeability, and ritual activation—gain further interpretative sharpness when read through Bede's distinction between the Tabernacle and the Temple. In *De Tabernaculo*, the portable sanctuary, carried 'on the route by which one reaches the land of promise', signifies the Church in transit: a community defined by movement, labour, and the uncertainties of pilgrimage, whereas the Jerusalem Temple, founded 'in the land of promise itself' on a 'royal and inviolable foundation', figures the Church in its settled, consummated mode.<sup>53</sup> This pairing maps with remarkable precision onto the Irish cult of saints. Portable shrines, book-cases, bells, and crosiers behave in practice like Bede's tabernacle: they produce sanctity in motion, carried through landscapes, brought to assemblies, invoked at boundaries, and activated in legal or devotional performance. Their holiness is not tethered to a fixed point but enacted relationally—its authority depends on the routes travelled and the communities encountered. The high cross, by contrast, corresponds to the temple end of Bede's spectrum. Erected at nodal points of paruchial and dynastic authority,

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<sup>50</sup> Overbey, *Sacral Geographies*, 1.

<sup>51</sup> Lisa Bitel, *Isle of the Saints: Monastic Settlement and Christian Community in Early Medieval Ireland* (Cornell University Press, 1990), 83; Overbey, *Sacral Geographies*, 128.

<sup>52</sup> Overbey, *Sacral Geographies*, 49; Patrick Geary, *Furta Sancta: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton University Press, 1990), 5; Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall (University of California Press, 1984), 115.

<sup>53</sup> Bede, *On the Temple*, 6 (Book 1.2).

these monuments localise sanctity, fixing in stone the logic of the mobile shrine and marking sites where sacred presence has come to rest and claim territory.

The capstone intensifies this effect. If the portable shrine is the tabernacle's analogue—a container whose holiness moves—the capstone is the analogue of the temple's settled sanctuary. Its architectural language, whether beehive dome or house-shaped reliquary, performs precisely what Bede associates with the Temple: the consolidation of divine presence at the summit of a sacred structure. Crowning the cross, the capstone declares that this point in the landscape is not merely visited by sanctity but inhabited by it; that the relic-logic of Irish devotion has here reached its moment of rest. In this sense, the capstone is not only a miniature shrine but the visual hinge between mobility and emplacement—a device that arrests the tabernacle's motion and translates it into the stability of the temple. Through Bede's lens, therefore, the high cross becomes an instrument of territorial holiness: a monument in which the fluid, ambulatory sacrality of the Irish shrine tradition is gathered, concentrated, and made architecturally permanent.

Seen through this lens, the high cross is not only a visual exegesis in stone but a device for producing sacred space in the open air. Its siting at thresholds, its role in circuits and preaching, and its dialogue with relic-culture align it with what Overbey terms the social production of the sacred: the cross marks, mediates, and authorises access.<sup>54</sup> This framing also sharpens the political dimension: Armagh's Roman affiliations (Petrine relics) and Columban or Ciarán networks likewise deployed material signs—portable shrines, oath-relics, monumental crosses—to map claims over people and territory.

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<sup>54</sup> Overbey, *Sacral Geographies*, 4.

This study extends that insight to the capstone. If portable reliquaries created sacral geographies in motion, capstones operate as their fixed counterparts petrified, visible crowns that stabilise those geographies in place. Whether evoking the Anastasis dome or a house-shaped shrine, the capstone localises universal topography—making Jerusalem present here—and concentrates the monument’s intercessory function at its summit. Read with inscriptions and iconography, capstones become architectural hinges where exegesis, relic-logic, and ecclesiastical rivalry converge. On this view, the crown of the cross is not an appendage but the spatial instrument through which sovereignty and sanctity are publicly negotiated.

### **The Capstones**

As we have seen, interpretations of and explanations for the capstones have thus far been few and far between, and, where they exist, remain largely descriptive: George Petrie attempted an early analysis, albeit brief, comparing them to *clochán* huts on the Dingle Peninsula, and therefore aligning them with monastic architecture.<sup>55</sup> He suggested that, like early churches, which he believed to have evolved from wood to stone, the capstones represented a monastic form deeply rooted in Irish tradition and ‘in almost entire independence of Roman traditions of building.’<sup>56</sup> However, this reading is weakened by the limited geographical distribution of *clochans*, the lack of direct architectural parallels across Ireland, and Petrie’s broader romantic-nationalist framing.<sup>57</sup> His claim of cultural isolation is also difficult to maintain in light of

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<sup>55</sup> George Petrie, *The Ecclesiastical Architecture of Ireland, Anterior to the Anglo-Norman Invasion: Comprising an Essay on the Origin and Uses of the Round Towers of Ireland* (Hodges and Smith, 1945), 215.

<sup>56</sup> Harold G Leask, *Irish Churches and Monastic Buildings*, (Dunagan Press (W. Tempest) Ltd, 1958), 1.

<sup>57</sup> Ó Carragáin, *Churches in Early Medieval Ireland*, 49.

growing evidence of sustained contact between Ireland and the Continent throughout the early medieval period. There is also a key element missing from Petrie's discussion: though he argues *what* the capstones may represent, he refrains from considering *why* this is the case. The connection between capstones and architecture is more convincingly echoed in the work of Stalley and Tomás Ó Carragáin, the former of whom has described the capstones at Monasterboice as taking the form of a 'miniature church or shrine, speculating about relic placement, but without sustained theological exploration.'<sup>58</sup> Both have also noted that there has been debate over whether the capstones were intended to replicate a *dairtech* (timber churches or 'oak houses').<sup>59</sup> All of these readings vary from architectural analogy to practical explanation, but they share two limitations: they are almost always descriptive, not analytical, and they rarely address the symbolic programme of the monument in which the capstone appears. As with Petrie's analysis, the question of *why* a capstone takes a specific form, *in a specific place, at a specific time*, remains unanswered.

While no study treats the capstone as a deliberate, symbolically charged element integrated into the cross's theological and political messaging, the work of Hilary Richardson makes the strongest attempt to address these questions, and there are two primary claims that define her contribution. First, she proposed that certain capstones (especially the Ahenny beehive forms) allude architecturally to the Anastasis—the rotunda covering the Holy Sepulchre, enclosing the tomb of Christ—thereby crowning the cross with an architectural sign of resurrection and

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<sup>58</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 19.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, Ó Carragáin, *Churches in Early Medieval Ireland*, 22, 29-30.

the Triumph of the Cross.<sup>60</sup> Second, she widened the comparative horizon, pointing to eastern

Christian and Caucasian parallels (pre-altar crosses in Georgia with conical ‘caps’), and to house-shaped shrines and oratory forms in Ireland: she expands this link to Jerusalem by noting the similarities between the house or shrine shaped reliquaries and the picture of Solomon’s Temple in the Book of Kells, and the shrine or house build by Constantine to mark the place of Christ’s resurrection,<sup>61</sup> thereby linking cross form, biblical topography, and reliquary symbolism.<sup>62</sup> In her argument, the capstones, therefore, stand for ‘Sion, the Heavenly City and the New Jerusalem’.<sup>63</sup> However, while Richardson’s arguments are both rich and suggestive, they do not fully consider certain contextual factors — such as why some clusters, namely Ahenny and Kilkieran, adopt beehive forms, while others — Clonmacnoise, Durrow, Monasterboice and Killamery — favour house-forms, or why capstones concentrate at sites implicated in Uí Néill and Columban/Patrician politics. Nor did Richardson model how capstones interact with specific iconographies on the shaft (e.g., *Traditio Clavium* or David cycles).

To develop Richardson’s insight further, we require a hermeneutic that explains how architecture itself functioned as sacred sign, and Bede offers precisely this. In *De Templo*, Bede repeatedly locates the most intense signs of divine presence at the innermost and uppermost points of the building: the Holy of Holies, the Ark and its mercy seat, the overshadowing cherubim, and the crowning

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<sup>60</sup> Hilary Richardson, “The Concept of the High Cross,” in *Ireland and Europe: The Early Church*, ed. by Próinséas Ní Chatháin and Maire Herbert (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1984), 127–34; Richardson and John Scarry, *An Introduction to Irish High Crosses*, 25–26.

<sup>61</sup> Richardson and Scarry, *An Introduction to Irish High Crosses*, 25

<sup>62</sup> Richardson and Scarry, *An Introduction to Irish High Crosses*, 26

<sup>63</sup> Richardson and Scarry, *An Introduction to Irish High Crosses*, 25

structure of the house itself. These zones mark, in his reading, the juncture where heaven and earth meet—where Christ the cornerstone, the angelic liturgy, and the perfected Church converge in a single image of indwelling glory. The ascent from outer court through Holy Place to inner sanctuary is thus not only spatial but spiritual, tracing a movement from the labour of the pilgrim Church to the rest and vision of the saints.

Transposed to the Irish high crosses, this vertical hierarchy clarifies the symbolic work of the capstone. The shaft, with its Passion cycles, Davidic kingship, Petrine imagery, and sometimes raw scenes of conflict or judgement, belongs to the ‘outer’ and ‘middle’ zones of Bede’s scheme: it represents the Church *in via*, that is, the Church on its earthly pilgrimage, engaged in struggle, discipline, and royal negotiation. The capstone, by contrast, occupies the position of the upper sanctuary. Positioned at the highest point of the monument, it functions as a surrogate Holy of Holies in the open air—the place where the cross’s narrative and political claims are gathered up into a sign of consummated presence and intercession.

The formal language of the capstones reinforces this reading. The beehive caps of Ahenny and Kilkieran, whose domed profiles recall contemporary evocations of the Anastasis over the Holy Sepulchre, are readily legible as figures of the resurrected Christ and the heavenly Jerusalem. The house-shaped caps at Clonmacnoise, Monasterboice, Durrow, and Killamery, echoing reliquary shrines and oratories, make the same point in a slightly different register: they materialise Bede’s image of the Church as a house of living stones, completed and crowned. In both cases, the capstone expresses the symbolism associated with the Temple’s upper sanctuary through Insular architectural form. It is not simply Jerusalem in

miniature in a general sense, but the Jerusalem-above—the settled, temple-mode of the Church that Bede opposes to the wandering tabernacle.

This has direct implications for the political readings of the crosses: when Uí Néill rulers inscribe their names beneath such capstones—on monuments that already stage Petrine succession, Davidic kingship, and resurrection—they are effectively situating their own authority within the Bedan temple diagram. The king appears not only as patron of a shrine, but as a Solomonic figure whose rule is architecturally aligned with the completed house of God. The capstone makes this move visible. It crowns royal and monastic names with an image of the heavenly sanctuary, suggesting that dynastic claims are not merely adjacent to sanctity, but structurally integrated into the Church’s ascent from earthly struggle to celestial rest. In this way the capstone becomes the crucial hinge between the cross’s exegetical programme and its political theology: a small architectural element that visually resolves pilgrimage into temple, conflict into stability, and local kingship into participation in the universal Church.

This thesis therefore adopts Richardson’s core insight—that the capstone is an architectural theophany—and integrates it with three key elements: iconographic choice (especially the *Traditio Clavium*), epigraphy (royal and abbatial inscriptions), and landscape strategy (crosses tend to be placed at boundaries and within key locations of monastic and ecclesiastical sites). In this composite reading, a capstone is not merely “Jerusalem in miniature”; it is the place where access is signified. As we will discuss, Petrine imagery, and particularly the *Traditio Clavium*, are key elements of this discussion: when read with this scene, the capstone becomes the visual threshold that turns a cross into a public reliquary-shrine—a locus of intercession whose imagery both validates local rule (Petrine

succession and episcopal/abbatial mediation) and stages salvation (resurrection space crowning Passion space).

### **Debates Around the House-Shaped Shrine: Chrismal or Reliquary?**

To contextualise the architectural vocabulary of these capstones more fully, it is necessary to turn to the long-running debates surrounding house-shaped shrines and related forms. As noted above, scholars have repeatedly drawn parallels between capstones and a range of early medieval structures: George Petrie likened them to monastic clochán huts, while Roger Stalley suggested they resembled miniature churches or shrines, speculating about relic associations.<sup>64</sup> Tomás Ó Carragáin has pointed to possible links with *dairthechs* (timber ‘oak-houses’), while Hilary Richardson proposed a more expansive interpretation, aligning capstones with reliquary language, and with the domed *Anastasis* of the Holy Sepulchre, thereby suggesting they signified resurrection and Jerusalem.<sup>65</sup> Ragnall Ó Floinn’s influential work on house-shaped shrines further underscores their prominence in early medieval Ireland, even if he did not extend his analysis to the capstones.<sup>66</sup> Taken together, these studies reveal a persistent recognition that the capstones evoke shrines, oratories, or martyria. Yet the debate has remained largely descriptive, cataloguing formal analogies without addressing how these architectural correspondences functioned within the symbolic and theological programme of the cross. In other words, while earlier scholarship has frequently noted what capstones resemble, it has seldom asked why those shapes

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<sup>64</sup> Petrie, *The Ecclesiastical Architecture of Ireland*, 215; Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 19.

<sup>65</sup> Ó Carragáin, *Churches in Early Medieval Ireland*, 22, 29-30; Richardson and Scarry, *An Introduction to Irish High Crosses*, 25-26

<sup>66</sup> Ragnall Ó Floinn, “A Fragmentary House-Shaped Shrine from Clonard, Co. Meath,” *Journal of Irish Archaeology* 5 (1980–90): 52.

appear at specific sites, in specific political contexts, or in dialogue with inscriptions and iconographic schemes. As a result, the capstone has remained curiously marginal—it is acknowledged architecturally but rarely integrated into broader interpretative models.

This lacuna stands in contrast to the wider historiography of the Irish high crosses. From Petrie's nationalist antiquarianism and Porter's mythological readings, through Henry and Harbison's continental comparanda, to the contextual and exegetical approaches of O'Reilly, Farr, and Ó Carragáin, scholarship has progressively redefined the high cross as a complex instrument of theology, liturgy, and politics embedded within lived landscapes. Yet across this diverse body of research, the capstone continues to occupy a peripheral position. Its resemblance to huts, oratories, and reliquaries has been noted; its architectural and theological promise has been glimpsed, particularly by Richardson; but it has seldom been analysed as an integral part of the monument's overall meaning.

It is precisely within this gap that the present study situates itself. Building on the exegetical hermeneutics developed by O'Reilly, Farr, and Ó Carragáin, and attentive to the political readings advanced by Stalley, Herbert, and others, this thesis argues that the capstones are not marginal embellishments but architectural crowns that concentrate and declare the theological, political, and liturgical significance of the high cross. By reframing capstones as visible reliquaries, miniature Jerusalems, and intercessory thresholds, the study proposes a new grammar for reading these monuments in their fullness. The chapters that follow apply this interpretative framework to the principal capstone-bearing crosses, demonstrating how architecture, iconography, and political geography converge in these extraordinary monuments.

## Chapter 2: The Ossory Group of Capstone Crosses

The Ossory group of high crosses centres on the site of Ahenny, where two monuments—the North and South crosses—still stand. Three further examples survive nearby at Kilkieran, Kilree, and Killamery, together forming a distinctive regional cluster unified by their striking use of capstones. Most adopt the unusual beehive form, while the Killamery cross preserves a house-shaped variant and carries an inscription naming Máel Sechnaill, anchoring the group within the political networks of the tenth century.

In what follows, I use the term *capstone cross* to describe ringed crosses crowned by beehive or house-shaped caps—forms that evoke *clocháin*, reliquary containers, or the Anastasis dome. The term signals not a single origin, but a constellation of related architectural and symbolic strategies that recur across these monuments. A description of these crosses at the outset allows their shared formal and iconographic features to establish the parameters of what this thesis identifies as the ‘capstone cross’ tradition; by outlining their sites, forms, and inscriptions, we can see how this group crystallises key themes of the study: the relationship between monument and landscape, the interplay of dynastic and ecclesiastical patronage, and the deliberate use of sculptural form to materialise theological and political claims. The Ossory crosses thus serve as a key starting point for examining how capstones functioned both as distinctive artistic features and as markers of sanctity and sovereignty in early medieval Ireland.

Although regionally distinctive, the Ossory capstone crosses must also be situated within the broader Insular sculptural tradition shaped by the so-called Iona School. The ringed cross form itself, first realised in stone on Iona, provided the architectural template for later Irish high crosses, including those at Ahenny and its

satellite sites. Iona's free-standing crosses established not only the circular ring as a structural and symbolic device, but also a shared repertoire of biblical scenes—among them the Virgin and Child, Daniel in the Lions' Den, Cain and Abel, and the Sacrifice of Abraham—as well as an ornamental vocabulary of interlace, spirals, key-patterns, serpents, and bosses that circulated between stone sculpture, metalwork, and manuscripts.<sup>67</sup> The close stylistic and iconographic affinities between the Iona crosses and manuscripts associated with the Columban milieu, most famously the Book of Kells, indicate that Irish workshops operated within an already dense network of artistic and exegetical exchange. The Ossory group participates fully in this Iona-inflected language of ringed form, relief carving, and ornamental richness; what distinguishes it is the way this shared Insular grammar is brought to bear on the summit of the monument through the addition of capstones. In this sense, the Ahenny and Ossory monuments do not stand apart from the Iona tradition but extend it vertically, developing the ringed cross into a deliberately capped, shrine-like form whose theological and political implications have yet to be fully explored; this is the purpose of this discussion.

Before turning to a face-by-face analysis of the Ahenny monuments, it is worth pausing on the role of animal imagery, since its interpretation exposes many of the methodological tensions—stylistic, archaeological, and exegetical—that shape how the Ossory crosses should be read. Earlier scholarship often treated such animals as either decorative filler or survivals of a heroic, 'pagan' mentality, especially when birds and beasts cluster around riders or corpses. Porter, Henry and the de Paors all saw resonances with saga material and the cult of the severed head,

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<sup>67</sup> Maclean, *Early Medieval Sculpture in the West Highlands and Islands of Scotland*, 366.

whereas Hicks, and more recently Herbert and Edwards, have pressed for explicitly Christian, exegetical readings of the same motifs.<sup>68</sup> As Carola Hicks has observed, the same carvings have often produced divergent conclusions: art historians have traditionally emphasised style, sequence, and formal development, while archaeologists have prioritised cultural function, dating, and social context.<sup>69</sup> Pursued in isolation, both approaches flatten the complexity of these monuments: stylistic analysis risks detaching them from their lived context, while archaeological reductionism can dismiss richly ornamented crosses as anomalies. A fuller understanding requires both perspectives, and Hicks's work on animals in early medieval art offers a productive way forward. She insists that recognisable animals—quadrupeds in profile with hooves, manes, or feathers clearly delineated—were not marginal embellishments but recurrent elements of Insular visual culture.<sup>70</sup> Their appearance across sculpture, manuscripts, and metalwork suggests a shared symbolic vocabulary, one that was simultaneously decorative, didactic, and commemorative. On the Ahenny South Cross, for instance, the corpse borne on a horse with ravens above has sometimes been read through Celtic head-cult traditions, or as a literal battlefield scene.<sup>71</sup> Yet Hicks encourages us to see the birds not as secular intrusions, but as polyvalent symbols: recalling pagan associations with war, while also invoking biblical motifs of death, judgement, and deliverance. Hunting imagery, too, was a universal visual shorthand, capable of moving fluidly between pagan and Christian registers. In Insular art it could allegorise the pursuit of the soul, the vigilance of Christ, or the Church's mission to

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<sup>68</sup> De Paor and De Paor, *Early Christian Ireland*, 144, 108; Hicks, *Animals in Early Medieval Art*, 184; Edwards, "An Early Group of Crosses from the Kingdom of Ossory," 29.

<sup>69</sup> Hicks, *Animals in Early Medieval Art*, 1.

<sup>70</sup> Hicks, *Animals in Early Medieval Art*, 3.

<sup>71</sup> Hicks, *Animals in Early Medieval Art*, 184.

‘capture’ converts.<sup>72</sup> For viewers steeped in bestiary lore, liturgical typology, and hagiographical narrative, such panels would not have appeared as secular digressions. Rather, they functioned as multivocal prompts for meditation—an interpretative mode fully consonant with O’Reilly’s ‘catena’ model, in which images accumulate meanings rather than exclude them, with Farr’s understanding of ornament as visual exegesis, and with Ó Carragáin’s emphasis on liturgical reception. From this perspective, the animals of the Ossory group were never intended as secular distractions. They are multivocal prompts for meditation, inviting audiences to read simultaneously in biblical, hagiographical, and local registers.

Hicks’s critique of stylistic chronology is equally crucial. The temptation has been to assume that the compacted, abstract animals of Ahenny must be early, while the more naturalistic beasts of Clonmacnoise or Monasterboice represent a later, more developed phase. Yet the epigraphic evidence places these groups closer in date than previously thought, and in any case recognisable and abstracted forms clearly coexisted, each carrying different symbolic demands.<sup>73</sup> At Ahenny, the consistent placement of animal panels at the base of the monuments underscores their structural as well as symbolic significance. Beasts, birds, clerics, and riders are juxtaposed to create visual *catenae*—chains of meaning that link the earthly to the eternal. Far from relics of pagan belief or decorative anomalies, these creatures participate in a cultural vocabulary in which animal imagery mediates between sacred theology and social life. Their position at the base is deliberate: they anchor the viewer at the threshold of creation, struggle, and mortality before the visual ascent

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<sup>72</sup> Hicks, *Animals in Early Medieval Art*, 175.

<sup>73</sup> Hicks, *Animals in Early Medieval Art*, 3.

through spiral ornament, apostolic mission, and dynastic claims, culminating in the capstone—where earthly disorder is shown gathered, ordered, and transfigured.

From this perspective, animal imagery is not a peripheral feature but a key to the programme as a whole. It initiates the theological and political readings that follow, demonstrating how even seemingly ‘secular’ or ambiguous motifs were absorbed into habits of exegesis and visual theology. The base imagery of Ahenny and Kilkieran thus provides an apt prelude to detailed analysis—beginning with the Ahenny North Cross, where Edenic motifs, apostolic mission, and dynastic overlays illustrate how multivocal interpretation operated in practice.

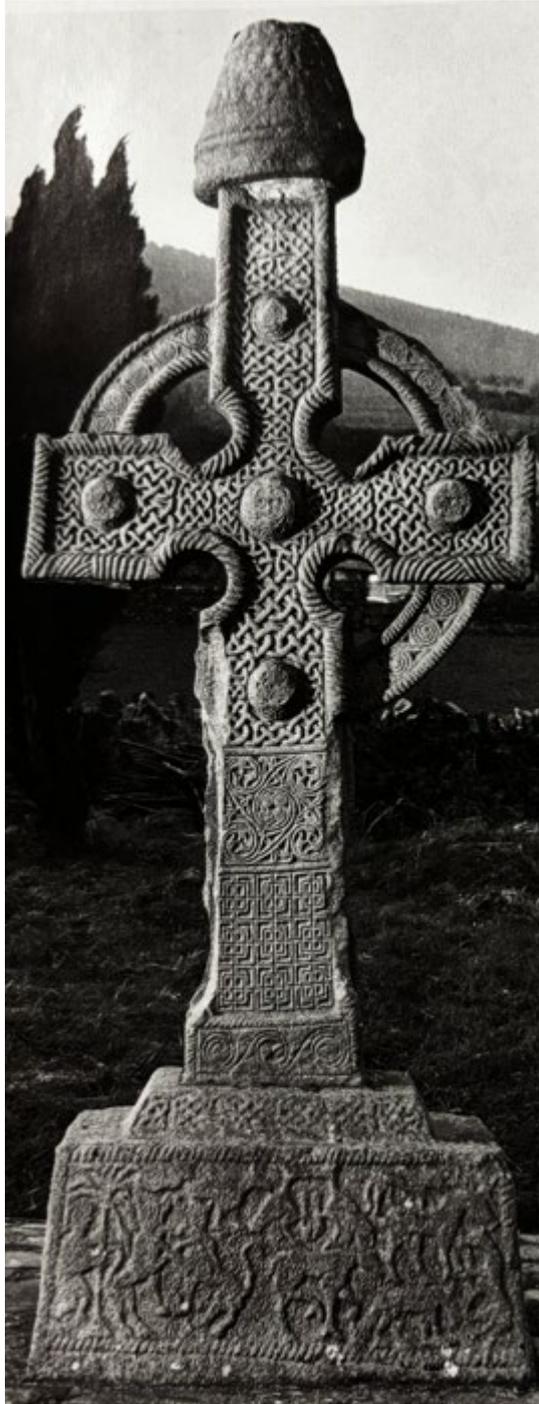
## 2.1 Ahenny North Cross

The North Cross (Figure 9) is the best preserved high cross example within the Ahenny group, retaining a good standard of carving despite its outdoor location. Its programme combines figural panels with dense interlace, spiral, and key-pattern ornament, articulated across a stepped base, a tall shaft, and a ringed head with bosses and a beehive capstone, which, as noted, Richardson has suggested may represent the Holy Sepulchre.<sup>74</sup> Other interpretations have included suggestions of a mitre from Porter, and Roe has questioned whether the capstone is native to the cross at all.<sup>75</sup> We will begin by analysing the decoration and iconography of the cross, before moving to explore the capstone more fully.

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<sup>74</sup> Richardson, “The Concept of the High Cross,” 130.

<sup>75</sup> Porter, *Crosses and Culture of Ireland*, 22, 22; Roe, *The High Crosses of Western Ossory*, 13



*Figure 9: North Cross at Ahenny, East Face*

### **East Face**

The base of the cross features figural decoration on the east face (Figure 10).



*Figure 9: North Cross at Ahenny, East Face Base*

The panel shows a single human figure placed slightly off-centre within a shallow rectangular frame, surrounded by a compact cluster of four-footed animals of similar scale. The beasts stand on a shared ground line and form a loose arc around the figure, their bodies kept parallel to the picture plane and their heads turned inward. Stylised trees or branching forms rise behind and beside the group, filling the background without enclosing the central figure. The scene is given a number of interpretations in the literature: as a hermit in retreat or Temptation scene, as a depiction of St Anthony, as the temptation of Christ in the desert, God creating the birds and beasts, Adam naming the animals, or, as concluded, the Garden of

Eden.<sup>76</sup> Other options have included non-Christian interpretations, such as a fairy man or Art, king of Tara, on his hunting mound.<sup>77</sup> Nancy Edwards supports the Edenic interpretation, aligning the composition and animal grouping with the Genesis cycles in the ninth-century *Alkuin-Bibel* (Bamberg Bible, Tours) and with a fourth-century north Italian diptych in which Adam sits in a tree observing beasts.<sup>78</sup> Alternatively, Henry proposed that the panel may depict a hermit, possibly a pilgrim dedicated to a solitary life of worship in the desert, set in a simplified wilderness, resonant with early ascetic vitae such as Paul and Anthony in the desert.<sup>79</sup> Heather Pulliam highlights scenes on Insular monuments where ‘beasts and men... sometimes shown attacking each other’ and interprets the panel as visualising moral disorder after the Fall of Man. Read this way, the panel stages the contested boundary between human and animal as an allegory of vice and virtue.<sup>80</sup> Similar motifs appear on the Ruthwell and Bewcastle crosses, where animals symbolically acknowledge Christ’s divinity, suggesting that this panel also represents a moment of spiritual recognition.

Taken together, these interpretations show the flexibility of the imagery, yet

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<sup>76</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 11; Henry S. Crawford, “A Descriptive List of the Early Irish Crosses,” *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 5th ser., 37, no. 2 (June 30, 1907): 187–239; H. S. Crawford, “The Crosses of Kilkieran and Ahenny,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 39 (1909): 256–60; H. S. Crawford, *Handbook of Carved Ornament from Irish Monuments of the Christian Period*, 1st ed. (Dublin: Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland, 1926), 77; Françoise Henry, *Early Christian Irish Art*, trans. by Máire MacDermott (Mercier Press, 1979), 21ff; Françoise Henry, “The Celtic Crosses of Slievenamon,” in *Romantic Slievenamon, in History, Folklore and Song* (1955): 88–90; Henry, “Les origines de l’iconographie irlandaise,” 89ff; Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period*, 153–3; Edwards, “An Early Group of Crosses from the Kingdom of Ossory,” 23; Roe, *The High Crosses of Western Ossory*, 6–3; B. Brandt-Förster, *Das Irische Hochkreuz: Ursprung, Entwicklung, Gestalt* (Stuttgart: Gestalt, 1928), 31ff.

<sup>77</sup> Elizabeth Hickey, *The Legend of Tara* (Dudalغان Press, 1955), 118–21.

<sup>78</sup> *Alkuin-Bibel* (834–43), Bamberg, Staatsbibliothek, Msc. Bibl. 1, fol. 7v, <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bvb:22-dtl-0000098100>; Edwards, “An Early Group of Crosses from the Kingdom of Ossory,” 23.

<sup>79</sup> Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period*, 153.

<sup>80</sup> Heather Pulliam, “Blood, Water and Stone: The Performative Cross,” in *Making Histories: Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference on Insular Art, York 2011*, ed. by Jane Hawkes (Donington: Paul Watkins Publishing, 2013), 262–78.

the Eden/Creation reading remains the most convincing primary identification. The panel lacks the usual cues of eremitic withdrawal—there is no cell, desert marker, or attribute such as a book, staff, or cross—and it does not exhibit the tension or violence that Pulliam’s post-lapsarian model requires. The animals do not attack or recoil; rather, they face the human figure with calmness and even spacing. The overall impression is one of ordered coexistence, more compatible with an Edenic or pre-lapsarian scene than with narratives of ascetic trial or moral chaos.

This does not, however, negate the secondary layers proposed by Henry or Pulliam: early medieval viewers, shaped by patristic exegesis, would not have expected a single, literal interpretation. As O’Reilly and others have shown, images were habitually read in multiple registers, and a medieval audience could therefore apprehend this panel simultaneously as a vision of Edenic harmony, as an allusion to the desert as a site of ascetic struggle, or as a moral allegory of the passions embodied in beasts. In this case, multivalence is not an interpretive escape hatch but a legitimate feature of the image, grounded in demonstrable early medieval habits of reading and supported by valid iconographic comparanda.

The upper step of the base on this side carries six panels of single-strand knotwork, initiating the façade’s alternation of rectilinear and curvilinear modes (Figure 11).

The plinth features three spirals, each composed of three strands: the connecting lines resemble vine scrolls seen elsewhere in Insular sculpture, such as the Bewcastle cross, reinforcing the concept of the cross as a living, organic creation. Above, the first panel of the shaft (Figure 12) depicts a rectilinear step pattern, consisting of nine squares, each containing four smaller squares, creating a meditative effect, with the interplay of high-relief carving and recessed areas

forming visual puzzles, as additional crosses emerge in the geometric framework.

Above this, the panel displays spirals in each corner that unfurl into three bird heads and converge upon a central spiral device, once again exploiting a play of five-part and four-part symmetries.<sup>81</sup>



*Figure 10: North Cross at Ahenny, East Face Plinth*

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<sup>81</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 11.

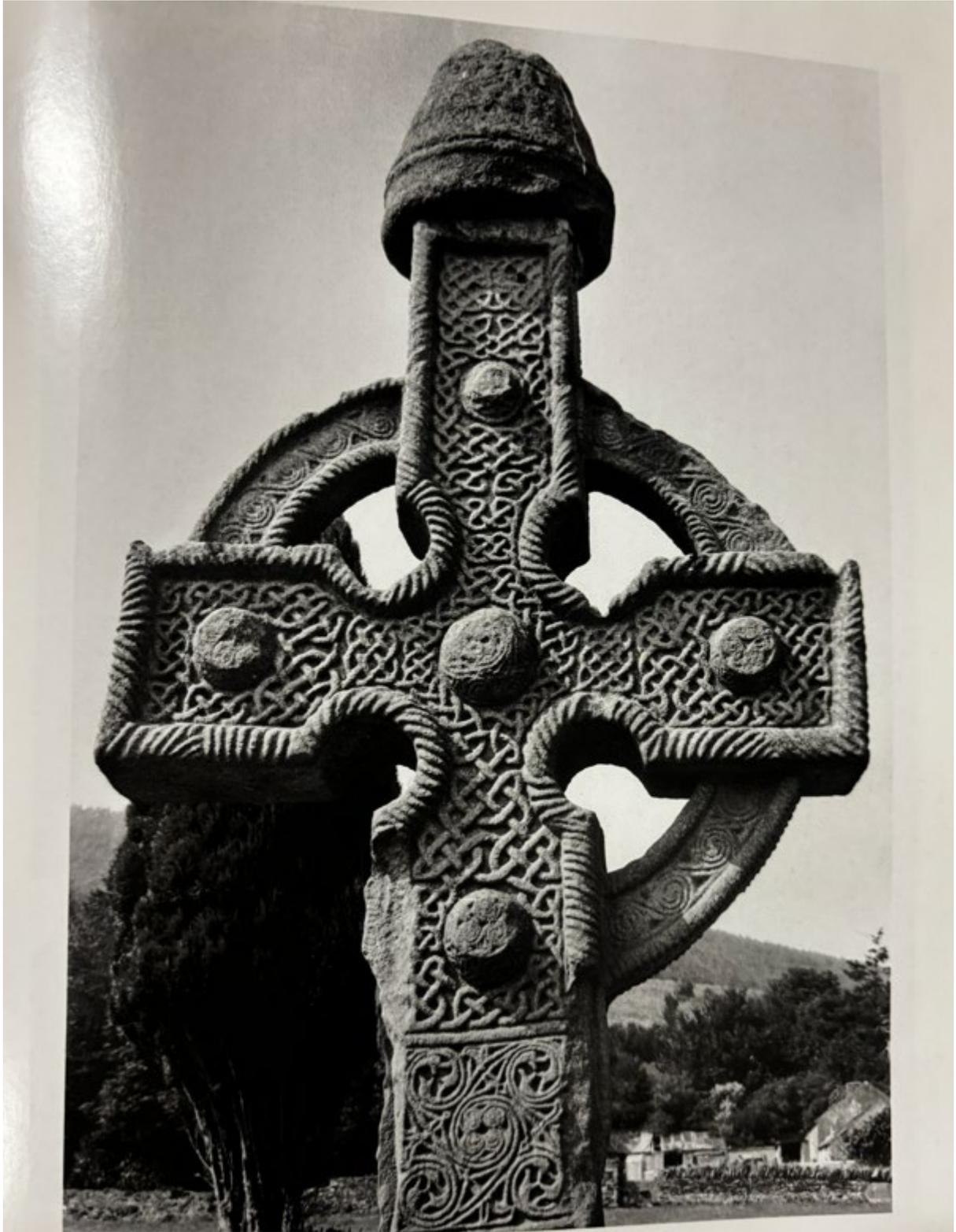


Figure 11: North Cross at Ahenny, East Face Shaft

The centre and arms of the cross head (Figure 13) are filled with single-strand knotwork in five fields, alongside five domed bosses, one on each arm, two on the shaft, and one in the centre. Harbison reads these bosses as skeuomorphic—stone analogues of metal bosses used to mask nail heads on wooden cores with metal revetment; Kelly counters that nails were not necessarily hidden and prefers a decorative/rivet-masking function, citing the Ardagh chalice.<sup>82</sup> Hawkes connects the bosses' interlace-sided, spiral-topped form to cast plaques with millefiori or glass insets.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>82</sup> Peter Harbison, "On Some Possible Sources of Irish High Cross Decoration," in *Festschrift zum 50-jährigen Bestehen des Vorgeschichtlichen Seminars Marburg*, ed. by Otto H. Frey and H. Roth, *Marburger Studien zur Vor- und Frühgeschichte* (Marburg: Kempkes, 1977), 283; Dorothy Kelly, "The Heart of the Matter: Models for the Irish High Crosses," *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 121 (1991): 131.

<sup>83</sup> Jane Hawkes, "Art and Society," in *The Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. 1, ed. by Brendan Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 77.



*Figure 12: North Cross at Ahenny, East Face Cross Head*

These proposals agree on one point: the bosses deliberately transpose metalwork idioms into stone, in line with the serpents-and-bosses vocabulary first developed on the Iona crosses and subsequently disseminated across the Irish high cross tradition.<sup>84</sup> Direct material proof is lacking, but typological convergence is strong; the safest claim is that the bosses signal the monument's conscious dialogue with high-status metalwork. The ring on the east face is carpeted with spiral ornament, visually tying the head to the spiral panels below. The moulding on the head's outer edge matches the base mouldings; breakage suggests the banding once continued further down the shaft, reinforcing a frame-within-frame logic.

### **West Face**

The west face of the cross reads as the main face of the monument (Figure 14). This side is distinguished by its elaborate bosses, figural ornament on the shaft, and a composition of standing figures on the base — a contrast to the figures in motion seen elsewhere (Figure 15). Here, seven figures are carved in relief: a central, frontal figure stands holding a book in his right hand, and he is flanked symmetrically by six others in profile, three on each side. Several of the flanking figures carry crosiers, marking them as ecclesiastical rather than secular and, most likely, Apostles. Though Porter identified the scene as having secular origins, depicting Cormac Mac Cuillenáin supported by six bishops, and Weir posits a possible interpretation of the scene as Patrick with ecclesiastics, this arrangement has long been identified as a version of Christ's Mission to the Apostles (Matt. 28:18–20), a subject also seen on the South Cross at Ahenny, as well as the Cross of

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<sup>84</sup> Maclean, *Early Medieval Sculpture in the West Highlands and Islands of Scotland*, 366.

Scriptures at Clonmacnoise.<sup>85</sup>

Figure 13: North Cross at Ahenny, West Face

<sup>85</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 11; Henry O'Neill, *Illustrations of the Most Interesting of the Sculptured Crosses of Ancient Ireland* (London: [Publisher not listed], 1857); Margaret Stokes and T. J. Westropp, *Notes on The High Crosses of Moone, Drumcliffe, Termonfechin and Killamery, Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1901), 576–77; Crawford, "The Crosses of Kilkieran and Ahenny," 256–60; Crawford, *Handbook of Carved Ornament*, 77; Porter, *Crosses and Culture of Ireland*, 20; Roe, *The High Crosses of Western Ossory*, 19–24; Henry, *Early Christian Irish Art*, 21ff; Henry, "The Celtic Crosses of Slievenamon," 88–90; Henry, "Les origines de l'iconographie irlandaise," 89ff; Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period*, 153–3; Edwards, "An Early Group of Crosses from the Kingdom of Ossory," 23; A. Weir, *Early Ireland: A Field Guide* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press Ltd, 1980), 201.



*Figure 14: North Cross at Ahenny, West Face Base*

This identification rests on strong evidence. The compositional schema appears at multiple high-cross sites, indicating that it formed part of a recognised monumental repertoire. The textual source—Matthew’s account of Christ’s post-resurrection commission, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me... Go therefore and make disciples of all nations’, was foundational for early medieval preaching and liturgy, making it especially apt for a didactic monument.<sup>86</sup> In addition, its repetition across the Ahenny pair further signals intentional selection by patrons and carvers. Alternative interpretations deserve brief consideration: readings that identify the figures as a memorial to seven bishops lack support: no martyrial attributes or funerary cues appear. Dynastic interpretations (Cormac mac Cuilennáin, Art mac Cuinn) reflect later reception rather than original iconographic design. These overlays, while historically interesting, do not displace the Mission

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<sup>86</sup> *The Bible*, Matthew 28:18–20.

reading; rather, they demonstrate the capacity of the scene to accrue additional resonances in local or dynastic contexts. The compositional grammar reinforces the apostolic reading. A single authoritative figure faces outward, flanked by smaller attendants whose scale and posture articulate hierarchy and reception. Their liturgical regalia ‘updates’ the apostles into the idiom of the Irish church—abbots or bishops—mirroring a wider tendency in the high-cross corpus to reframe apostolic authority through contemporary ecclesiastical structures. The scene is therefore not only a narrative of commissioning but a visual assertion of divine authority extending across both celestial and earthly realms. This layered interpretative potential is characteristic of the high crosses. As the capstone operates simultaneously as reliquary-sign, monastic symbol, and architectural apex, so too this Mission panel functions on multiple registers: as scriptural commission, as an assertion of ecclesiastical continuity, and, in some contexts, as a site of dynastic identification.<sup>87</sup> Together, these layers exemplify how the crosses materialise the fusion of sanctity and sovereignty that lies at the heart of this thesis. If the shaft articulates this logic horizontally—through narrative sequence, apostolic authority, and dynastic inflection—the capstone invites the viewer to complete the reading vertically. The eye is drawn upward, beyond the figural panels, to the architectural form that gathers and crowns the entire programme. It is here, at the summit, that the significance of the capstone must be considered.

It is at this point that the significance of the capstone itself must be considered more closely. The multivalence evident in the figural panels is echoed

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<sup>87</sup> Hickey, *The Legend of Tara*, 118–21; *Annal AI* 902; Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland 400–1200*, 254–55; Paul Russell, “Cormac mac Cuilennáin (d. 908),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online ed., accessed March 20, 2025, doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/6319; Grigory Bondarenko, “Conn Cétchathach and the Image of Ideal Kingship in Early Medieval Ireland,” *Studia Celtica Fennica* 4 (2007): 19–20; *Annal of the Four Masters* 122–157.

and concentrated in the crowning form: a shape that has long attracted competing readings. Porter and Henry stressed its resemblance to Irish *clocháin*, seeing in the beehive form an evocation of monastic enclosure and ascetic retreat; others have preferred to read it primarily through reliquary architecture, noting affinities with house-shaped shrine lids and strapped caps. Richardson, in turn, pressed the analogy with the Anastasis dome of the Holy Sepulchre, proposing the cap as a miniature echo of Christ's tomb in Jerusalem. Not all scholars are persuaded by the Jerusalem link, warning that domed or gabled forms can arise from local building practice without implying any specific topographical reference, and that excessive typology risks overburdening what may be a relatively simple architectural conceit. These cautions are important, because formal resemblance alone does not establish intended meaning: a beehive outline can recall a *clochán* as readily as the Anastasis; a gabled roof may evoke a generic *domus Dei* or a local church as much as the Holy Sepulchre. The question is not merely what the capstones resemble to modern viewers, but which interpretive possibilities were available to early medieval audiences within their broader visual, liturgical, and textual horizons. Here the immediate sculptural context matters: the capstones sit at the apex of crosses whose bases and shafts are already saturated with biblical narrative, typology, and ecclesiological imagery. Read within that programme, the caps are unlikely to function as neutral 'roofs' and far more likely to participate in the same network of scriptural and liturgical allusions.

Within this wider frame, the reliquary reading has unusually strong support. The strapped profiles of the Ahenny caps echo the metal bindings of early medieval shrines such as the Shrine of St Lachtin's Arm and the so-called Abbot's Shrine in Copenhagen, where gabled or domed lids are articulated with similar banding.

Formal parallels alone remain suggestive rather than decisive, but they gain weight when set alongside what we know of Irish reliquary culture: house- and casket-shaped shrines were central to monastic devotional life, carried in procession, sworn upon in oaths, and treated as arcae of holy presence. A capstone that mimics their silhouette and ‘strapping’ at monumental scale is unlikely to be entirely coincidental. I therefore take ‘reliquary capstone’ as the minimal, and most secure, layer of meaning: the beehive stone signals a shrine-logic in which the entire cross becomes a kind of enlarged reliquary, a public, immovable container of sanctity. The Jerusalem reading adds an upper layer rather than replacing this reliquary base. Early Jerusalem lections, such as those preserved in Egeria’s *Itinerarium*, and other Sepulchre-centred liturgical materials circulated in the Latin West by the eighth and ninth centuries, describing in some detail the rites enacted at the Holy Sepulchre and the form of the Anastasis rotunda, confirming that Sepulchre-centred rites were well known in the West, and ensuring that Irish audiences could have recognised the capstone as a reference to the Holy Sepulchre.<sup>88</sup> Through homiliaries, pilgrims’ narratives, and the movement of relics and books, Irish clergy and educated laity could have acquired at least a schematic mental image of the Sepulchre complex. In that context, a domed or beehive cap crowning a monumental cross—especially when combined with resurrection and Ascension imagery—could plausibly be recognised as an allusion to the tomb of Christ, without requiring any precise architectural copying. I therefore suggest that for at least some viewers, the Ahenny caps operated as Jerusalem-signs: reliquary forms that also invited the imagination towards the Anastasis and the topography of the Resurrection.

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<sup>88</sup> Egeria, *Journey to the Holy Land*, trans. by Paul F. Bradshaw (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020), 27–31.

Bede's temple exegesis offers one useful analogy for thinking about the vertical logic that the capstone completes. In *De templo* he distinguishes the outer courts, where the pilgrim people labour, from the upper and innermost sancta where divine presence rests and where the building is crowned with glory. Architectural ascent becomes, for Bede, a diagram of spiritual progress: from the realm of toil and discipline at ground level, through the ordered service of clergy in the upper storeys, to contemplation and heavenly rest in the crowning spaces. Read through this lens—not as a direct source but as a contemporary way of thinking with buildings—the Ossory crosses reproduce a comparable hierarchy in stone. Their bases teem with animals, riders, kings, and prophets: the world of creation, struggle, and moral testing. Their shafts display commissioning scenes, preaching figures, and ordered ornament: the Church *in via*, labouring under apostolic mandate. The capstones occupy precisely the place Bede assigns to the Temple's uppermost zone: they mark the point of divine presence, the space of rest rather than movement, where resurrection and Jerusalem-logic appropriately reside. In this sense, the beehive and house-shaped caps serve not only as reliquary or Sepulchre signs but as architectural enactments of the ascent from struggle to sanctuary, from the turbulence of the lower panels to the stillness of a miniature martyrdom at the summit.

Taken together, these strands allow for a deliberately layered reading. The capstones need not 'mean' clochán *or* reliquary *or* Sepulchre *or* temple-top; in a culture accustomed to catena exegesis, they can inhabit all of these registers at once. What matters for the argument of this thesis is that, whatever combination of associations individual viewers brought to them, the caps were legible as more than structural caps. They crystallised the monument's theological arc, signalling that the equestrian sovereignty, apostolic mission, and Davidic struggle depicted below were

subsumed under a higher order of sanctity: that of relic, resurrection, and the heavenly house of God.

### **South Face**

Before turning to the details of the south face (Figure 16), it is worth noting that this side of the monument introduces a markedly different visual register from the more hierarchical and static compositions elsewhere on the cross. Here the imagery becomes narrative, kinetic, and emotionally charged, drawing the viewer into a scene in which movement, death, and ritual action converge. The panel's dense interplay of procession, clerical insignia, and violent animal intervention has long made it one of the most debated images on the Ahenny North Cross. As with the animal panels on the base, its interpretative difficulty arises not from ambiguity alone but from the richness of symbolic possibilities available to its medieval audience—biblical, hagiographical, liturgical, and dynastic. With this context in mind, we may now turn to the carving itself.

The south base panel (Figure 17) presents a single-register procession: four robed human figures and a horse move in line across the field; all set on a continuous ground line. At the front walks a figure in long garments, followed by a second carrying a tall processional cross and a third holding a crosier. Between this clerical cluster and a final attendant, a horse bears a headless human body slung lengthwise across its back, limbs hanging down towards the ground. Two large birds, usually identified as crows or ravens, are shown at the exposed torso, their beaks directed into the flesh, so that the corpse becomes the visual focus of the



*Figure 15: North Cross at Ahenny, South Face*



Figure 16: North Cross at Ahenny, South Face Base

small, indistinct object.<sup>89</sup> It seems clear that there is some kind of procession taking place; the combination of funerary imagery, processional objects, and violent animal intervention has led to a wide range of interpretations, including the funeral procession of Cormac Mac Cuillenáin, the recovery of the body of King Saul or St Vincent of Sargossa, the funeral procession of Art, king of Tara, the transfer of a holy body or relics, or a symbol of death and martyrdom, or a procession with a decapitated ruler.<sup>90</sup>

One influential view, proposed by Harbison, identifies the scene as David carrying the head of Goliath back to King Saul in Jerusalem.<sup>91</sup> This is a compelling

<sup>89</sup> Henry Crawford, "The Crosses of Kilkieran and Ahenny," 259.

<sup>90</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 12; R. A. S. Macalister, *The Archaeology of Ireland* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1920), 240, 313; Porter, *Crosses and Culture*, 20; Roe, *The High Crosses of Western Ossory*, 6-30; Hickey, *The Legend of Tara*, 91-92; Henry, *Early Christian Irish Art*, 21ff; Henry, "The Celtic Crosses of Slievenamon," 88-90; Henry, "Les origines de l'iconographie irlandaise," 89ff; Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period*, 153-3; B. Brandt-Förster, *Das Irische Hochkreuz: Ursprung, Entwicklung*, 31ff.

<sup>91</sup> Peter Harbison, "A High Cross Base from the Rock of Cashel and a Historical Reconsideration of the 'Ahenny Group' of Crosses," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 93C, no. 1 (1993): 11, Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 11.

possibility: David imagery is a common theme throughout this group of crosses, being found on the Durrow cross, the Cross of Scriptures at Clonmacnoise, and both the Tall Cross and Muiredach's Cross at Monasterboice, making the theme a natural fit for the Ossory group. David's typological richness made him an enduring subject in medieval visual culture: the divinely anointed king whose victories signified God's favour, whose life prefigured Christ's, and whose kingship offered a biblical archetype for legitimate Christian rule.<sup>92</sup> On Muiredach's Cross, for instance, David appears enthroned beside a Last Judgement scene, visually articulating the continuity between Davidic and Christic sovereignty. If the Ahenny scene is Davidic, the implication would have been clear: the patron aligns himself with a model of righteous, divinely endorsed kingship.

The panel, however, has also been a touchstone in wider debates over hunting, warfare, and death-imagery on Irish high crosses. Earlier so-called nativist scholarship, including that by Arthur Kingsley Porter and Françoise Henry (in her earlier writings) suggested that scenes of horsemen, hounds, and decapitation reflected Celtic heroic tradition and even the cult of the severed head.<sup>93</sup> Later scholars—including Máire and Liam de Paor, Carola Hicks, and Nancy Edwards—continued to see resonances with saga literature such as the *Táin* and with figures like the raven-goddesses of war.<sup>94</sup> More recent scholarship, however, challenges the assumption that monastic artists needed to accommodate pagan motifs. Catherine Herbert, in particular, has argued that that so-called 'secular' or 'pagan' scenes on

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<sup>92</sup> Murray and Murray, *The Oxford Companion to Christian Art and Architecture*, 130; Helen Roe, "The David Cycle in Early Irish Art," *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 79, nos. 1/2, Centenary Volume (1949): 39–41.

<sup>93</sup> Herbert, "Psalms in Stone," 8; Porter, *Crosses and Culture of Ireland*; Henry, *La sculpture irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles de l'ère chrétienne*, 1:118; Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period*, 155.

<sup>94</sup> De Paor and De Paor, *Early Christian Ireland*, 108; Hicks, *Animals in Early Medieval Art*; Edwards, "An Early Group of Crosses from the Kingdom of Ossory," 29.

Irish crosses are better understood through the Psalms and Davidic typology, not as survivals of Celtic cult.<sup>95</sup> Scripture provides close textual echoes: David's triumph over Goliath, his beheading, and the feeding of Philistine corpses to birds (1 Sam. 17:46–57) align precisely with the Ahenny imagery, reinforced by psalmic imagery of beasts devouring bodies (Ps. 62:11; Ps. 77:2). Even Patrick's *Confessio* evokes this imagery in its meditation on martyrdom. Within this scriptural horizon, the Ahenny scene coheres with the wider biblical programme of the cross rather than standing as a secular or "pagan" outlier. A funerary reading nevertheless remains possible. The presence of the crosier and processional cross fit burial ritual, while the birds feeding on the corpse may recall martyrological traditions in which saints' bodies were exposed or desecrated yet vindicated by divine intervention; such an interpretation would connect the panel to commemoration of the holy dead and local cultic memory. Yet the visual emphasis on triumph—attendants moving forward, the displayed body, and the predatory birds—suggests a scene of humiliating exposure more than pious lamentation. Still, in patristic and Hiberno-Latin exegesis, David functioned both as Israel's king and a figure of Christ, especially in contexts involving suffering, vindication, and divine justice. Scenes of death or abasement could therefore operate simultaneously as Davidic narrative, Christological typology, and moral exhortation.

Seen in this light, the south base offers a deliberately polyvalent visual exegesis: a Davidic triumph that also gestures toward martyrdom and eschatological judgement, enriched by liturgical and commemorative associations. This layered significance becomes more apparent when the panel is read alongside the east base, where two birds perch upon an animal—variously identified as a horse or cow. Birds in early medieval iconography frequently

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<sup>95</sup> Roe, *The High Crosses of Western Ossory*, 24; O Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland*, 27–40; Mytum, *The Origins of Early Christian Ireland*, 66–73; Herbert, "Psalms in Stone," 8, 20.

signal divine presence, resurrection, or spiritual vigilance.<sup>96</sup> Together, the south and east bases form a thematic pairing in which birds function as mediators at moments of vulnerability or transition. Their recurrence suggests that the sculptor expected viewers to read horizontally as well as vertically, weaving the separate panels into an interconnected programme of signs. Above the base, the upper step is adorned with two horizontal registers of spiral ornament, closely resembling the designs on the shaft. The shaft itself is decorated with four-petal motif, a design known from early pillars and grave slabs, but also appearing in metalwork from Norway and in Anglo-Scandinavian sculpture in Britain.<sup>97</sup> The distribution is too broad to offer a chronological marker, but it does point to artistic exchange across the Irish Sea, suggesting that the sculptor drew on a repertoire circulating between Ireland, Britain, and the Scandinavian world.<sup>98</sup> In addition, the petal motif may be linked to the cross of arcs, an early Christian symbol found on Irish stone sculpture. Notable examples include the Ballyvourney cross slab and the stone at the Maumanorig enclosure, both of which feature the same design, as well as Pictish slabs such as the Lerwick stone.<sup>99</sup> The adoption of this motif may have been intentional, invoking an established Christian symbol while simultaneously embedding the Ahenny cross within wider artistic traditions of boundary-marking and sacred enclosure. The head of the south face is framed by double moulding and filled with five spirals radiating

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<sup>96</sup> Pulliam, "Between the embodied eye and living world," 23; *The Last Judgement*, ca. 800–ca. 850–870, London, Victoria and Albert Museum, Museum no. 253–1867, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O90891/the-last-judgement-panel-unknown/>; Henry, *Irish Art during the Viking Invasions*, 183–84; A. M. Luiselli Fadda, "The Mysterious Moment of Resurrection in Early Anglo-Saxon and Irish Iconography," in *Text, Image, Interpretation: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Literature and Its Insular Context in Honour of Éamonn Ó Carragáin*, ed. by A. J. Minnis and Jane Roberts (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 149–68.

<sup>97</sup> Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period*, 55, 60; P. Lionard, "Early Irish Grave Slabs," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 61C (1960–61): 95–169.

<sup>98</sup> Jan Petersen, *Viking Antiquities in Great Britain and Ireland, Part V: British Antiquities of the Viking Period, Found in Norway* (H. Aschehoug & Co., 1940).

<sup>99</sup> Anna Ritchie, "Another Pictish Cross-of-Arcs: An Old Find from Shetland Re-interpreted," *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 147 (2017): 119–26.

outward from the central axis. This design echoes the spiral vocabulary used elsewhere on the monument but here arranged to suggest centrifugal motion, a visual analogue for the spreading power of the cross itself. The interplay of figural base and abstract head reinforces the balance of narrative and ornament typical of the Ahenny group, while also highlighting the theological connection between history (David or funeral), divine intervention (bird symbolism), and cosmic order (spiral geometry).

Overall, the south face of the Ahenny North Cross thus holds multiple interpretive possibilities. The David and Goliath identification remains the most persuasive, supported by typological tradition and parallels elsewhere in the corpus. The visual emphasis falls not on an ordered transport of the dead but on the exposed and violated body at the centre of the composition: the corpse is not laid out on a bier or covered with a shroud, as one might expect in a conventional Christian burial, but is slung awkwardly across the horse, with limbs hanging and birds actively tearing at the flesh. The absence of mournful gesture among the attendants and the lack of any clear grave marker or liturgical focus make a straightforward funeral less likely, whereas the public display of a mutilated enemy, left to the birds as a sign of victory, corresponds closely to the rhetoric of 1 Samuel and to psalmic imagery of defeated foes given over to beasts and birds. At the same time, the funerary overtones of the procession and the avian details suggest that early viewers may have read the panel simultaneously as commemoration of the dead, as typological meditation on Christ's suffering, and as a moral lesson on kingship.

Rather than forcing exclusivity, the imagery invites a multivalent reading consistent with the theological aims of high crosses more generally. As with the west face, the scene unites biblical narrative, local cultic memory, and dynastic

symbolism, embedding the patron's authority within both scriptural exempla and the sanctified landscape.

### **North Face**

The north face of the Ahenny North Cross (Figure 18) presents one of the most enigmatic sequences in the Ossory corpus. Unlike the west and south faces—where identifiable biblical and Davidic themes provide relatively clear interpretative anchors—the north face combines abstract ornament, ambiguous figural elements, and animal motifs in a way that resists straightforward narrative identification. Yet this very ambiguity is characteristic of the visual strategies at work in the Ossory group: the north face invites viewers into a mode of reading that moves between ornament, typology, and moral reflection. Before turning to a panel-by-panel analysis, it is important to trace how these elements interact across the surface, shaping a field of meaning in which creation, conflict, and spiritual ascent are held in deliberate tension.

The north base (Figure 19) shows a tightly packed procession of mounted riders and a horse-drawn vehicle arranged in a single horizontal band. The riders sit upright on their horses, legs extended, with little overlap between figures, and the chariot is distinguished by its box-like body and elevated profile behind the team of horses. Human and animal bodies are rendered in comparable scale, and the group advances as a coherent unit across the panel, with no figure dramatically isolated or enlarged. The image has been interpreted as a chariot procession or the translation of relics by Harbison and Roe respectively, while Elizabeth Hickey suggests that the scene shows Art, king of Tara, setting out to battle, and Henry sees the scene as an

allegory of bringing the faith to Ireland.<sup>100</sup> The image is unusual in the Irish corpus but not without parallels, and it opens up several interpretive possibilities ranging from martial symbolism to liturgical ritual.<sup>101</sup>



Figure 17: North Cross at Ahenny, North Face

<sup>100</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, Roe, *The High Crosses of Western Ossory*, 6-30; Hickey, *The Legend of Tara*, 91-92; Henry, *Early Christian Irish Art*, 21ff; Henry, "The Celtic Crosses of Slievenamon," 88-90; Henry, "Les origines de l'iconographie irlandaise," 89ff; Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period*, 153-3.

<sup>101</sup> Heidi Stoner, "Signifying Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England: The Visual Languages of Power and Authority c. 500-1000." (PhD diss., University of York, 2017), 257 <https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/17342/> (accessed March 15, 2025); Roe, *The High Crosses of Western Ossory*, 17.

At the most immediate level, mounted figures carried an established symbolic association with elite and royal identity: as Heidi Stoner has shown, rider imagery formed a visual language of kingship in Anglo-Saxon England, embodying the role of the warrior-king and the ideals of military triumph and authority.<sup>102</sup> Similar motifs recur across the Irish high cross tradition and across Insular art more broadly, where the horse functioned as a shorthand for sovereignty and prestige.<sup>103</sup> This royal register was itself part of a deeper and older visual discourse. From Late Antiquity, imperial cameos, medals, and diptychs regularly portrayed rulers on horseback as emblems of power, victory, and divine sanction. Examples such as the fourth-century Belgrade Cameo, the Constantine Londinium adventus medal, and numerous imperial diptychs circulated widely, ensuring that the horseman type was a recognisable shorthand for authority.<sup>104</sup> When adapted in Insular contexts, such imagery connected Irish and Anglo-Saxon patrons to Roman imperial ideals and embedded local dynastic claims within universal visual codes. The Pictish St Andrews sarcophagus provides an illuminating comparison. One panel shows a mounted figure attacking a lion, whose features duplicate those of the standing David on the same monument. As Isabel Henderson notes, the rider must therefore also represent David, but ‘such an image is not associated with David and must have significance in its own right.’<sup>105</sup> Biblical kingship and imperial triumph here coalesce to memorialise a ruler—probably Oengus son of Fergus—through imagery that fuses sovereignty with sanctity. In this light, the Ahenny horsemen need not be

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<sup>102</sup> Stoner, “Signifying Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England,” 257.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Stoner, “Signifying Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England,” 156–57; Richard Brilliant, “Cameo with Rider in Battle (Belgrade Cameo),” in *Age of Spirituality: Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century*, ed. by Kurt Weitzmann (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979), 83, no. 71; C. H. V. Sutherland, *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, vol. 6 (London: Spink, 1967), 118; Ernst Kitzinger, *Byzantine Art in the Making: Main Lines of Stylistic Development in Mediterranean Art, 3rd–7th Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 96, fig. 176.

<sup>105</sup> Hicks, *Animals in Early Medieval Art*; 9, Edwards, “An Early Group of Crosses from the Kingdom of Ossory,” 113

dismissed as processional fillers or echoes of Celtic heroic literature, but as active participants in a visual language of authority that merged Davidic typology with imperial prestige. For Irish patrons, such equestrian motifs could inscribe dynastic legitimacy simultaneously within biblical and Roman-derived frameworks. Earlier scholarship sometimes interpreted such riders through the lens of heroic saga or Celtic martial tradition.<sup>106</sup> More recent work, however, has shown that equestrian imagery in early medieval Ireland is best understood within Christian visual and textual frameworks, where the mounted figure could signify royal authority, biblical victory, or even saintly triumph. Continental comparanda reinforce this: the Hornhausen Rider Stone and the Einhard arch both deploy horsemen as Christian warriors rather than secular heroes. In this broader interpretative field, the Ahenny procession aligns more naturally with Christian idioms of sovereignty and ritual movement than with vestiges of pre-Christian myth.

Within this field of interpretation, the Ahenny horsemen could therefore be read as Davidic or saintly figures re-cast as paradigms of Christian sovereignty. From a visual standpoint, the compositional discipline of the scene—its single, ordered register, the absence of prey animals or combat, and the presence of a structured vehicle within a controlled procession—fits awkwardly with the chaos and pursuit characteristic of heroic hunting imagery. Instead, the measured spacing of riders and chariot, and the lack of obvious weaponry or quarry, align more naturally with processional and triumphal idioms, whether royal, liturgical, or both. The liturgical interpretation is supported by Nancy Edwards, who has suggested that the clothing of the lead figure points to religious rather than secular significance, and Helen Roe went further by linking the scene to the cult of relics.<sup>107</sup> Roe

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<sup>106</sup> Porter, *Crosses and Culture of Ireland*; Henry, *La sculpture irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles de l'ère chrétienne*, 1:118; Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period*, 155.

<sup>107</sup> Edwards, "An Early Group of Crosses from the Kingdom of Ossory," 25; Roe, *The High Crosses of Western Ossory*, 16-45.

compared the Ahenny procession to a sixth-century Byzantine ivory from Trier Cathedral Treasury, which depicts a relic translation in Constantinople: a cross-bearer leads the procession, followed by attendants and a chariot carrying figures associated with a shrine.<sup>108</sup> Although no reliquary is shown at Ahenny, the presence of a chariot, the processional format, and the mixture of clerical and lay figures resonate with ninth- and tenth-century practices of relic presentation and exhibition.<sup>109</sup> The Ahenny vehicle itself is significant: unlike the two-wheeled continental type, it appears distinctly Irish, recalling Iron Age chariot traditions.<sup>110</sup> This localisation suggests deliberate adaptation: the sculptor may have borrowed the motif of relic translation from continental models but reconfigured it in an Irish idiom. The result is a hybrid image that embeds an international Christian ritual within a visual vocabulary familiar to Irish audiences, binding global Christianity to local culture. Additional details complicate the reading further. Two small animals—one carved between the legs of the lead horseman’s mount, another perched on the reins of the chariot—are easily overlooked but may carry symbolic weight, perhaps alluding to divine presence, moral struggle, or protective talismans. Their ambiguity reinforces the broader point: the scene was likely meant to be read on multiple levels, combining royal and biblical symbolism with liturgical processional imagery, and functioning as a polyvalent visual theology of sovereignty, sanctity, and ritual. On balance, the most convincing primary reading is that of a Christian, triumphal procession—probably a royal or saintly cortege associated with relics or sacred authority—rather than a purely heroic or secular parade. The equestrian imagery articulates sovereignty; the ordered, processional format and chariot evoke liturgical and relic-bearing contexts; and together these elements inscribe dynastic power within a recognisably Christian visual theology of kingship and sanctity. Above the base, the upper step features rectilinear patterns, while the shaft and arms return to curvilinear ornament, echoing the

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<sup>108</sup> Roe, *The High Crosses of Western Ossory*, 16–45.

<sup>109</sup> Hughes, *Church in Early Irish Society*, 167–69.

<sup>110</sup> David Greene, “The Chariot as Described in Irish Literature,” in *Iron Age in the Irish Sea Province: Papers Given at a C.B.A. Conference Held at Cardiff, January 3 to 5, 1969*, ed. by Charles Thomas (London: Council for British Archaeology, 1972), 59–73, <https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/library/browse/issue.xhtml?recordId=1075405> (accessed January 20, 2025).

interplay seen elsewhere on the cross. The carving here is particularly high in relief, producing a sharp distinction between figure and ground. As Stalley has argued, this technique allows the design to operate visually in both positive and negative space, ensuring that forms emerge dynamically as light shifts across the surface.<sup>111</sup> This reinforces the idea that the north face was designed for sustained, contemplative viewing, where layers of meaning could emerge through extended looking.

At the summit, the tall beehive-shaped capstone remains in situ, and this once again draws comparisons to reliquary architecture. Some, following Porter and Henry, saw it as a reference to the Irish *clochán* hut, evoking monastic enclosure and ascetic retreat, while Hilary Richardson emphasised its evocation of the Anastasis dome of the Holy Sepulchre, and others have noted its resemblance to reliquary caps and caskets.<sup>112</sup> These interpretations need not be mutually exclusive: the beehive could resonate simultaneously as *clochán* (ascetic retreat), Sepulchre dome (resurrection), and reliquary cap (presence and intercession). In the context of Ahenny, its placement above the equestrian procession of the north face intensifies this polyvalence: earthly sovereignty, staged in horse and chariot imagery, is here subsumed within a higher order of sanctity. Read vertically, the cross guides the eye upward from biblical foundation scenes (Eden or eremitic retreat on the east), through apostolic commissioning (west) and Davidic or funerary struggle (south), toward the reliquary-like capstone at the summit. In this progression, the capstone crystallises the monument's theological arc: temporal power is legitimate only when crowned by the hope of resurrection, sanctity, and divine intercession. The beehive stone is not an architectural afterthought but the

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<sup>111</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 143-144.

<sup>112</sup> Petrie, *The Ecclesiastical Architecture of Ireland*, 215; Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 19; Richardson, "The Concept of the High Cross," 127-34.

theological climax of the monument — a miniature Jerusalem crowning Ossory's landscape.

The north face, therefore, exemplifies the multivocality of high cross imagery. On one level, it reflects local aristocratic and martial traditions, employing equestrian iconography to assert dynastic identity and power. On another, it resonates with international Christian ritual, placing Irish rulers and communities in continuity with Constantinopolitan ritual. The distinctive Irish chariot ties these registers together, rooting global Christianity in local tradition, alluding to relic translation and sacred procession. Finally, the vertical axis capped by the beehive stone directs the viewer's gaze from temporal triumph to eternal hope, embedding sovereignty within sanctity. In this layered interplay, the north face integrates biblical, imperial, and local traditions into a unified programme, consistent with the wider claim of this thesis: that the Ossory crosses articulate sovereignty through sanctity, binding dynastic power into the geography of relics and resurrection.

Taken as a whole, the Ahenny North Cross presents a sophisticated theological and political programme that unfolds across its four faces. The east face combines ornamental density with figural ambiguity, encouraging multivalent readings (Eden, ascetic retreat, moral struggle) rooted in patristic habits of exegesis. The west face, with its Mission to the Apostles, articulates a scriptural mandate for authority, reimagined through episcopal insignia and crowned by the capstone as symbol of resurrection and contemplative ascent. The south face, with its funeral procession or Davidic triumph, layers biblical typology, martyrological commemoration, and dynastic resonance, binding ideals of sacred kingship to Christological foreshadowing. The north face integrates equestrian imagery and

chariot procession, simultaneously asserting dynastic power, recalling relic-ritual, and embedding local Irish tradition within a universal Christian geography. Across all sides, the cross exhibits deliberate multivocality: no single interpretation exhausts its meaning. Instead, its programme links biblical narrative, dynastic identity, and relic-based sanctity within a vertical and lateral coherence. The vertical axis moves from commission to Christic centre to capstone/Sepulchre and stages a theological ascent from apostolic mission to resurrection hope, while the lateral interplay of birds, beasts, riders, and clerics reinforces the theme of mediation between earthly and divine authority. Ultimately, the Ahenny North Cross operates as a monument of political theology, where sovereignty is articulated not through brute power but through participation in the sacred order of creation, scripture, relic, and resurrection. Its capstone, distinctive within the Irish corpus, crystallises this synthesis: a visual climax that crowns dynastic ambition with eschatological promise, binding local authority to the universal narrative of salvation.

## 2.2 Ahenny South Cross

The South Cross stands only a short distance from its northern counterpart, forming part of the same monumental programme at Ahenny. Structurally, it mirrors the North Cross in its ringed head, bosses, and overall design vocabulary, but its capstone is now flattened. While some suggest this was its original form, it is equally possible that it once matched the beehive profile of the North Cross and was later damaged. Either way, the comparison highlights the intentionality of the pair: the South Cross was conceived to operate in visual dialogue with its twin, sharing the same ornamental grammar while introducing distinct iconographic emphases, with the South Cross concentrating narrative imagery at the base while allowing spirals and interlace to dominate the upper shaft and head.

**East Face**

The east face of the Ahenny South Cross (Figure 20) presents a more restrained and contemplative programme than the narrative-rich bases of the North Cross. Though there are figures on the base, the general overview combines geometric pattern, disciplined spiralwork, and careful balance to create a visual meditation characteristic of the Ossory group.

The base of the east face (Figure 21) features two discrete panels, separated by a central cross shape, and this is an intentional departure from the single continuous panels of the North Cross. This difference alone suggests a distinct compositional logic: two tightly framed episodes rather than a single, continuous narrative.



*Figure 18: South Cross at Ahenny, East Face*

On the left is a central, frontal human figure, arms raised or extended, flanked symmetrically by two lions whose bodies curve inward without attacking. Their muzzles face the figure but do not bite; their tails frame the scene. The absence of aggression—no open jaws, no claws—matches the iconography conventionally associated with Daniel in the Lions’ Den, a motif that persisted in Ireland long after it waned elsewhere in Europe.<sup>113</sup> In addition, the figure’s upright, frontal stance with raised arms, framed symmetrically by two non-attacking lions, corresponds closely to other Insular Daniel scenes, whereas Irish hagiographical encounters with beasts tend to individualise the saint by attribute (crozier, book, or distinctive hair or dress) and to stage the animals in more dynamic or chaotic relation to the human. Here the carefully balanced symmetry, the lions’ curved bodies embracing rather than assaulting the figure, and the lack of any personalising attribute favour identification with Daniel’s archetypal deliverance rather than a more specific Irish saint. Its longevity suggests more than simple narrative repetition: for early medieval Irish viewers, Daniel’s miraculous preservation served as a potent emblem of divine deliverance, an image of protection in extremis that resonated deeply with a devotional tradition attentive to trial, exile, and God’s safeguarding of the faithful.<sup>114</sup> As Shirley Alexander has observed, the Irish corpus affords Daniel an unusually extended afterlife, with further analogues at Monasterboice and Kells reinforcing the motif’s thematic centrality within Insular visual culture.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 13; Shirley Alexander, “Daniel Themes on the Irish High Crosses”, in *The Insular Tradition*, ed. by Catherine Karkov and Michael Ryan (State University of New York Press, 1977), 99.

<sup>114</sup> Helen Roe, ‘The “David Cycle” in Early Irish Art’, *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 79 (1949): 43.

<sup>115</sup> Alexander, “Daniel Themes on the Irish High Crosses,” 99.



*Figure 19: South Cross at Ahenny, East Face Base*

The deliverance scene, where Daniel's rescue prefigures Christ's Resurrection and God's protection of the righteous, has been proposed by scholars including Shirley Alexander, Nancy Edwards and Peter Harbison, but it is far from unchallenged: the Daniel panel has invited a range of interpretive nuances.<sup>116</sup> Some earlier scholars, including Françoise Henry in her early work and Arthur Kingsley Porter, allowed that Old Testament deliverance scenes could function typologically as images of the solitary saint enduring trial, drawing on Irish hagiographical traditions in which figures such as Columba, Patrick, or the desert fathers confront beasts or wilderness conditions as tests of sanctity. This

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<sup>116</sup> Alexander, "Daniel Themes on the Irish High Crosses," 99; Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 13-14; Edwards, "An Early Group of Crosses from the Kingdom of Ossory," 28-29.

approach is not strongly evidenced by the carving itself and relies more on general devotional patterns than on iconographic specificity, and has not been widely adopted in more recent scholarship, yet it is not inconsistent with how early medieval viewers might have layered meaning: Daniel could be both the biblical exemplar and a type of the Irish saint who persists faithfully amid adversity. Visually, however, nothing in the carving anchors the scene to a particular Irish holy figure or locale; the lions and the central figure remain generic enough to function as a biblical type, onto which viewers could subsequently project local saints as analogues, rather than as a portrait of any one hagiographical episode. Others, such as Carola Hicks and Catherine Herbert, have read the lions as symbolic guardians, with Daniel functioning not as narrative illustration but as a cue for broader meditation on deliverance.<sup>117</sup>

The right-hand panel of the base shows a compact group of seven human figures, one frontal and authoritative, the others in profile and apparently receiving instruction. Though the scene has been identified as a depiction of Noah's Ark, the presence of crosiers among the flanking figures, combined with close formal parallels on the North Cross, strongly favours identification as a version of the Mission to the Apostles.<sup>118</sup> The Noah identification can be safely excluded, as the scene lacks any ark-structure, animals, or flood symbolism, and the crosiers unequivocally anchor the figures in ecclesiastical, not patriarchal, iconography. The Mission to the Apostles reading, however, accords with the wider Ossory corpus and with the pattern observed on the North Cross, where apostolic commissioning appears as a central theme. Although alternative proposals—such as commemorative portrayals of local ecclesiastics or assemblies of bishops—have

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<sup>117</sup> Hicks, *Animals in Medieval Art*, 81; Herbert, "Psalms in Stone," 8, 20.

<sup>118</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 14; Henry, *Early Christian Irish Art*, 21ff; Henry, "The Celtic Crosses of Slievenamon," 88–90; Henry, "Les origines de l'iconographie irlandaise," 89ff; Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period*, 153–3; I Eberhart, "The High Cross: An Art in Human Terms," *The Arts in Ireland* 2, no. 1 (1973): 57; Roe, *The High Crosses of Western Ossory*, 6–30; Brandt-Förster, *Das Irische Hochkreuz: Ursprung, Entwicklung*, 31ff.

occasionally been suggested, the hierarchical structure of the composition—one enlarged, frontal figure flanked by smaller profile figures equipped with crosiers—visually encodes a moment of commissioning or instruction rather than a static memorial, while the lack of funerary markers, inscriptions, or distinctive martyr symbols further weakens a commemorative reading. When combined with near-identical layouts at the North Cross and other high crosses, the panel conforms more naturally to a Mission schema than to a localised group portrait. The alternatives could survive as reception overlays but do not explain the formal repetition as well as the scriptural identification. The emphatic pairing of Daniel and the Apostles is therefore not accidental: taken together, Daniel (deliverance) and the Apostles (commission) form a theologically coherent diptych: God saves; the apostles proclaim that salvation. In addition, under a capstone read as an Ascension threshold, Daniel’s deliverance becomes not only typology but a visual promise that the ascent inscribed by the monument culminates in divine reception. However, this theological coherence is *not* the proof; the visual evidence (composition, parallels, posture) ground the identifications, and the theological reading follows. Above these panels, quadrupeds are carved in ambiguous poses, part of a wider motif of animals perched or poised on bases throughout the Ahenny group. Their size, placement, and orientation are too compressed for certainty, and their precise meaning is elusive, though their proximity to Daniel strengthens readings related to deliverance or divine guardianship. A purely secular or decorative reading is less convincing given the immediately adjacent biblical panel.

The shaft of the east face is filled with interlace, similar to that seen on the North Cross; unlike the North Cross, however, where panels are separated by moulding, the designs here are divided by empty space, though rope moulding still runs along the edges of the shaft, providing continuity within the decorative scheme. The head of the cross

continues the interlace pattern, but with a notable distinction: the strands in the shaft's upper panel turn inward, creating an enclosed design, and the strands in the head flow outward, suggesting movement and expansion. This contrast in directional flow may indicate a deliberate compositional choice, reinforcing symbolic themes of containment versus transcendence. Some scholars have dismissed the ornament here as simpler or less accomplished than on the North Cross, attributing differences to sculptural limitation, but the deliberate contrasts in direction, spacing, and strand structure undermine that view.<sup>119</sup> The variations appear intentional rather than accidental. The five skeuomorphic bosses further reinforce its connection to metalwork traditions. The ring of the cross is adorned with single-strand knotwork, which contrasts with the double-strand interlace used elsewhere on the head. This variation in decorative style suggests an intentional differentiation, ensuring that different sections of the cross maintained distinct visual identities while still contributing to an overall cohesive aesthetic.

### **West Face**

The west face of the Ahenny South Cross (Figure 22) shifts the viewer's attention from narrative imagery to the dense ornamental language that is characteristic of the Ossory group. In contrast to the south base's dramatic figural procession and the east face's balanced geometric order, the west side is dominated by spirals, interlace, and bossed forms that create a surface of continuous visual motion. Here the cross functions less as a narrative panel and more as a meditative field, in which layered patterns enact the theological themes of order, creation, and divine intricacy that permeate the wider monumental programme. This ornamental concentration provides an essential counterpoint to the figural registers elsewhere, demonstrating how the South Cross integrates both image and abstraction into a unified visual theology.

The west base (Figure 23) again consists of two panels separated by a cross,

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<sup>119</sup> Roe, *The High Crosses of Western Ossory*, 24; Edwards, "An Early Group of Crosses from the Kingdom of Ossory," 28.

though the carving is more eroded, complicating interpretation. The surviving traces show a single horizontal register populated by at least one human figure and several quadrupeds, including what appears to be a hound. The figures are set on a common ground line and spaced fairly evenly across the panel; there is no clear central prey animal or obvious scene of combat. The human and animal bodies are rendered at comparable scale, and the carving, though worn, suggests a controlled, almost frieze-like progression rather than a tightly focused narrative climax. Although a literal hunting scene, as proposed by Roe and Edwards through comparison with other Ossory crosses, cannot be ruled out, the composition most strongly supports an allegorical hunt—an emblem of controlled power rather than a narrative chase.<sup>120</sup> The scene can also be seen as an allegory of spiritual struggle, or as a symbol of aristocratic identity.<sup>121</sup> In early medieval visual culture, hunting frequently served as a metaphor for royal mastery, aligning this scene with the cross's broader discourse on sovereignty, and the allegorical reading has gained traction because the riders and animals lack the clear narrative cues of heroic or saga scenes; there are no weapons, and no evidence of prey clearly rendered. The panel's worn state makes certainty impossible, but even in its eroded condition there is no sign of a stricken animal, human foe, or severed head that would anchor it in a specific heroic episode: instead, the figures form a relatively even, processional band in which no single quarry or climax is singled out. This compositional restraint, combined with the absence of explicit weaponry, suits an emblematic or allegorical hunt—one that stands for status and control in general—

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<sup>120</sup> Roe, *The High Crosses of Western Ossory*, 24; Edwards, "An Early Group of Crosses from the Kingdom of Ossory," 28, Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 14.

<sup>121</sup> Hicks, *Animals in Medieval Art*, 81; Herbert, "Psalms in Stone," 8, 20; Stoner, "Signifying Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England," 257; Roe, *The High Crosses of Western Ossory*, 17.

more readily than a detailed narration of a particular chase. Yet the literal hunting possibility remains open, especially given the prevalence of hunting in elite iconography; in the context of high crosses, where sovereignty and sanctity converge, hunting imagery may have functioned as a polyvalent metaphor of control—whether the king’s control over subjects, or the Christian’s control over sin. Overall, the safest reading is this polyvalent interpretation: earthly power and spiritual discipline rendered through a familiar aristocratic motif. Above, two stacked panels of spirals dominate the shaft, and five concave spirals expand outward in rhythmic succession, creating a visual pulse across the surface. The repetition of spiral ornament—found in manuscripts, metalwork, and stone—testifies to a shared Insular visual language, and their placement here, alongside figural panels, is not merely decorative: the spirals’ movement reinforces themes of energy, cosmic order, and divine dynamism, while their endless loops suggest eternity.<sup>122</sup> The head of the west face continues this logic. Two-strand interlace terminates in animal heads that appear to devour the bosses—a vivid visual metaphor that may connote both danger and protection.<sup>123</sup> The bosses themselves, domed with flat tops, echo metalwork prototypes; their central placement marks them as symbolic pivots in the cross’s geometry. The ring alternates interlace in the upper arcs with spirals in the lower, creating a deliberate rhythm of rectilinear vs. curvilinear ornament. This interplay of control and energy, structure and movement, mirrors the cross’s broader programme: the wildness of beasts is bounded by divine order, just as earthly power is circumscribed by Christ. The primary reading of this face, therefore, is an allegorical hunt, signalling control

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<sup>122</sup> Harbison, *High Crosses of Ireland*, 14.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

over passions, reinforced by the cross-shaped interlace above, while a secondary layer of elite pastime imagery is also possible.



*Figure 20: South Cross at Ahenny, West Face*



*Figure 21: South Cross at Ahenny, West Face Base*

### **South Face**

The south face of the cross (Figure 24) is also largely decorated with intricate non-figural decoration, with the figural decoration confined to the base. The south base (Figure 25) shows two horsemen galloping rightward in the left panel, framed by a tree, while the right shows a single rider flanked by dog-like animals. All figures move rightward; all are proportionally similar, suggesting continuity, and the most common interpretation is a scene of pursuit, in which horse, hound, and rider combine into a dynamic image of chase.<sup>124</sup> The scene has also been interpreted as depicting the Fall of Man, but here more convincingly

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<sup>124</sup> Edwards, "An Early Group of Crosses from the Kingdom of Ossory," 28.

seems to carry hunting imagery, here clearer in its narrative dimension.<sup>125</sup> The Fall of Man reading lacks the necessary iconographic markers—no serpent, no dual human figures, no paradisaical cues—and is therefore less persuasive. The shaft develops this sense of motion through six sets of C-scroll spirals, their flowing rhythm reinforcing pursuit and struggle. The scene may also be a metaphor of sovereignty; the rider is a well-established shorthand for rulership in Insular and Continental art, and, given the links elsewhere to kings and kingship, this is another plausible interpretation. At the most immediate level, mounted figures carried an established symbolic association with elite and royal identity: as Heidi Stoner has shown, rider imagery formed a visual language of kingship in Anglo-Saxon England, embodying the role of the warrior-king and the ideals of military triumph and authority.<sup>126</sup> Similar motifs recur across the Irish high cross tradition and across Insular art more broadly, where the horse functioned as a shorthand for sovereignty and prestige.<sup>127</sup> This royal register was itself part of a deeper and older visual discourse. From Late Antiquity, imperial cameos, medals, and diptychs regularly portrayed rulers on horseback as emblems of power, victory, and divine sanction. Examples such as the fourth-century Belgrade Cameo, the Constantine Londinium adventus medal, and numerous imperial diptychs circulated widely, ensuring that the horseman type was a recognisable shorthand for authority.<sup>128</sup> When adapted in Insular contexts, such imagery connected Irish and Anglo-Saxon patrons to Roman imperial ideals and embedded local dynastic claims within universal visual codes. In early medieval political theology, righteous sovereignty was inseparable from spiritual discipline; the control embodied in the hunt thus anticipates the cross's broader vertical movement toward divine kingship. Overall, the absence of

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<sup>125</sup> Roe, *The High Crosses of Western Ossory*, 24; Brandt-Förster, *Das Irische Hochkreuz: Ursprung, Entwicklung*, 31ff.

<sup>126</sup> Stoner, "Signifying Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England," 257.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> Stoner, "Signifying Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England," 156–57; Brilliant, "Cameo with Rider in Battle (Belgrade Cameo)"; C. Sutherland, *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, 118; Kitzinger, *Byzantine Art in the Making*, 96, fig. 176.

weaponry and the repeated presence of hounds argue against battle, while the tree may mark a threshold or wilderness, often associated with temptation or spiritual testing. I therefore take ‘hunt as allegory of control’ as the primary reading, while considering that the idea of portraying an elite pastime, and the connections that come with such an interpretation, is a plausible secondary layer; it explains some details but not the panel’s placement in a biblical programme. Above this scene, knotwork forms interlaced crosses, explicit Christian signs interwoven into abstract pattern. This integration of hunting with cross-shaped interlace encapsulates the monument’s hermeneutic method: worldly struggle transposed into theological meaning. The cross-arms elaborate this order: each arm carries spirals framed by mouldings, recalling the binding strips of reliquary shrines such as the Copenhagen Shrine, reinforcing the shrine-like quality of the cross, turning its arms into architectural frames.<sup>129</sup> The result is a tightly balanced composition, uniting movement (spirals, riders) with containment (mouldings, interlace), a visual theology of control and transformation. As on the other faces of the cross, sovereignty is presented not as unbounded force but as disciplined, theologically ordered control. Here, then, a primary reading can be the metaphor of sovereignty or pursuit, conveyed by paired riders, hounds, and a framing tree, while a secondary reading as a moral chase of the soul is also plausible, though a battle scene seems unlikely – no weapons or human foe appear.

The remainder of the south face is covered in panels of interlace, similar in style to the other faces of the cross, as well as the North Cross, and this helps to add to the meditative, reflective element of the crosses.

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<sup>129</sup> Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period*, 140.



*Figure 22: South Cross at Ahenny, South Face*



*Figure 23: South Cross at Ahenny, South Face Base*

### **North Face**

The north face (Figure 26) is similarly decorated with non-figural decoration, and the base contains the figures. As before, the base here (Figure 27) repeats the two-panel format, divided by a central cross-shaped spacer. On the left, a mounted rider advances toward the middle of the panel, accompanied by one or two smaller quadrupeds placed close to the horse's legs. On the right, two similarly scaled horsemen move in the opposite direction, so that the three riders together appear to converge toward the vertical axis of the base. One of the right-hand figures may be dismounted or partially obscured, but the overall effect is of bodies leaning and moving into a shared central space rather than simply progressing across

the field. The sense of convergence toward a focal point distinguishes this composition, suggesting interaction or encounter rather than mere pursuit. Harbison proposed that this may depict a hunting contest, while others see allegories of spiritual combat.<sup>130</sup> I argue that the convergence toward the centre is unusual and weakens a straightforward ‘chase’ reading, and that the scene could therefore represent a ritual encounter, a contest, or a symbolic meeting. In a typical hunting scene, figures and animals move in a single direction toward an implied prey or landscape boundary; here, the opposing directions of the riders, their roughly equal scale, and their meeting at the panel’s vertical axis suggest encounter rather than pursuit. No obvious quarry or fleeing animal is set ahead of the riders, and there are no clear signs of weaponry. Visually, the composition reads less as a line of hunters following game and more as two parties riding into confrontation or ritual meeting. In early medieval exegesis, scenes of encounter or confrontation readily carried dual political and moral meanings: earthly contest could simultaneously signify spiritual struggle, making polyvalence an expected rather than exceptional feature of such imagery. Ultimately, I lean toward a polyvalent reading: sovereignty and confrontation framed within the broader theological grammar of the cross. In this respect, the north base participates in the same visual discourse of authority seen elsewhere at Ahenny, where royal imagery functions as both political emblem and moral exemplum. The shaft continues the established vocabulary of interlace and spirals, with minor variations in patterning. This controlled flexibility—standard structure with local variation—suggests the work of a workshop adept at reusing motifs while adapting them to site-specific contexts. The head reprises the formula of bosses, spirals, and interlace seen elsewhere, ensuring overall coherence across the monument.

Like its northern counterpart, the South Cross complements the North Cross in both

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<sup>130</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 14.

structure and programme, but it introduces a stronger emphasis on deliverance and struggle. The east base juxtaposes Daniel's miraculous rescue with apostolic commissioning, articulating salvation and mission in tandem. The repeated hunting scenes, while elusive in meaning, resonate with themes of pursuit, power, and control—whether read as elite imagery, allegories of sin and virtue, or metaphors of sovereignty, and the ornamental spirals and interlace serve not as filler but as theological texture, visualising eternity, order, and transformation. Together with its northern twin, the South Cross contributes to a monumental dialogue at Ahenny. Where the North Cross foregrounds apostolic mission, dynastic overlays, and relic-translation, the South Cross insists on protection, deliverance, and struggle. Both culminate in capstones that function as visual reliquaries, binding the crosses into a single programme of sanctity and sovereignty. In this way, the Ahenny pair form a coherent statement: Irish kingship and ecclesiastical authority are legitimated not by force alone but by participation in divine deliverance, apostolic commission, and the eternal promise embodied in the cross.



*Figure 24: South Cross at Ahenny, North Face*



*Figure 25: South Cross at Ahenny, North Face Base*

### 2.3 Kilkieran South and West Crosses

Approximately three km from the Ahenny site lie the Kilkieran crosses. Originally, there are believed to have been four sandstone crosses at the site, but today, only fragments survive: the South and West Crosses (both ringed, with capstones), the slender North Cross, and the remains of a shaft, known as the Fragmentary Cross.<sup>131</sup> Of these, the South and West Crosses are the only examples here with surviving capstones, and so will be the focus of this discussion. These capstones adopt the beehive form familiar from Ahenny, though with a distinctive twist: both are encircled with incised horizontal lines, evoking architectural strapping or reliquary bands. This detail sets them apart within the Ossory group and reinforces their reliquary-like quality. The South Cross bears no figural ornament, and it has been suggested that its capstone may originally have crowned another monument, possibly the Fragmentary Cross. Even in their fragmentary state, however, the Kilkieran crosses carry forward the visual and theological grammar of Ahenny, adapting it for a new ecclesiastical landscape. The repetition of panel formulas and cap profiles suggests a shared workshop or the circulation of a pattern-book, linking Kilkieran directly with Ahenny and embedding both sites within a coherent Ossory tradition. At the same time, the Kilkieran crosses, like Ahenny, participate in a wider Insular sculptural idiom whose roots lie in the Iona School. The ringed form of the crosses, their use of bosses at the intersection of shaft and arms, and their dense repertory of interlace, spiral and key-pattern carving continue a visual language first articulated on the great free-standing crosses of Iona. There, the translation of manuscript and metalwork ornament into stone—particularly the

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<sup>131</sup> Roe, *The High Crosses of Western Ossory*, 35

serpents-and-bosses motif and the tightly woven interlace fields—established a template that later Irish workshops could adapt and localise. The Ossory group does not simply imitate this Iona repertoire; it intensifies it by adding capstones and by reworking shared iconographies, such as equestrian processions and animal ornament, within the specific political and ecclesiastical landscape of southern Ossory.

### **West Cross**

The West Cross at Kilkieran (Figure 28) is the richest monument on site, integrating figural and ornamental carving in a highly structured programme. Like its Ahenny counterparts, it features a stepped base, a decorated shaft, and an elaborately worked head with bosses and interlace, though its design exhibits more experimentation.



*Figure 26: Kilkieran High Cross*

## East Face

The base contains two stacked registers of mounted figures, each panel holding four horsemen arranged in a horizontal band. The riders sit upright on similarly scaled horses, aligned along a single ground line and spaced with little overlap, so that the group reads as an ordered procession rather than a chaotic *mêlée*. No prey animals, fallen bodies, or obvious weapons are legible in the surviving carving; instead, each figure repeats a similar pose, creating a rhythm of paired horse and rider across the width of the base. Suggestions have included a group of horsemen, the Battle of Ballymoon or the goddess Epona.<sup>132</sup> As we have seen, horsemen are a recurring motif in the Ossory crosses, echoing the chariot scene at Ahenny North and reflecting the importance of equestrian imagery in Insular art. As elsewhere, such scenes could connote martial power, dynastic identity, or processional ritual, but their placement at the foundation of a high cross inflects these associations with theological resonance: the horsemen may embody the triumph of order over chaos or the victorious spread of the Gospel. I argue that the primary reading here is a royal or processional register at the base, which symbolically underpins authority and is coordinated with the metalwork-coded head. Visually, the disciplined repetition of four mounted figures per panel, all aligned on a common ground line and lacking any clearly defined quarry, is more compatible with a mounted procession than with a hunt. In hunting imagery, one expects a visible focus—a fleeing animal, a struck quarry, or riders turning toward a specific target—whereas here every rider holds roughly equal emphasis and no single figure is isolated as prey or victor. The absence of spears, bows, or other recognisable weapons, as far as the weathering allows us to tell, further weakens a straightforward hunting interpretation. Moreover, in the context of high crosses—where base registers frequently stage sovereignty, deliverance, or ritual movement—the

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<sup>132</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 118; Porter, *Crosses and Culture of Ireland*, 20; Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period*, 153-3; Henry, *Early Irish Christian Art*, 33, 67; Henry, *Irish Art during the Romanesque Period*, 135.

processional format aligns more naturally with liturgical or royal display than with secular recreation. Placed at the base of a monumental cross whose upper zones are saturated with metalwork-coded ornament and reliquary logic, such an ordered cavalcade is well suited to signify royal or ecclesiastical procession—the publicly displayed authority that undergirds the monument—rather than a private aristocratic pastime.

Above, interlace panels climb the shaft, the lower tightly woven in carpet-like density, the upper framed spirals terminating in animal heads—a motif closely recalling the Ahenny repertoire.<sup>133</sup> These links are not casual: they suggest either shared sculptors or, at minimum, a workshop tradition consciously aligning Kilkieran with the Ossory visual idiom. The top step is too badly damaged to discern any surviving ornament. The cross-head is encircled with single-strand interlace, and five bosses punctuate its arms and centre. The slightly diminished relief of the top boss may be due to weathering rather than deliberate variation, but it has the effect of softening the monument's upper register and drawing the eye back toward the capstone above. The ring's knotwork ties the entire scheme into a continuous rhythm of linear energy, underscoring the monument's ornamental unity.

### **West Face**

Unlike the east face, which contains figural elements, the west face consists entirely of ornamental decoration. The shaft continues this alternation: interlaced animals forming a cross in the first panel, spirals in the second, both carefully balanced within rope-moulded frames. This interplay between geometric abstraction and subtle figuralisation demonstrates how Insular carvers treated ornament as theology—spirals as symbols of eternity, animal interlace as metaphors for entanglement and deliverance. The five bosses

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<sup>133</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 118.

of the head again reinforce continuity with Ahenny and the wider Irish corpus, while the dense interlace of the ring strengthens the impression of cosmic order radiating outward from the centre.

### **South Face**

The south face is heavily weathered, but faint traces of interlace survive across base and shaft. The base is divided into two sections, with the left panel featuring a sunken cross enclosed by four interlace compartments, while the right presents a nine-part grid of knotwork, a more fractured yet systematic pattern that plays order against fragmentation. The primary reading is order achieved through binding, conveyed by the sunken cross and nine-compartment grid, which anticipate the strapped capstone above.

### **North Face**

The north base panels mirror the variation on the south face: one shows four-petaled forms and circular motifs, the other interlace with a curious ‘unravelling’ in one corner, a rare deliberate rupture in the otherwise tightly controlled ornamental field. This visual interruption may symbolically allude to disorder or mortality — a striking reminder that high crosses were designed to provoke contemplation as much through dissonance as through harmony. The shaft’s looser, flowing interlace reinforces this organic, almost vegetal rhythm, while the north cross-arm ends in wheel-like motifs, suggestive of cosmic order or celestial motion.<sup>134</sup>

The Kilkieran West Cross demonstrates how the Ossory tradition could balance continuity and innovation. Its iconography—particularly the equestrian imagery—anchors it within the same thematic field as Ahenny. At the same time, its greater reliance on ornament reveals a programme more invested in abstraction,

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<sup>134</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 119.

where spirals, grids, and interlace perform theological work as visual metaphors for eternity, cosmic order, and the entanglement of human and divine. The capstones remain crucial to the reading: their beehive shape links them to Ahenny, while the encircling incised lines accentuate their reliquary character, suggesting containment, binding, and sanctity. These strappings are a stone analogue of reliquary binding, cueing the viewer to read the cap as a protective housing—an architectural sign of presence rather than a container in fact. Read alongside the decorative scheme, they transform the crosses into monumental reliquaries: at once local markers of dynastic and ecclesiastical presence, and cosmic vessels mediating between earth and heaven. The strapping strengthens the reliquary analogy: these are stone translations of bindings that secured relic caps or shrine lids. Where Ahenny’s beehive could oscillate between *clochán* hut and Anastasis dome, Kilkieran insists on reliquary form, declaring the capstone not simply architectural but devotional—stone housing that signals presence even in the absence of relics. The insistence lies not in some unique outline—the beehive form remains formally close to hut or dome types—but in the additional incised bands that wrap the caps. These rings have no structural function in stone yet closely imitate the metal bindings of house- and casket-shrines, where straps both held lids in place and visually proclaimed their status as containers of holy things. For early medieval viewers accustomed to interpreting buildings, containers, and liturgical objects typologically, such strapped caps would almost certainly have cued a shrine-reading, even if no relics were present. While formal resemblance alone cannot prove intention, the combination of beehive silhouette, non-structural ‘strapping,’ and the crosses’ broader scriptural and devotional context makes a reliquary reading the most economical explanation, and, as a result, Kilkieran extends the

Ossory visual-theological project. If Ahenny North and South stressed apostolic mission and dynastic overlays, Kilkieran leans toward procession and protection, staging the cross as both reliquary and cosmological diagram. Read vertically, Kilkieran—like Ahenny—moves from earthly authority signalled by ordered cavalry processions, through the disciplined ornament of the shaft, to the reliquary capstone that signifies heavenly presence and eschatological hope. Together, these monuments form a networked statement: sovereignty and sanctity are mutually reinforced, carried in stone by imagery that binds the local to the universal. Here the beehive cap—belted like a reliquary—crowns equestrian triumph and ornamental cosmos as a visible promise of resurrection space. Comparanda support this reliquary reading: the Shrine of St Manchán and several house-shrine lids with encircling bands offer close formal parallels for the encircling “straps,” suggesting that the Kilkieran mason was transposing a familiar reliquary motif into stone rather than inventing a purely architectural device.

#### 2.4 Kilree Cross

Though heavily worn, the Kilree cross (Figure 29), forms an important bridge within the Ossory group. Its proximity to Ahenny and Kilkieran situates it firmly in that regional network, but its proportions, details, and iconographic emphases connect it also to Killamery and to the great crosses of Clonmacnoise. The ringed head remains intact, though the capstone is lost; the surviving tenon confirms that one once crowned the monument. Whether that capstone resembled the beehive form of Ahenny and Kilkieran, or the house-shaped shrine form of Killamery, cannot be determined, but the very presence of the tenon ties Kilree into the capstone tradition. Although the capstone is lost, the surviving tenon ensures that Kilree once carried one, and this detail alone situates it firmly within the Ossory capstone tradition. Whether domed or gabled, the missing crown would have

signalled either enclosure and asceticism (beehive) or reliquary authority (house-shaped), and this ambiguity should be acknowledged as part of Kilree's polyvalence.



*Figure 27: Kilree High Cross*

### **East Face**

The base of the east face departs from the figural bases of Ahenny and Kilkieran, preserving instead traces of geometric ornament, as seen at Killamery. Stalley has noted that such variations may reflect patronal decision-making rather than rigid workshop formulae, and Kilree seems to confirm this flexibility.<sup>135</sup> This variation also reveals a deliberate theological choice: where Ahenny grounds its programme in narrative exempla, Kilree opts to anchor its base in abstract geometry, privileging cosmic order and contemplation as the foundation of the cross. The shaft has two panels: a lower fretwork design (now fragmentary) and an upper spiral fret, whose rhythmic curves create a visual ripple across the surface. The carving distinguishes foreground from background with unusual clarity, producing a fluid, almost watery effect. This technique—relief shifting between raised and sunken lines—suggests a sculptor skilled at adapting curvilinear motifs into stone. The head diverges sharply from the Ahenny crosses: instead of five bosses, it preserves a single large domed boss at the centre, framed by single-strand interlace within a circular moulding. This centralisation intensifies the boss's symbolic weight as cosmic navel or Eucharistic host. Surrounding interlace is looser than at Ahenny, but the emphasis on circularity and containment underscores Kilree's preference for unity rather than multiplicity. One further distinction is the roll moulding framing the panels, rendered in low relief rather than the bold rope mouldings of Ahenny. This lower-profile moulding reflects either a different sculptural tradition or a deliberate stylistic simplification, perhaps linking Kilree more closely with Killamery and Clonmacnoise than with its Ossory neighbours. The arms are decorated with a collection of figures and animals, consistent with the depictions of hunting scenes we have encountered in the other Ossory crosses, and this helps to align Kilree with the equestrian imagery at Ahenny North and Kilkieran,

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<sup>135</sup> Roger Stalley, "European Art and the Irish High Crosses," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 90C, no. 6 (1990): 147.

strengthening the Ossory preference for martial and processional themes. As it stands, the evidence is too faint to be decisive. The fragmentary equestrian traces cannot be ignored, but their eroded state prevents any secure reading. If a hunt or procession was once carved, it would align Kilree with its neighbours' themes of sovereignty and ritual display.

### **West Face**

The base and shaft of the west face are badly eroded, but two panels remain visible, the upper decorated with circular motifs. The head restores the five-boss arrangement: a central domed boss surrounded by four in the arms, all encircled by concentric rings of interlace. In the upper arm the circles unfurl into spirals, introducing a sense of upward motion. This arrangement visually aligns Kilree with both the Ahenny South Cross and the Cross of the Scriptures at Clonmacnoise, though the central-boss-with-circle motif also recalls the Bealin Cross. The only securely identifiable figural scene appears at the top of the shaft: the scene occupies a small rectangular panel immediately beneath the ring: at the centre is a frontal figure interpreted as the Christ Child, either seated on Mary's lap or set apart on a raised support, with one or both larger figures behind forming an implied throne. Three smaller, bearded figures approach from one side, slightly turned toward the central figure, their hands raised in a gesture of offering. At least one holds or extends a small, round object, while the others appear to bear similarly shaped gifts. The configuration of three approaching figures offering small, rounded objects to a central, smaller figure, combined with their deferential posture and orientation toward the cross-head above, conforms closely to standard Insular treatments of the Adoration of the Magi.<sup>136</sup> The composition of the scene strengthens the likelihood of this interpretation over alternatives such as Daniel in the Lion's Den or the pagan goddess Epona; alternative scenes of gift-giving or enthronement would not typically preserve the triadic approach of donors nor the focus on

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<sup>136</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 134.

a child-like central figure.<sup>137</sup> Moreover, the panel's position immediately below the ring, at the visual climax of the shaft, is appropriate for a theophanic scene marking the manifestation of Christ's kingship to the nations. The Magi, bringing gifts to Christ, enact both recognition of divine kingship and the submission of earthly rulers to Christ's authority. In the Ossory context—where capstones, inscriptions, and figural panels repeatedly negotiate dynastic legitimacy—this scene is particularly resonant. Visually, the Magi are distinguished from the Christ figure by their larger scale, active movement, and gesture of offering, all of which signal their status as earthly rulers who must approach and bow. This hierarchy in pose and relative prominence, combined with the panel's liminal position between shaft and head, makes the scene a potent image of royal submission to divine sovereignty rather than a generic act of devotion. The image ties Kilree directly into the broader Insular habit of visualising Christian kingship, and it anticipates the explicitly dynastic imagery of Killamery. Placed just beneath the ring, the Magi proclaim Christ's kingship at the most prominent point of the shaft. This placement is unlikely to be incidental; it makes the Adoration a theological hinge that links the cross's ornamental programme with Ossory's broader concern for dynastic legitimacy. The primary focus of the west face, then, is the Adoration of the Magi, asserting recognition of divine kingship and aligning earthly rulers with Christ, while secondary resonances also lie in its ornamental parallels with Clonmacnoise and Bealin. A reading of the panel as purely decorative is highly unlikely here, given the clarity of the Magi scene.

### **South Face**

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<sup>137</sup> Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period*, 11; Henry, *La sculpture irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles de l'ère chrétienne*, 199; Henry, *Early Christian Irish Art*, 48; Henry, "The Celtic Crosses of Slievenamon,"; Henry, *Irish High Crosses*, 21ff; Brandt-Förster, *Das Irische Hochkreuz: Ursprung, Entwicklung*, 31ff; Edwards, "An Early Group of Crosses from the Kingdom of Ossory," 146.

The south face is fragmentary but preserves vertical panel divisions on the shaft: one fretwork, one interlace, and one too worn to identify. The base is similarly damaged, though faint traces of figural carving suggest a narrative once present. The surviving carving at the end of the south arm is divided into four small compartments arranged in a cross-shaped layout, two above and two below the arm's horizontal axis. Within these panels only fragmentary elements can now be discerned—traces of an animal body in one, a possible human head or torso in another—yet their deliberate framing and symmetrical arrangement indicate that they once formed a coherent narrative or typological group rather than isolated vignettes. The top left quadrant is worn, but may show a figure upside down; suggestions have included Saints Paul and Anthony receiving bread or Salome dancing for the head of John the Baptist. The top right section shows a lion, possibly David and the Lion or, less likely, the Beheading of John the Baptist, while the bottom left quadrant shows two figures, the tops of their bodies crossing in what seems to be an embrace. Harbison draws comparisons with Durrow to suggest an interpretation of John the Baptist Recognising Christ, and suggestions of Jacob and the Angel have also been made. The bottom right quadrant shows three figures, one central, raising an object to the head of the figure standing on the right, and a third seated figure to the left. If we take the risen object to be a sword, this may be a Beheading of John the Baptist. The Temptation of St Anthony has also been suggested.<sup>138</sup> Taken individually, none of these proposals is secure: the weathering is too severe to anchor a narrative with certainty. Yet the range of suggestions is itself revealing. Across the literature, the proposed figures fall into broader categories familiar from Ossory typology: (Daniel, David); martyrs who prefigure Christ through

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<sup>138</sup> Edwards, "An Early Group of Crosses from the Kingdom of Ossory," 146; Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 133; Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period*, 11; Henry, *La sculpture irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles de l'ère chrétienne*, 199; Henry, *Early Christian Irish Art*, 48; Henry, "The Celtic Crosses of Slievenamon,"; Henry, *Irish High Crosses*, 21ff; Roe, *The High Crosses of Western Ossory*, 51; Brandt-Förster, *Das Irische Hochkreuz: Ursprung, Entwicklung*, 31ff.

suffering (John the Baptist); and apostolic witnesses who recognise Christ (John the Evangelist, or the Baptist recognising Christ). Despite the uncertainty of specific scenes, these recurring interpretative clusters point toward a coherent typological sequence of prophet, martyr, and apostolic witness—figures who collectively prefigure Christ and model sanctity.

Such an overarching reading aligns cleanly with the wider Ossory programme: on the Ahenny and Kilkieran monuments, the arm terminals frequently distil key elements of biblical typology, focusing on figures who embody exemplary obedience, suffering, or recognition. The south arm of the South Cross appears to participate in precisely this logic: a compact cycle of witness under trial, framed as a theological pendant to the equestrian and ornamental registers below. Alternative proposals—such as Jacob wrestling, eremitic temptation scenes, or additional martyrdoms—remain possible at the level of individual panels, but they do not disrupt the broader interpretative pattern. In its fragmentary state, the south arm functions less as a set of recoverable narrative scenes and more as a concentrated typological cluster: a quartet of prophet, martyr, and apostle figures whose shared theme is fidelity under pressure, prefiguring Christ and modelling sanctity within the Ossory theological grammar.

### **North Face**

The cross head of the north side is similarly too eroded to allow for a full reconstruction. The shaft is divided into three panels, containing a combination of spiral scrolls and tightly structured single strand interlace in a fretwork design. The base is also significantly worn, but some traces of a panel of negative and positive squares remain.<sup>139</sup> These squares are arranged to form sunken squares and T—shapes, reinforcing the interplay between

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

rectilinear and curvilinear elements. This combination of squares and spirals reinforces Kilree's distinctive balance: where Ahenny emphasises narrative density, Kilree explores the tension between order and fluidity through ornament. The primary register of the north face is ornamental—spirals, fretwork, and geometric squares—underscoring cosmic order and visual rhythm. In addition, secondary associations with baptismal T-shapes and square motifs are plausible, and the two work side-by-side.

Kilree is less well preserved than Ahenny or Kilkieran, yet its programme remains legible enough to identify key themes. It combines regional continuity—spirals, interlace, bosses, equestrian traces—with distinctive departures: the single central boss on the east face, the roll mouldings, and the emphatic placement of the Adoration of the Magi. Thematically, Kilree underscores kingship and recognition of divine authority. The Magi's homage, placed so prominently, ties the monument to discourses of Christian sovereignty; this resonates with the political context of the Ossory crosses, where inscriptions, dynastic overlays, and capstones collectively staged the intertwining of ecclesiastical and royal legitimacy. The possible typological cycle on the south face further reinforces themes of prophetic witness, martyrdom, and apostolic authority, aligning Kilree with the exegetical habits of Insular art. The lost capstone is crucial: whether beehive or shrine-shaped, it would have crowned these themes with an architectural allusion to either ascetic enclosure or the Holy Sepulchre, reinforcing the monument's reliquary-like presence. This conclusion is necessarily inferential: the tenon proves that some form of capstone existed, and the beehive and house-shaped types attested at neighbouring Ossory sites provide the most likely models, but the exact profile and emphasis of the lost top cannot now be verified. Even so, the very fact that Kilree once bore a capstone invites viewers to imagine its programme as vertically completed by an architectural sign of enclosure or Jerusalem, in line with the cap-bearing crosses elsewhere in the region. Even in its worn state, Kilree

demonstrates how the Ossory group extended the cross-as-catena principle: layering scripture, typology, and kingship into a visual chain that bound temporal rulers to eternal truths. Placed just below a (now-lost) capstone that likely signalled Jerusalem, the Magi's homage folds royal recognition into pilgrimage logic: rulers approach the Christ who is crowned above, as Irish pilgrims approach the cross crowned by a miniature Jerusalem. Whether beehive or house-form, the missing capstone would have completed this logic: kingship acknowledged below, divine city signalled above.

## 2.5 Killamery Cross

The Killamery Cross (Figure 30) is the final monument of the Ossory group. While it shares structural features with Ahenny, Kilkieran, and Kilree—ringed cross-head, stepped base, and ornamental panels—it diverges in two unique ways: it bears an inscription naming Máel Sechnaill, and it is crowned with a house-shaped capstone rather than a beehive. These features make Killamery a critical point of comparison, demonstrating both continuity with and innovation within the Ossory sculptural tradition. Killamery's divergence — the named inscription and house-shaped capstone — makes it the most overtly political of the Ossory monuments. Where Ahenny emphasises theological ascent, and Kilkieran reliquary containment, Killamery proclaims kingship and shrine-status directly in stone.



*Figure 28: Killamery High Cross*

## East Face

The base of the east face consists of two steps. The lower is incised with a row of crosses, while the second contains traces of a figural panel too eroded for secure identification. The upper step is bordered by a fine incised line, a framing device that sets off the decorative programme above.<sup>140</sup> The shaft presents three marigold motifs in vertical sequence, striking choice given their association with renewal and cosmic order. Above, interlace gives way to one of the most unusual features of the Ossory corpus: serpents biting a double-headed serpent emerging from plaited strands. The motif occupies a compact rectangular panel in which several slender, sinuous bodies twist around a central, thicker serpent whose head is doubled, one face turned upward and one downward. The flanking serpents are shown in strict profile, their jaws clamped onto the central body rather than striking outward, and all are entangled with a dense plait of interlace that fills the background. No serpent moves freely across the field; each is visually tethered by the braided strands or by its own coiling. The serpentine motif is unique among the Ossory monuments and gains added significance because this is the only cross inscribed to a named king, Máel Sechnaill. At first glance, serpents may suggest chaos, sin, or diabolic threat—long-standing associations in Christian exegesis. Yet patristic commentary insists that serpents were not univocal symbols. The brazen serpent of Numbers 21, lifted up by Moses to heal the Israelites, became for Augustine and others a Christological type: a sign of salvation through paradox, the image of death that brings life (cf. John 3:14–15). George and Isabel Henderson have noted a similar polyvalence in Pictish sculpture, where serpents on bosses can symbolise not only danger but also renewal and baptism, their shedding of skin evoking rebirth. Insular

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<sup>140</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 121–23.

traditions reinforced these layered readings.<sup>141</sup> Adomnán's *Life of Columba* recounts how the saint blessed Iona so that serpents could no longer harm its inhabitants:

Then he [Columba] raised his holy hands and blessed all this island of ours, saying: 'From this hour, from this instant, all poisons of snakes shall have no power to harm either men or cattle in the lands of this island for as long as the people who dwell here keep Christ's commandments.'<sup>142</sup>

Here serpents stand not for random evil but for disorder neutralised by sanctity. Set beside the inscription to Máel Sechnaill, the serpentine panel thus works as a political-theological analogy: just as Columba secured his island against harm, so the king is figured as protector of his people, restraining threats both natural and political—pagan, Viking, or dynastic. The serpents' polyvalence—danger, healing, renewal—becomes a visual resource for articulating kingship as both defensive and transformative.

At the top of the east shaft another striking image extends this logic: a grotesque spreadeagled quadruped, its frontal eyes and profile jaws producing a hybrid, almost monstrous composition.<sup>143</sup> The body stretches diagonally across the panel, limbs splayed toward the corners, while the head is twisted so that both frontal eyes and a long, profile snout can be seen at once. The result is an impossible combination of viewpoints—neither fully human nor fully animal—that heightens its unsettling, monstrous quality. If the serpents embodied danger overcome or transfigured, this hybrid intensifies the theme of chaos confronted and

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<sup>141</sup> George Henderson and Isabel Henderson, *Art of the Picts: Sculpture and Metalwork in Early Medieval Scotland* (Thames and Hudson, 2011), 75–85.

<sup>142</sup> Adomnán, *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, ed. and trans. Alan Orr Anderson and Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson (Nelson, 1961).

<sup>143</sup> Roe, *The High Crosses of Western Ossory*, 48.

contained. The juxtaposition is deliberate. As the viewer's eye ascends the shaft, disorder appears in successive guises—serpents, hybrid beast—yet always within a framework that points upward toward resolution. The composition itself reinforces this upward pull: both serpent panel and hybrid beast are vertically stacked, each panel framed by neat mouldings and surmounted by further structured ornament. The eye is never left to dwell in the chaotic forms alone; it is drawn to the architectural and ornamental frames that enclose them and finally to the gabled cap. This vertical choreography strengthens the case for reading the imagery as a staged progression from threat to sanctified resolution, rather than as isolated emblems of danger. Negative evidence matters here: unlike serpents-as-chaos in pagan or mythic registers, these serpents are formally bound, not free-roaming; the hybrid beast is grotesque but framed, not uncontained. The fact that every serpent is either biting into another body or interlaced with the braided strands, and that none is shown striking outward into open space, visually enacts restraint rather than unchecked attack. The central double-headed serpent, far from rampaging across the field, is itself surrounded and held within the plait. This containment, together with the ordered repetition of the coils, supports readings of mastered or transfigured danger more strongly than images of unbounded chaos. Both features argue against a reading of unbounded disorder and instead confirm a visual logic of containment and resolution. The capstone above provides that resolution: the domed or house-like form crowns the monument with an image of sanctity, shrine, or heavenly Jerusalem. Read as a sequence, the monument stages a progression: serpents tamed, hybrid overcome, capstone sanctified. The shaft thus becomes a vertical drama in which threat is acknowledged but contained, and kingship—anchored by Máel Sechnaill's inscription—is aligned with the divine power that ensures ultimate

triumph. The cross is no mere ornament but a theological-political programme: at its base, the king's name; along its shaft, the conquest of disorder; at its summit, the shrine-sign of heaven itself.

The head retains a single boss at its centre, ringed by faded interlace and rope mouldings, tying Killamery visually to the Ahenny group while signalling its distinctiveness through simplification and emphasis on the central boss. The head of the cross features a single central boss, surrounded by a ring bearing faded interlace. The rope moulding framing the ring is consistent with the Ahenny group, creating a visual link between this monument and the wider tradition of high crosses.

### **West Face**

The lower step of the base on the west face is adorned with panels of interlace that form multiple cross shapes within the pattern, embedding Christian symbols into abstract ornament. Above this, bosses arranged in pairs once bore spiral or trumpet decoration, though these are now badly worn. This deliberate incorporation of crosses within the interlace reinforces the sacred nature of the design, embedding Christian symbolism within the ornamental framework. The upper step of the base originally contained three groups of two bosses, possibly embellished with spiral and trumpet patterns; however, these details are now heavily worn.<sup>144</sup> The top step features the inscription we have discussed previously, which reads 'OR DO MAEL SECHNAILL', a dedication that aligns the cross and wider site to king Mael Sechnaill, binding text, image, and capstone into a single claim: the king's name is set beneath a reliquary roof, his rule aligned with intercession and resurrection.<sup>145</sup> Its

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<sup>144</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 121–23.

<sup>145</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 122.

position high on the base, immediately beneath the shaft and not tucked away on a side face, ensures that the text confronts the viewer as part of the main visual axis.

Combined with the rarity of named royal inscriptions on Irish high crosses, this placement argues against a purely commemorative function. Instead, the inscription operates as a public, performative claim, integrating Máel Sechnaill's name into the same visual field as the abstract crosses, bosses, and capstone above. This rare survival also transforms the monument into both prayer and proclamation: a visible request for intercession and a public assertion of royal presence. When combined with the serpent motif on the opposite side, the inscription binds text and image into a single programme of sanctified kingship. The shaft panels continue the theme of contemplation through abstraction: the lower panel presents a key pattern rendered in unusually low relief, creating shifting optical effects where lines can be read alternately as crosses or diamonds, while above, a circular openwork pattern introduces further play between geometry and symbolism. At the top of the shaft, traces of figural carving survive; only partial outlines are now legible: a larger, central figure seems to be seated, with two figures kneeling on its shoulders holding a rounded object, possibly a crown, above its head. A small, winged creature sits in the bottom right-hand corner, the hand of the seated figure places on its head, and there are worn details in the rest of the panel.<sup>146</sup> No clear cross-beam or resting posture can be seen, but the gesture of the arms suggests either extension in blessing or a cruciform pose. The Crucifixion seems a likely interpretation here, following the patterns of other crosses in both the Ossory and Scripture groups of crosses, and this seems more likely than other interpretations, such as Christ in Glory, or God Blessing the Seventh Day, though the worn nature of the carving means that it is

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

impossible to reach a definitive conclusion.<sup>147</sup> It may be that scholars were glimpsing fragments of a larger cycle extending into the cross arms, a reminder that the monument's imagery was once far more comprehensive. The centre of the cross head has a circular whorl, and the north arm shows a horseman chasing a stag, a dog already on its back. The south arm shows a chariot procession, including a man with a crosier, and human figures in front: this appears to be a hunting scene similar to those seen elsewhere in the group, rather than Elijah and his chariot, as suggested by Stokes; there is nothing to explicitly identify the figure as such.<sup>148</sup> Above the head is a seated figure with bare legs, holding up another figure on the knees, while a figure approaches from the right; suggestions have included Eve holding up one of her children, possibly Abel, David playing the harp, or Paul and Anthony.<sup>149</sup> Given the prevalence of David imagery elsewhere, and the connection that this has to kingship, I am inclined to interpret the figure as David: particularly given the presence of a named king on the same face of the cross. Equally important is the inscription: unlike most high crosses, Killamery speaks explicitly in text. The combination of inscription, serpent imagery, and capstone fuses verbal, figural, and architectural registers into a single claim of sanctified kingship. The head is distinctive: a swirling whorl or disc-like spiral design, imparting a sense of motion that complements the shifting, dynamic ornament of the shaft. The primary reading of the west face is a

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<sup>147</sup> Roe, *The High Crosses of Western Ossory*, 44; Margaret Stokes, *The High Crosses of Castledermot and Durrow* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1898), v.; Margaret Stokes, *Early Christian Art in Ireland* (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1911), 119; Stokes, *Notes on the High Crosses of Moone, Drumcliffe, Termonfechin and Killamery*, 567 and 572-78; Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 122; G. Visser, A. Voskuilen, and W. Zandstra, *Die Ierse Kreuzigungsikonografie van de 7de tot de 13de Eeuw. I: Tekst; II: Catalogus*, 1st ed. (Utrecht, 1981), 8, 39-40, 64, 98; Henry, *La sculpture irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles de l'ère chrétienne*, 208; Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period*, 102 and 105; Henry, *Early Christian Irish Art*, 46, Henry, *Irish High Crosses*, 22-24 and 67.

<sup>148</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 122; Stokes, *The High Crosses of Castledermot and Durrow*, v.; Stokes, *Early Christian Art in Ireland*, 119; Stokes, *Notes on the High Crosses of Moone, Drumcliffe, Termonfechin and Killamery*, 567 and 572-78.

<sup>149</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 122; Roe, *The High Crosses of Western Ossory*, 45; Henry, *La sculpture irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles de l'ère chrétienne*, 208; Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period*, 102 and 105; Henry, *Early Christian Irish Art*, 46, Henry, *Irish High Crosses*, 22-24, 67.

combined programme of inscription and abstract ornament proclaiming Máel Sechnaill's kingship under divine sanction, and key secondary figural identifications (Crucifixion or Sabbath Blessing) enrich but do not displace this focus. Already, it seems unlikely that the inscription is intended to be mere commemoration: its placement in the programme makes it theological-political.

### **South Face**

The south base is divided into three panels. Only the left, with interlace, is secure; the others are too worn for certain reading. The second step may once have shown human interlace around a sunken cross, a motif paralleled at Ahenny North, though erosion leaves this tentative.<sup>150</sup> The top step preserves interlace, ensuring continuity with other sides, and the shaft carries three stacked panels of single-strand interlace, transitioning into spirals near the cross arms, creating a sense of rhythmic transformation. At the end of the south arm, a panel has been identified as Noah's Ark, though weathering makes this uncertain.<sup>151</sup> The panel preserves the outline of a box-like structure set on a horizontal base line, with faint indications of internal division and a curved or gabled upper edge. Above or beside this form, fragmentary traces of small, rounded shapes may record animal heads or apertures, though the weathering makes these ambiguous. If correct, the theme of deliverance fits well with the serpent-vanquishing imagery and the broader Ossory habit of invoking biblical episodes of salvation. Even if the Ark identification is set aside, the combination of interlace, possible human-interlace around a sunken cross, and a boxed, boat-like form at the arm's end points toward protection within a bounded vessel or sign. The repeated framing of figures and patterns—people around a cross,

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<sup>150</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 122.

<sup>151</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 122; Roe, *The High Crosses of Western Ossory*, 47.

forms within a rectangular panel—mirrors the way serpents are bound on the east face, suggesting a shared preoccupation with danger mastered and life preserved within divinely ordered structures. The primary reading of the south face is deliverance (Noah/Ark or equivalent), tied to salvation themes, and other secondary readings include abstract interlace as visual containment.

### **North Face**

The north base carries stepped patterns with geometric decoration, but its upper steps are blank, recalling the sparer bases at Kilkieran. The shaft mirrors the south side with three interlace panels, but the patterns shift noticeably at the bottom of the ring before returning to the earlier scheme, producing deliberate visual variation. As at Kilree, the end of the arm is divided into four squares, arranged in a tight two-by-two grid, each recessed within its own shallow frame so that the group forms a compact cross-like unit at the arm's terminal. The carving is too worn to reveal internal detail, but the deliberate fourfold division and framing recall other uses of quadripartite motifs to signify order, evangelists, or foundational witnesses. The surviving traces in each quadrant have prompted multiple identifications. The top left panel has been read as an embrace—John the Baptist recognising Christ at Durrow—or alternatively as Jacob wrestling the angel.<sup>152</sup> The top right section depicts a figure standing on its head to the left, with another figure in the centre, holding out an object to the right; this has been interpreted as Salome dancing for the head of John the Baptist, the Temptation of St Anthony, and David Killing the Lion, or

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<sup>152</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 123; Stokes, *The High Crosses of Castledermot and Durrow*, v.; Stokes, *Early Christian Art in Ireland*, 119; Stokes, *Notes on the High Crosses of Moone, Drumcliffe, Termonfechin and Killamery*, 567, 572-78; Henry, *La sculpture irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles de l'ère chrétienne*, 208; Henry *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period*, 102 and 105; Henry, *Early Christian Irish Art*, 46, Henry, *Irish High Crosses*, 22-24 and 67; Brandt-Förster, *Das Irische Hochkreuz: Ursprung, Entwicklung*, 78; Visser et al, *Die Ierse Kreuzigungsikonografie van de 7de tot de 13de Eeuw. I: Tekst; II: Catalogus*, 8, 39-40, 64, 98.

the Death of Goliath.<sup>153</sup> The bottom left panel shows two figures, a large object between them which has been identified as the table upon which Zacharias wrote the name of John, though it has also been identified as Paul and Anthony receiving bread in the desert.<sup>154</sup> Finally, the bottom right quadrant shows two figures shown frontally, one holding a child, which seems to be a depiction of Zacharias and Elizabeth with the infant John the Baptist.<sup>155</sup> Individually, none of these identifications is secure—the carving is simply too worn. Yet the pattern of suggestions across the scholarship is strikingly consistent: almost every proposal belongs to one of three categories—prophets preserved under trial (Daniel, David), martyrs or forerunners whose suffering anticipates Christ (primarily John the Baptist), and recognition scenes involving apostolic or prophetic figures (John the Baptist or Evangelist recognising Christ). This clustering strongly implies that the arm once carried a typological cycle of witness under trial, even if the exact scenes cannot be reconstructed. Reading the panel as a Baptist-focused programme is particularly persuasive: it harmonises the majority of identifications, draws support from parallels at Durrow, and integrates cleanly with the face’s existing symbolic repertoire.

Such a reading also aligns with the broader theological logic of the north face.

Beneath the arm-panel, the serpents on the shaft evoke **rebirth through shedding**, a long-standing patristic analogue for baptismal renewal; above, the shrine-like capstone seals the vertical axis with a sign of enclosure or Jerusalem. Between them, the fourfold arm-terminal functions as a typological “hinge”: the Baptist cycle evokes prophecy, martyrdom, and recognition—precisely the themes associated with baptism as both death and new life.

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<sup>153</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 123; Henry, *La sculpture irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles de l'ère chrétienne*, 208; Henry *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period*, 102, 105; Henry, *Early Christian Irish Art*, 46, Henry, *Irish High Crosses*, 22-24 and 67; Brandt-Förster, *Das Irische Hochkreuz: Ursprung, Entwicklung*, 78; Roe, *The High Crosses of Western Ossory*, 43-48.

<sup>154</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 123; Henry, *La sculpture irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles de l'ère chrétienne*, 208; Henry *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period*, 102, 105; Henry, *Early Christian Irish Art*, 46, Henry, *Irish High Crosses*, 22-24, 67.

<sup>155</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 123.

The four-square layout also supports baptismal symbolism more generally: it can evoke the four rivers of Paradise, the four Gospels into which the baptised are incorporated, or more abstract cosmic order. Taken together, these cues form a coherent vertical argument. Serpents mastered on the shaft (rebirth), a fourfold cycle of prophetic witness on the arm (prefiguration), and a reliquary-like capstone above (sacramental enclosure) integrate into a unified baptismal register that simultaneously encodes divine order and royal legitimacy. The rope mouldings at Killamery—with herringbone detailing that mediates between the bold ropes of Ahenny/Kilkieran and the flatter rolls at Kilree—reinforce the monument’s position within an evolving Ossory style rather than a fixed template. The north face therefore carries a primary baptismal reading, centred on rebirth, prophetic witness, and sacramental containment, while still admitting secondary associations with cosmic order and the four corners of the earth. In its surviving state it functions less as recoverable narrative illustration and more as an abstracted theological cluster, consolidating the monument’s soteriological logic and rooting political authority within sacramental symbolism.

The Killamery capstone is radically different from the domed beehives of Ahenny and Kilkieran, and its gabled profile consciously echoes house-shaped reliquaries such as Emly or Moneymusk: portable shrines translated to architectural scale, proclaiming the cross itself a locus of intercession. Such shrines were central in early medieval liturgy and political theology: portable containers of relics, carried in procession, displayed on altars, and invoked in oaths. By crowning the cross with this form, Killamery fuses monumental and portable traditions. The symbolism is rich: the capstone asserts that the cross itself is a reliquary, a house of sanctity, a material locus of intercession. In combination with the inscription, it binds together relic, text, and monument in a programme of kingship and sanctity. Unlike Ahenny’s contemplative ascent, or Kilkieran’s visual rhythm, Killamery

proclaims itself a reliquary in stone, situating Máel Sechnaill's kingship within the framework of relic devotion and ecclesiastical authority. House-shaped reliquaries such as Moneymusk and Emly provide direct models for Killamery's cap, while portable-shrine usage in oath-taking and procession explains its resonance in political theology. While formal resemblance alone cannot prove that the Killamery capstone was consciously modelled on any one surviving shrine, the convergence of gabled profile, ridge-like "roof," and the cross's broader concern with inscription and sanctified kingship makes the reliquary analogy more than casual. It is precisely the kind of architectural translation of portable forms that we see elsewhere in Insular monumental art. The capstone is therefore not decorative but a deliberate reliquary-sign.

Killamery is both continuous with and distinctive from the Ossory group. It shares rope mouldings, spiral and interlace ornament, and structural format. But it innovates boldly: serpent-slaying imagery, grotesque bestial motifs, a rare inscription, and above all the house-shaped capstone. The programme functions on several registers: it is biblical in its depictions of serpent-slaying, Noah's Ark, and the likely depiction of the Crucifixion. It is political, with the inscription linking the cross to Máel Sechnaill, king and patron, and it is theological, adding a capstone to act as reliquary, and imagery of baptism and salvation. Together these elements articulate a vision of kingship sanctified by divine triumph and anchored in the reliquary traditions of Irish Christianity. Killamery thus marks both the culmination and transformation of the Ossory tradition: a monument that proclaims dynastic legitimacy through stone, scripture, and shrine. Killamery's overall programme is primarily political and theological: we see Máel Sechnaill's kingship proclaimed in text, serpent imagery, and reliquary capstone, while secondary layers include baptismal and deliverance motifs, such as Noah, the Ark, and the serpent rebirth). We can largely discredit interpretations of serpent or grotesque imagery as purely mythic/pagan survivals: the

evidence supports deliberate Christian exegesis.

## 2.6 The Ossory Crosses: A Summary

What most clearly binds the Ossory group together is a shared formal grammar. All four sites display the same core elements: stepped bases with figural and ornamental panels, ringed heads with bosses, and crowning capstones. Spirals, knotwork, key patterns, and marigolds interweave across the group, creating a consistent visual vocabulary that ties these monuments firmly into the wider Insular artistic tradition. Figural bases are a particular hallmark, anchoring the crosses in narrative as well as abstract design: Daniel in the Lions' Den, the Mission to the Apostles, equestrian processions, funerary or royal themes. This consistency of form and repertoire marks Ossory as a coherent regional tradition, rather than a scatter of isolated experiments. Within this common grammar, the Ossory group's signature innovation is its insistence on capstones. Beehives belted like reliquaries at Ahenny and Kilkieran, the lost tenon at Kilree, and at Killamery a gabled, shrine-form cap all invite viewers to read the cross as a reliquary in stone. Earlier scholarship wrestled with the beehive type—whether it recalled the monastic *clochán* hut, the dome of the Holy Sepulchre, or the lid of a reliquary. In the Ossory corpus I argue that these meanings converge: the capstone can simultaneously evoke ascetic enclosure, Jerusalem's resurrection shrine, and the presence of relics. Repetition at Ahenny and Kilkieran and variation at Killamery strongly suggest the capstone as the theological signature of the group, the architectural device that crowns each monument as shrine and summit.

The figural programmes that unfold beneath these caps resist any single interpretation. At Ahenny North, the base imagery may allude to Eden, eremitic retreat, or post-lapsarian struggle, while the west face accommodates both Christ's Mission to the Apostles and potential dynastic overlays, whether the tenth-century Cormac mac

Cuilennáin or the mythic Art mac Cuinn. At Ahenny South, Daniel in the Lions' Den, processions, and hunting scenes articulate deliverance and divine protection. Kilkieran continues the equestrian motif, balancing martial symbolism with echoes of relic translation. Kilree introduces the Magi and may include John the Baptist and Daniel imagery, reinforcing themes of kingship, martyrdom, and salvation. Killamery's serpents and grotesques, sharpened by its unique royal inscription, function as a manifesto of sanctified rulership. Across the group, ambiguity is not a weakness but a strategy: multivalence seems to be deliberate, inviting audiences to layer biblical exegesis, liturgical cycles, and dynastic memory into a single visual field.

Taken together, the Ossory crosses are not simply 'Bibles in stone', but monuments positioned at the nexus of theology and power. Their iconography intersects repeatedly with themes of kingship, legitimacy, and dynastic continuity: David as anointed ruler, apostles commissioned as bishops, Magi as royal archetypes. Killamery makes this link explicit by fusing inscription, image, and capstone into a programme of sanctified sovereignty.

Elsewhere the claim is less direct but no less forceful: the equestrian processions, serpent-slayers, and apostolic commissions all encode models of kingship beneath the reliquary summit of the capstone. In this framework the capstone emerges as the visual and theological climax. Beehive or house-shaped, reliquary or sepulchre, it crowns the monument with a sign of heavenward ascent while anchoring dynastic and ecclesiastical identity in stone. It makes visible the convergence of shrine, tomb, and tabernacle, transforming each cross into an intercessory structure in the open air.

The Ossory group therefore represents a distinctive regional idiom within the high cross tradition: consistent in its ornamental grammar, experimental in its figural schemes, and unified above all by its repeated use of capstones. These monuments functioned not

only as theological statements but as instruments of memory, identity, and authority— artefacts where scripture, kingship, and intercession met. Yet, as striking as this regional idiom is, the Ossory crosses also be seen as preparing the ground for the more ambitious ‘scripture crosses’ of Clonmacnoise and Monasterboice. If Ossory shows how capstone and base imagery could frame theological and dynastic narratives, the great crosses of the next chapter expand that strategy into panoramic biblical cycles, transforming the high cross into a full-scale visual theology.

## Chapter 3: The Muiredach Group of Capstone Crosses

The Ossory group shows how sovereignty and sanctity could be fused in stone, with capstones functioning as reliquary-signs that crowned dynastic authority with resurrection hope. At the great monastic centres of Durrow, Kells, Clonmacnoise, and Monasterboice, the high cross was drawn into the much larger contest between rival *paruchia*e and the dynasties that supported them. To understand the Muiredach group of capstone crosses, then, it is essential to first set them within the shifting political-ecclesiastical landscape of the period—where Armagh sought to consolidate Patrician primacy, Columban communities reasserted their authority from Iona to Kells, and independent foundations like Clonmacnoise mediated between competing powers.

### 3.1 Political-Ecclesiastical Content: Paruchiaie, Armagh and Rivalry

The iconographic programmes of the great ‘scripture crosses’ cannot be fully understood apart from the ecclesiastical rivalries of the ninth and tenth centuries. Alongside the fractured dynastic map of *túatha*, the Irish church was structured by powerful federations of monasteries, or *paruchia*e, each bound to the authority of a founding saint.<sup>156</sup> Key examples include Patrick at Armagh, Columba at Iona and later Kells, Brigid at Kildare, and Ciarán at Clonmacnoise each of whom commanded networks that were as much political as spiritual.<sup>157</sup> These federations competed not only for prestige and relics but also for the patronage of kings, whose legitimacy was often reinforced—or contested—through monastic endorsement.

The rise of Armagh illustrates the scale of this competition. By the early ninth century it had fashioned itself as the primatial see of Ireland through the

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<sup>156</sup> Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland*, 166; Sharpe, “Some Problems Concerning the Organisation of the Church in Early Medieval Ireland,” 241; Etchingham, “The Implications of Paruchia,” 139.

<sup>157</sup> Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 14; Etchingham, “The Implications of Paruchia,” 147.

strategic consolidation of Patrician texts and relics. The *Book of Armagh*, bringing together Muirchú, Tírechán, and the *Liber Angeli*, transformed Patrick from local missionary into apostle of all Ireland.<sup>158</sup> Tírechán's claims of angelic revelation granting Armagh authority over every Irish church effectively amounted to a theological charter of supremacy.<sup>159</sup> This textual authority was reinforced further through relics, which provided a physical locus of sanctity. By claiming possession of Patrick's relics, Armagh established itself as a centre of pilgrimage where spiritual capital translated into political leverage. In this context, relics were not merely devotional artefacts but instruments of legitimacy—attracting patronage from kings, monastic federations, and lay elites alike. They played a critical role in the consolidation of ecclesiastical power and the materialisation of Armagh's supremacy within both sacred and secular domains.

The Columban familia responded with its own strategies, offering an alternative model of ecclesiastical power—less centralised, more missionary—oriented, and closely tied to royal patronage.<sup>160</sup> This threat to Armagh's claims to supremacy gained momentum with the production of Adomnán's *Life of Columba* in the late seventh century: a text was designed to present Columba as a saint equal to Patrick: a miracle-working founder who converted rulers, built churches, and commanded spiritual authority across multiple kingdoms. This hagiography was not simply devotional but political—aimed at establishing Columba as a national saint and Iona as a legitimate rival to Armagh.<sup>161</sup> By the ninth century, Viking

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<sup>158</sup> Kathleen Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society* (Routledge, 2008), 302; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 426.

<sup>159</sup> Tírechán, *Collectanea*, 18.24–63; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 426.

<sup>160</sup> Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 250, 587; AU 807.4

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

incursions forced the Columban community to re-centre, relocating the relics of Columba to Ireland.<sup>162</sup> As Máire Herbert has argued, the translation of Columba's relics functioned as a strategic re-centring: it reasserted Columban authority within Ireland's contested ecclesiastical landscape and safeguarded the saint's prestige at a moment when relics defined institutional legitimacy.<sup>163</sup> The high crosses at Kells can be seen to materialise this shift in stone. Most striking is the so-called Cross of St Patrick and St Columba, where the two saints are depicted in deliberate harmony. This pairing was a calculated visual statement. Armagh had promoted Patrick alone as Ireland's national apostle; Kells countered with a claim that was both rival and conciliatory: not Patrick alone, but Patrick and Columba together. The monument thus performed a double move—asserting Columban independence while also positioning the community within the broader apostolic framework of Irish and universal Christianity.

Between these poles stood Clonmacnoise, founded by Ciarán and marked by its deliberate independence from either *paruchia*. Geographically central and politically agile, it cultivated ties with both Northern and Southern Uí Néill while resisting absorption by Armagh or Kells. Its monuments reveal this mediating role: the Cross of the Scriptures, with its fusion of commissioning imagery, resurrection typology, and capstone symbolism, proclaimed a universal theology while anchoring it in local cult. In this way Clonmacnoise staged itself as a neutral yet powerful locus of sanctity—one capable of negotiating rival claims while attracting royal and monastic patronage alike.

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<sup>162</sup> Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland 400-1200*, 253-254.

<sup>163</sup> Máire Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry: The History and Hagiography of the Monastic Familia of Columba* (Clarendon Press, 1998), 48.

Within this context, the capstone form takes on a fuller significance. Beehive and house-shaped crowns were not only exegetical allusions to the Sepulchre, reliquary, or monastic hut; they were architectural declarations within the theatre of parochial rivalry. To inscribe a king's name beneath such a capstone, to combine Petrine *Traditio Clavium* with resurrection imagery, was to embed dynastic sovereignty within the sanctity of a particular familia. In the Muiredach group of crosses, the capstone thus crystallises the dual contest: exegetical multivalence on one hand, and institutional rivalry on the other.

### 3.2 Scripture Crosses

The so-called Scripture Crosses mark a decisive new phase in the development of the Irish high cross. Where the Ossory monuments articulated sovereignty and sanctity through relatively compact schemes—often anchored by capstones—the monuments at Durrow, Kells, Clonmacnoise, and Monasterboice expand into fully developed biblical cycles. In many respects, these monuments represent the full maturation of an artistic trajectory first articulated in the Iona School, whose ringed-form crosses and manuscript-derived ornament provided the precedent for the expansive iconographic cycles visible at Durrow, Kells, Clonmacnoise, and Monasterboice. Their scale and narrative density have earned them their modern designation, though the term is not without problems. What it does capture, however, is the ambition of these monuments: to render salvation history in stone, from Creation to Judgement, in a manner at once exegetical, liturgical, and political. This expansion was not simply a matter of size or ornament. It reflects the charged ecclesiastical landscape outlined above, in which Armagh, the Columban familia, and Clonmacnoise vied for primacy. In this context, crosses became more than devotional images: they were monumental statements of authority, embedding saintly legacy and dynastic claim within cycles of scripture. If Ossory's capstone crosses staged multivalent visual theologies at a

regional scale, the Scripture Crosses embody a new conceptual ambition, in which stone becomes the medium for a comprehensive visual theology—public, programmatic, and universal. Chief among them is Muiredach’s Cross at Monasterboice, frequently described as the masterpiece of the tradition. Its programme combines narrative coherence, typological depth, and monumental scale, setting a benchmark for the group as a whole.

Together, these monuments represent the full flowering of Insular visual exegesis: images, texts, and theologies woven into multivalent cycles that spoke simultaneously to monastic elites, dynastic patrons, and the wider lay communities who gathered in their shadow. The best point of entry into this development is the cross at Durrow, whose scale and iconography signal the first clear step from the Ossory tradition into the ambitious scriptural cycles of the Muiredach group.

### 3.2.1 Durrow

Durrow, founded by Saint Columba (Colum Cille) in the sixth century, was one of the most significant early medieval monastic centres in Ireland.<sup>164</sup> Situated in present—day County Offaly, it became a major hub of Columban influence, second only to Iona in its importance. Durrow was renowned for its scholarly activities, particularly in scriptural study and manuscript production, including the Book of Durrow, and, like its peers, integrates dense biblical cycles with an ornamental vocabulary shared across Insular sculpture. Situated in the Southern Uí Néill heartlands, the monument stands at the intersection of Columban identity, dynastic power, and exegetical display. The Durrow high cross (Figure 31) is an important addition to the site, reflecting both local and wider Insular artistic traditions, and serves as an important focal point for understanding the relationship between

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<sup>164</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 172.

monasticism, kingship, and the evolving role of high crosses in medieval Ireland.

Durrow's inscriptions themselves contribute to this sense of deliberate monumental planning. Unlike the more typical practice, in which an east or west face is reserved for a dedicatory panel, Durrow places its two inscription zones on adjacent faces—west and north—an arrangement highly atypical within the Irish high cross corpus. Epigraphic analysis by Ó Murchadha and Ó Murchú confirms that these panels belong to the original design: at the point where the shaft enters the base, the cross measures eighteen by thirteen inches, and both inscriptions share a common height of roughly twelve and a half inches. Each panel was set within a shallow half-round moulding approximately three-quarters of an inch in width, demonstrating that the inscriptions were conceived architecturally as framed, integral components of the cross rather than casual additions.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Domhnall Ó Murchadha and Giollamuire Ó Murchú, "Fragmentary Inscriptions from the West Cross at Durrow, the South Cross at Clonmacnois, and the Cross of Kinnitty," *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 118 (1988): 54.



*Figure 29: Durrow High Cross, East Face*

## East Face

The east face exemplifies this expansion of narrative ambition. The base appears blank, and the plinth is badly worn, though faint traces suggest two distinct sections. On the left is a suggestion of a ringed cross, or lamb with ringed head, with a small ring on the right, and possible figural decoration in the centre; there are traces of a human figure flanked by an animal or bird, or two centaurs face to face: a definitive identification is impossible.<sup>166</sup>

Above this, the lowest figural panel is also heavily worn but retains enough structure to suggest a coherent composition. A central standing figure—almost certainly Christ—is flanked by two attendant figures, probably angels. Beneath his feet are two smaller profile figures supporting an open book between them, likely representing Apostles. Given the book and the bilateral arrangement, Peter and Paul are the most plausible candidates, especially in light of the *Traditio Clavium* imagery attested elsewhere both at Durrow and within the wider Ossory group, the significance of which we will discuss in Chapter 4.<sup>167</sup> In its basic visual grammar, the panel therefore resembles a post-Resurrection, Raised-Christ or commissioning schema.

At the same time, the panel has attracted a strikingly wide range of interpretations in the literature—including Christ with the disciples at Emmaus, the Trinity, Christ in Glory, Colum Cille with angels, and David as King.<sup>168</sup> The very breadth of proposals reflects the worn state of the carving, but it also highlights the panel's capacity to register multiple layers of meaning within early medieval habits of typological reading. Among these possibilities, two identifications remain most plausible given the surviving evidence: a generalised Raised Christ image or the Supper at Emmaus. The Raised-Christ

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<sup>166</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 79.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>168</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 79; Stokes, *The High Crosses of Castledermot and Durrow*, 8-12; Porter, *Crosses and Culture of Ireland*, 85-88; Brandt-Förster, *Das Irische Hochkreuz: Ursprung, Entwicklung*, 123 and 67; Gsänger, *Irland: Insel des Abel: Die Irischen Hochkreuze*, 72.

reading fits the compositional structure but is weakened by the absence of triumphal attributes such as a cross-staff, mandorla, or cruciform nimbus—elements normally present in Ascension or *Maiestas Domini* depictions. By contrast, the Emmaus interpretation aligns both with the visual cues (Christ instructing with book-bearing disciples below) and with Durrow’s monastic context, where the Emmaus narrative—centred on the recognition of Christ through scripture and Eucharistic revelation—would have carried particular theological resonance.

Thus, while the panel’s structure echoes Raised-Christ and commissioning imagery, thematically and contextually the Emmaus identification provides the most coherent primary reading, with other interpretations surviving as secondary or reception-layer possibilities.

Above this scene, a panel of four circular motifs arranged in a square, each recessed within its own shallow frame, closely comparable to designs at Ahenny and at Monasterboice. The presence of this motif, repeated across different regions, suggests its role as part of a shared symbolic vocabulary rather than a purely local invention.<sup>169</sup> This makes it less likely that the four circles are merely decorative: repetition at Monasterboice and Ahenny suggests that they carried cosmological or Eucharistic connotations, not empty ornament. The panel above shows a figure in profile on the left, a sword over the right shoulder, and an object in the left hand. Another figure sits to the right, his left knee on the ground, and holding an axe above the altar in his left hand, with this right above the altar and a rope around his body. An angel holds the hind leg of a ram in front of the second figure. Harbison argues that the scene depicts the Sacrifice of Isaac, one of the most widely circulated Old Testament types of Christ’s Passion in early medieval art, and this seems convincing; the figure on the left is Abraham, holding the fire

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<sup>169</sup> Ó Murchadha and Ó Murchú, “Fragmentary Inscriptions,” 54.

for the sacrificial flame, and Isaac sits to his right. The inclusion of this scene here also situates Durrow firmly within the exegetical culture of typology: Abraham's obedience and Isaac's near-sacrifice prefigure God's offering of Christ, aligning Durrow with the same visual exegesis articulated at Monasterboice.<sup>170</sup> Above this is a scene of Christ wearing a long robe, a cross staff in his left hand and a sceptre in his right, with the lamb in a circle above his head, and interlace below his feet. Angels sit to the right and the left, the left of which is blowing a pipe with a human head attached. Interpretations have included the Last Judgement, Christ in Glory, *Majestas Domini* and the Second Coming.<sup>171</sup> Of these, the *Majestas Domini* seems the most convincing; the combination of Christ enthroned, flanked by angels, bearing regalia, and surmounted by a symbolic Lamb corresponds closely to other Insular examples of the *Majestas* type, particularly the capstone of the Cross of the Scriptures at Clonmacnoise, which offers a striking parallel in both composition and theological emphasis. This resonance reinforces the likelihood that Durrow's sculptor was consciously engaging with a shared iconographic vocabulary of divine enthronement. Moreover, the comparison drawn by Harbison between this image and the 'Angel of the Ascension' on Muiredach's Cross further situates the Durrow panel within an Ascension–*Majestas* continuum: both types envision Christ at the threshold between the earthly and heavenly realms, attended by angels who serve as mediators of celestial authority.<sup>172</sup> This Ascension inflection is particularly important for understanding Durrow's architectural

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<sup>170</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 79.

<sup>171</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 79; Rev. Sterling de Courcy Williams, "The Old Graveyards in Durrow Parish," *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* (1897): 134–47; Stokes, *The High Crosses of Castledermot and Durrow*, 8–12; Arthur C. Champneys, *Irish Ecclesiastical Architecture, with Some Notice of Similar or Related Work in England, Scotland, and Elsewhere* (G. Bell & Sons; Hodges, Figgis & Co. Ltd, 1910), 83, 85f, 95; Henry Crawford, "A Descriptive List of Early Irish Crosses," *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 37 (1907): 225; J. Romilly Allen, *The High Crosses of Ireland* (Whiting & Co., 1887), 134, 228; Porter, *Crosses and Culture of Ireland*, 85–88; Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period*, 99–107; Henry, *La sculpture irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles de l'ère chrétienne*, 204; Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period*, 166, 173 and 180; Henry, "A Cross at Durrow (Offaly)," *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 93 (1963): 83–84; Henry, *Irish High Crosses*, 18, 30ff and 66; Henry, *Irish Art During the Viking Invasions*, 136ff; Henry, *Irish Art In the Romanesque Period*, 123ff; Weir, *Early Ireland: A Field Guide*, 211; Brandt-Förster, *Das Irische Hochkreuz: Ursprung, Entwicklung*, 123 and 67.

<sup>172</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 79

logic. On many Scripture Crosses, the Majestas or Ascension image occupies a liminal or upper register, functioning as an iconographic marker of Christ's entry into heaven. At Durrow, the enthroned Christ appears immediately beneath the elaborately worked summit zone; read in tandem with the capstone imagery, it underscores the notion that the uppermost region of the monument represents the point of transition between earth and heaven. Thus, identifying this scene as *Majestas Domini* not only accords best with its iconographic details, but also reinforces the cross's broader theological programme, in which the summit acts as the visual climax of the vertical axis—a symbolic ascent culminating in divine authority, judgement, and heavenly intercession. The interpretation of the Last Judgement is also a possible reading, and the two are not automatically mutually exclusive: together, Isaac and the Last Judgement frame salvation history in miniature—promise, fulfilment, and ultimate reckoning—and set the stage for the vertical culmination of this sequence in the *Majestas Domini*, where the narrative moves from earthly history into the heavenly realm, anticipating the threshold symbolism of the summit.

This ascending movement—from typology to judgement to the enthroned Christ—naturally extends into the arms of the cross, where the programme turns toward the theme of divinely sanctioned kingship. The south arm shows a figure seated, facing the central Christ, placing his hand on a lyre on his lap, while the north arm shows a figure with his knee on the back of a lion, pulling the jaws of the animal asunder with his hands. A lamb sits in front of him. Given the prevalence of Davidic imagery elsewhere, it seems plausible to identify this as David Playing the Lyre, and David Slaying the Lion; this also fits with the theme of Killamery, of using similar, related iconography in a confined space, as with John the Baptist.<sup>173</sup> This sequence of biblical scenes reinforces themes of divine authority,

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<sup>173</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 80.

salvation, and legitimate kingship, and these scenes underscore the biblical king as both psalmist and warrior, uniting themes of divine inspiration, obedience, and triumph over enemies. Their placement on the arms of the cross may also deliberately echo the theological framing of kingship: just as David was anointed by God, so contemporary rulers could claim legitimacy through divine sanction. The Davidic imagery is therefore unlikely to be mere 'biblical scene' filler: its symmetry on the arms and its focus on psalmist and warrior roles strongly suggest a typology of Christian kingship: its symmetry on the arms and its focus on psalmist and warrior roles point clearly to a typology of Christian kingship. This is particularly significant in a Columban context, where patrons such as the Uí Néill sought to present themselves as defenders of the Church. The decorative framing enhances these theological layers: the ends of the arms are carved with interlace, while the section above the ring displays bosses and zoomorphic ornament. Most striking is the treatment of the upper terminal of the cross, which integrates a decorated summit zone rather than leaving the capstone as an afterthought. Four snake-bosses crown the composition, reinforcing the idea that the highest point of the monument participates in the iconographic programme. Unlike earlier examples where the capstone appeared separate or secondary, here it is fully integrated into the body of the cross, with its own distinct decoration and sculptural emphasis, and this deliberate integration of the summit reflects a theological logic already visible in the Ossory crosses: the capstone is not merely structural but symbolic, representing the point of contact between earth and heaven.

### **West Face**

The plinth of the west face carries a fragmentary inscription, and its damaged state has generated considerable debate. Stokes and Harbison identified that only the letters 'ODUBT' remain, while Macalister states that he "could make out nothing more than

[OROI]TDO T [IG].<sup>174</sup> The latter has been largely discredited by the work of Ó Murchadha and Ó Murchú.<sup>175</sup> Readings have included a prayer for a Dubthach, possibly identifiable with the ninth-century abbot of the Columban paruchia (927–38), or a reference to a king (this interpretation is enhanced by the inclusion of ‘rig’, or ‘king’).<sup>176</sup> More speculative proposals have linked the name to the legendary fili Dubthach maccu Lugair, but this reading is not supported by the epigraphic evidence and remains a reception-level suggestion rather than a viable identification, particularly given that the trend seemed to be focused on highlighting and naming kings, such as Mael Sechnaill at Ahenny, or abbots and monks, as seen on Muiredach’s Cross at Monasterboice. Thus, the safest reading is that the inscription participates in intercessory practice—naming abbots or kings as part of Durrow’s culture of commemoration. Legendary identifications should be treated as reception, not original intention.

Above the plinth, the shaft presents three scenes, the first of which depicts soldiers in plumed helmets and with spears, sleeping on either side of a small human figure. Beneath the seat of the soldiers is a flat stone, covering the body of the dead Christ, and a small bird breathes into his mouth in a clear depiction of Christ in the Tomb.<sup>177</sup> Above this is a panel showing a robed Christ facing in profile to the left, his hands tied. A soldier stands to the left, holding a flail to beat Christ, and another soldier appears to hold Christ around the waist. The scene seems to depict the Arrest or the Flagellation; both would seem plausible,

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<sup>174</sup> Ó Murchadha and Ó Murchú, “Fragmentary Inscriptions,” 57.

<sup>175</sup> Ó Murchadha and Ó Murchú, “Fragmentary Inscriptions,” 57.

<sup>176</sup> Ó Murchadha and Ó Murchú, “Fragmentary Inscriptions,” 57; Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 81; Stokes, *The High Crosses of Castledermot and Durrow*, 11.

<sup>177</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 81.

and fit with the theme of Passion scenes which appears on this face.<sup>178</sup> Above this is a scene of a soldier flanked by two other figures, both holding swords, and has been interpreted as the Soldiers Casting Lots for Christ's Garments, the Mocking of Christ, or the Arrest.<sup>179</sup> All of these emphasise the humiliation and suffering of Christ, providing a sharp contrast to the triumphant iconography on the east face. The head centres the Crucifixion, flanked by Stephaton and Longinus, with a bird (probably the Holy Spirit) hovering above Christ's head. The south arm shows Pilate sitting on a chair, washing his hands in water, while the north may show a figure with a sword at his waist and a drinking horn at his lips; the presence of another figure, also with a drinking horn, strongly suggests a depiction of the Denial of Peter.<sup>180</sup> The summit, remarkably, contains what appears to be a *Traditio Clavium* scene, with Christ seated between Peter and Paul presenting keys and scroll.<sup>181</sup> Though Porter has identified this as the judgement of Tara, and Brandt-Förster Moses, Aaron and Hur, the *Traditio Clavium* seems the most likely interpretation given the presence of this scene elsewhere, and its significance, as we will discuss in Chapter 4.<sup>182</sup> If correctly identified, this imagery explicitly links Durrow with the foundation of apostolic

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<sup>178</sup> Williams, "The Old Graveyards in Durrow Parish," 134–47; Stokes, *The High Crosses of Castledermot and Durrow*, 11; Champneys, *Irish Ecclesiastical Architecture, with Some Notice of Similar or Related Work in England, Scotland, and Elsewhere*, 83, 85f, 95; Crawford, "A Descriptive List of Early Irish Crosses," 225; Porter, *Crosses and Culture of Ireland*, 85–88; Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period*, 99–107; Henry, *La sculpture irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles de l'ère chrétienne*, 204; Henry, *Early Christian Irish Art*, 18, 30ff, 66; H. Morris, "The Muiredach Cross at Monasterboice: A New Interpretation of Three of Its Panels," *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 64 (1934): 207–10; Françoise Henry, *Irish Art During the Viking Invasions, 800–1020 A.D.* (London: Methuen & Co., 1967), 136ff; Weir, *Early Ireland: A Field Guide*, 201; Gsänger, *Irland: Insel des Abel: Die Irischen Hochkreuze*; 72; Brandt-Förster, *Das Irische Hochkreuz: Ursprung, Entwicklung*, 123 and 167; Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 172.

<sup>179</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 81; Williams, "The Old Graveyards in Durrow Parish," 134–47; Champneys, *Irish Ecclesiastical Architecture, with Some Notice of Similar or Related Work in England, Scotland, and Elsewhere*, 83, 85f, 95; Brandt-Förster, *Das Irische Hochkreuz: Ursprung, Entwicklung*, 123 and 167; Weir, *Early Ireland: A Field Guide*, 201; Visser, and W. Zandstra, *Die Ierse Kreuzigungsikonografie van de 7de tot de 13de Eeuw. I: Tekst; II: Catalogus*, 8, 39–40, 64, 98.

Gsänger, *Irland: Insel des Abel: Die Irischen Hochkreuze*; 72.

<sup>180</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 172–3; Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 81; Henry, *La sculpture irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles de l'ère chrétienne*, 204; Henry, *Early Christian Irish Art*, 18, 30ff; Henry, *Irish Art During the Viking Invasions, 800–1020 A.D.*, 136ff; Porter, *Crosses and Culture of Ireland*, 85–88.

<sup>181</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 81.

<sup>182</sup> Porter, *Crosses and Culture of Ireland*, 85–88; Brandt-Förster, *Das Irische Hochkreuz: Ursprung, Entwicklung*, 123 and 167.

authority, placing the Irish Church within a Roman and universal ecclesiological framework. Its location at the very top of the monument—part of the worked summit zone—visually enacts its theological meaning: Peter and Paul, like the cross itself, mediate between heaven and earth.<sup>183</sup> The placement of the *Traditio Clavium* at the summit weakens any reading of it as merely decorative: its vertical positioning insists that apostolic succession is the capstone theme of this face. This is a recurring theme in this group of crosses, and one we will move to consider in greater detail in Chapter 4. This side of the cross, therefore, moves from humiliation (Mocking, Casting Lots) to triumph (Crucifixion, *Traditio Clavium*), reinforcing the same typological arc articulated across the monument: sin and judgement below, salvation and authority above.

### South Face

The south face of the cross adds Old Testament references and typological depth to the overall programme of decoration. The base is undecorated, and sits below an image of the Tree of Life flanked by winged beasts introduces themes of divine provision and cosmic order. Above, Adam and Eve stand beneath an apple tree which bears the serpent in a clear depiction of Adam and Eve in Eden, in a depiction which has been referred to by Douglas Maclean as ‘the Irish type’, and above this we see the figure of Cain shown in profile, holding a club which he is using to stroke the head of a second figure, Abel, dramatizing the Fall and its violent aftermath.<sup>184</sup> The sequence then shifts to a seated figure, facing the front with a sword over his right shoulder, and a shield in his left hand, two animals by his side. This seems to follow the trend of David seen elsewhere, representing David as king and

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<sup>183</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, p. 169.

<sup>184</sup> Maclean, “Early Medieval Sculpture in the West Highlands and Islands of Scotland,” 437; Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 80; Williams, “The Old Graveyards in Durrow Parish,” 134–47; Stokes, *The High Crosses of Castledermot and Durrow*, 11; Porter, *Crosses and Culture of Ireland*, 85–88; Henry, *La sculpture irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles de l’ère chrétienne*, 204; Henry, *Early Christian Irish Art*, 18, 30ff, 66; Henry, *Irish Art During the Viking Invasions, 800–1020 A.D.*, 136ff; Weir, *Early Ireland: A Field Guide*, 201.

again recalling Davidic kingship as a type of Christ.<sup>185</sup> Other scholars agree on the depiction of the figure as a king, but the specific identification of David adds another layer of meaning to the cross.<sup>186</sup> The underside of the ring is carved with a serpent and three human heads, enclosed within a spiral. This motif recalls similar imagery on Muiredach's Cross and probably functioned as a liminal marker: the serpent signifies sin and deception, while the three heads may evoke fallen humanity or, conversely, the Trinity overcoming evil. Above, the upper terminal features a horseman, a motif familiar from Ahenny and Kilkieran. In this context, however, the rider functions not simply as martial display but as a symbol of triumph—over sin, over enemies, and perhaps over the Vikings whose incursions had recently reshaped the Columban world.

When considered together, the imagery on the south face appears to be structured around themes of sin, divine intervention, and redemption. The Tree of Life, often associated with divine knowledge and eternal life, establishes a contrast with Adam and Eve, whose fall from grace represents the introduction of sin into the world. This narrative of transgression and consequence continues with Cain and Abel, reinforcing themes of violence, judgment, and divine justice. David is also included and, as noted, he may represent a central figure in biblical kingship, providing a counterpoint to ideas of sin and destruction. The snake and three human heads deepen this moral and theological message: the snake, a universal symbol of sin, deception, and chaos, may represent the temptation and fall of humankind, while the three heads could symbolise the fallen state of humanity (as seen in Cain's

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<sup>185</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 80.

<sup>186</sup> Williams, "The Old Graveyards in Durrow Parish," 134–47; Stokes, *The High Crosses of Castledermot and Durrow*, 11; H. S. Crawford, "A Descriptive List of Early Irish Crosses," 225; Lilian Cullen, *The High Crosses of Ireland and The Book of Kells* (Dublin: Catholic Truth Society of Ireland, [ca. 1900]), 8; Porter, *Crosses and Culture of Ireland*, 85–88; Henry, *La sculpture irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles de l'ère chrétienne*, 204; Henry, *Early Christian Irish Art*, 18, 30ff, 66; Henry, *Irish Art During the Viking Invasions, 800–1020 A.D.*, 136ff.

violence and Adam's exile), or the contrast between divine order and human corruption.

The horseman, positioned at the top of the ring, introduces another layer of meaning: as noted, this can be associated with triumph and victory.<sup>187</sup> Here, we can interpret this motif as being intended to represent triumph over sin, in contrast to the figures below, as well as acknowledging the role of kingship as a divine protectorate: the king sees himself as a divinely assigned ruler, and he is depicted as fulfilling the dual role of both warrior and spiritual guardian, entrusted with the protection of his people not just in a political sense, but in a theological framework as well. Negative evidence helps here: unlike pagan horsemen or saga riders, Durrow's rider is not shown in combat or chase, and his isolation and summit placement favour symbolic triumph rather than literal narrative. If so, this concept of divinely ordained kingship is deeply embedded in Irish high cross imagery. By aligning the summit rider with figures such as David, the imagery offers a model of kingship in which the ruler is not only a military leader but also a defender of Christian values, whose legitimacy is framed in theological as well as political terms. We cannot identify a particular patron with certainty at Durrow, but the parallels with named crosses such as Killamery suggest that such images were intelligible as visual claims about sacred kingship. This also echoes the broader function of the high crosses themselves, which served as public declarations of faith, authority, and protection—both for the ruling elite and for the wider community. Thus, when viewed holistically, the South face presents a structured narrative that moves from sin and destruction through depictions of Adam, Eve,

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<sup>187</sup> Stoner, "Signifying Kingship in Anglo—Saxon England," 257.

Cain, and Abel, to divine authority and kingship through David and the horseman. The snake and heads, positioned at the underside of the ring, serve as a threshold between these ideas, a visual and symbolic boundary between chaos and divine order.

### North Face

The north plinth contains another fragmentary intercessory inscription, again too damaged to yield a secure identification, though it is far more refined in its layout than the western panel and appears to have been the more carefully designed of the two. Its near-square field originally held six lines of text, the first carved in a larger letter height (around one and a quarter inches) and the remaining five in a slightly smaller script. This sophisticated layout, with consistent line spacing and carefully planned framing, has been described as “the best-designed body of lettering” encountered in studies of high cross inscriptions.<sup>188</sup> The inscription may be read as:

‘ORDO (M) — — SECHNA — — RIGHERE — — OR — — OC — — O — —  
A — — DORRO — —

ACHRO — — S.’<sup>189</sup> The presence of the elements *SECHNA* and *RIGHERE* has naturally prompted comparison with the widespread commemoration of Máel Sechnaill mac Máel Ruanaid on crosses of this group. Such an identification is plausible—the title “righere” (‘king/ruler’) coheres with the political vocabulary of the Scripture Crosses, and the prominence of Máel Sechnaill as a royal patron makes him a reasonable candidate. However, the surviving traces remain too fragmentary to permit a definitive reading, and the inscription should therefore be treated as part of a broader culture of intercessory naming rather than as securely

<sup>188</sup> Ó Murchadha and Ó Murchú, “Fragmentary Inscriptions,” 58.

<sup>189</sup> Ó Murchadha and Ó Murchú, “Fragmentary Inscriptions,” 57.

attributable to any single individual. The palaeographic recovery of roughly thirty-five previously unnoticed letters across both Durrow panels greatly expands the evidence for the cross's commemorative function.<sup>190</sup> The ambiguity itself is telling: inscriptions at Durrow, unlike the more secure examples at Killamery or Clonmacnoise, resist definitive naming but nonetheless participate in the same culture of commemorative intercession. Given the references to kings elsewhere, commemoration of a figure such as Máel Sechnaill is a plausible possibility, though the evidence is too fragmentary to be conclusive.

Above the plinth, the lower panel depicts two figures, embracing in a way that causes the upper parts of their bodies to cross in an X. The identification of this panel has long oscillated between two readings: John the Baptist recognising Christ and Jacob wrestling with the angel.<sup>191</sup> The X-shaped entanglement of the figures, their close physical engagement, and the absence of clear baptismal attributes (no river, no vessel, no dove, no gesture of blessing) immediately complicate a reading of John the Baptist. Although Harbison proposes that the embrace might depict John embracing Christ in the desert, such an episode is traditionally represented through such a strongly intertwined, almost combative posture. Early medieval art typically distinguishes baptiser and baptised through clear vertical hierarchy and unambiguous gestural cues. Nothing of that structure survives here.

By contrast, the Jacob-and-the-Angel interpretation corresponds more closely to both the pose and the broader iconographic logic of the cross. The grappling, the

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<sup>190</sup> Ó Murchadha and Ó Murchú, "Fragmentary Inscriptions," 57

<sup>191</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 172-3; Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 82; Williams, "The Old Graveyards in Durrow Parish," 134-47; Stokes, *The High Crosses of Castledermot and Durrow*, 11; Porter, *Crosses and Culture of Ireland*, 85-88; Weir, *Early Ireland: A Field Guide*, 201; Brandt-Förster, *Das Irische Hochkreuz: Ursprung, Entwicklung*, 123 and 167.

bodily crossing, and the intimate struggle are all features associated with depictions of Genesis 32:24–30, where Jacob wrestles a mysterious divine figure until dawn. In Insular contexts, this scene frequently appears in compressed compositions, with limbs crossing or bodies intertwined to signify the intensity of the struggle rather than literal motion. The X-shaped formation of the Durrow figures is a particularly strong indicator of this reading, evoking not benign recognition but contest, resistance, and blessing wrested through persevering struggle.

Theologically, the Jacob scene is also far more at home within Durrow's programme. Jacob's wrestling was a core monastic topos, routinely interpreted allegorically as the soul striving with God, the monk struggling with temptation, or the contemplative labouring toward divine illumination. This aligns seamlessly with the cross's broader themes—Fall, judgement, providence, triumph—and resonates strongly with the Columban interest in ascetic discipline and spiritual combat. Jacob's transformation into Israel after the struggle also contributes to a narrative of identity re-forging, a theme not out of place in a monument situated within Uí Néill territory and bound to Columban political-theological identity. Moreover, the panel sits above an inscription panel already deeply embedded in themes of commemoration and divine favour. Placing Jacob's struggle above an intercessory inscription subtly reinforces the idea that human striving and divine blessing stand in dialogue—just as the cross itself mediates between earthly names and heavenly authority.

For these reasons, while a reading of John the Baptist cannot be entirely excluded, the Jacob-and-the-Angel identification offers a far stronger fit on formal, theological, and contextual grounds. The posture accords better with Insular depictions of struggle; the typology speaks directly to monastic spirituality; and the

placement fits Durrow's structured ascent from human need (inscription and struggle) to divine order (spiral bosses) and providential protection (the Flight into Egypt above). It therefore seems most likely that this panel depicts Jacob wrestling the angel rather than any Johannine encounter.

The middle register carries a band of eight spiral bosses, whose number and form may carry Eucharistic or eschatological associations. Above them, a robed couple move leftwards carrying a child. This scene has often been interpreted as the Flight into Egypt, yet the most distinctive surviving detail—the right-hand figure raising a hand toward the mouth—does not fit traditional Flight iconography.<sup>192</sup> Instead, that gesture corresponds precisely to the biblical account of Zacharias, struck dumb until he confirmed the name of his son, John (Luke 1:20, 62–63). In combination with the triad of two adults and a child, the Zacharias–Elizabeth–John the Baptist identification offers the most coherent explanation of the surviving forms.<sup>193</sup> If correct, the scene introduces a theme of prophetic birth and divine intervention, resonating with other Baptist material proposed on this face. The ring is adorned with interlace, and the summit features a seated figure amid serpents, though the damage prevents certain identification. The seated figure amid serpents should be read in line with other summit registers on Durrow: a final image of order framed by chaos, not random filler. Read together, these upper registers form a typological progression of promise (the Baptist birth), struggle (the Jacob motif below), and cosmic order (spiral bosses and serpents). Even if the precise narrative details remain partially lost, the programme's overall logic—divine protection, prophetic vocation, and ordered sovereignty—is clearly consistent with Durrow's

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<sup>192</sup> Brandt-Förster, *Das Irische Hochkreuz: Ursprung, Entwicklung*, 123 and 167; Weir, *Early Ireland: A Field Guide*, 201; Visser and W. Zandstra, *Die Ierse Kreuzigungsikonografie van de 7de tot de 13de Eeuw. I: Tekst; II: Catalogus*, 8, 39–40, 64, 98.

<sup>193</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 82.

broader theological grammar.

The Durrow cross marks a pivotal stage in the evolution of the Irish high cross tradition, representing both continuity with the Ossory monuments and innovation within the emerging category of Scripture Crosses. Its iconographic programme is remarkably coherent: the east face moves from resurrection and typology, with depiction of the Risen Christ or Emmaus and the Sacrifice of Isaac to eschatological fulfilment through the image of the Last Judgement, framed by Davidic imagery that affirms the divinely sanctioned model of kingship. The west face deepens this typological arc through Passion scenes that descend into humiliation before rising into triumph in the Crucifixion and the *Traditio Clavium*, a scene which asserts apostolic succession and the authority of the universal Church. The south and north faces elaborate this vision with Edenic narrative, Cain and Abel, Jacob wrestling with the angel, and the Flight into Egypt—biblical stories of sin, struggle, providence, and redemption. Taken together, these panels create a theologically ordered cycle that charts salvation history from Creation and Fall to Judgement and heavenly authority, while simultaneously embedding themes of kingship, ecclesiastical authority, and monastic spirituality.

The inscriptions, although fragmentary and difficult to interpret, align Durrow with the wider practice of intercessory naming seen across the Scripture Crosses. In addition, the unusual side-by-side placement of Durrow's inscriptions, their careful original design, and the later attempts at effacement together illuminate the cross's role as a site where memory, authority, and identity were negotiated. The inscriptions cannot be dismissed as marginal: their planning, scale, and deliberate framing establish them as central components of the monument's visual logic, while the later damage suggests shifting political or ecclesiastical contexts in which the original names or claims were no longer acceptable. As such, the inscriptions at Durrow both reflect and participate in the culture of

intercessory naming, dynastic commemoration, and institutional self-definition that characterises the Scripture Crosses. Whether invoking kings such as Máel Sechnaill, abbots like Soergus, or figures more symbolic of Christianised Irish learning, the presence of these names situates Durrow within the interplay of dynastic and ecclesiastical power. This alone distinguishes the monument from earlier Ossory examples, Killamery aside, where figural bases dominated, and signals the increasing importance of cross inscriptions as a medium of both commemoration and legitimation. Most distinctive, however, is the handling of the summit. In place of the separate beehive capstones characteristic of Ossory, Durrow develops a house-shaped capstone that is not simply perched above the monument but architecturally and iconographically integrated into the cross itself. Decorated with snake bosses and inscribed with the *Traditio Clavium*, the summit functions as the culmination of the entire monument: not an ornamental add-on but the theological climax of the vertical axis. In this position, it simultaneously recalls reliquary architecture, the Holy Sepulchre, and the heavenly Jerusalem. Its placement and decoration suggest that the capstone was never treated as a marginal element in these monuments but a key component of their theological logic: the point of contact where heaven and earth meet, where biblical narrative and ecclesiastical identity converge.

The Durrow cross, therefore, is far more than a decorated marker. It is a monumental synthesis of Columban monastic identity, dynastic patronage, and scriptural exegesis. Its dense iconographic cycle situates it within the wider Insular artistic network, while its integrated capstone marks it as a bold innovation, transforming the high cross into a cosmic axis and a theological statement in stone. In its union of biblical narrative, apostolic authority, and summit symbolism, the Durrow cross not only articulates the distinctive concerns of its community but also lays the foundation for the more expansive cycles of Kells, Clonmacnoise, and Monasterboice. It is here that the Scripture Cross type

fully takes shape, with Durrow as both precedent and prototype. Overall, Durrow's programme is primarily salvation history framed by Columban identity: Emmaus/Isaac/Judgement on the east, Passion + apostolic authority on the west, Fall + kingship on the south, and struggle + providence on the north. Secondary emphases can also be read: namely, intercessory inscriptions and ornamental cosmologies. These additions are far from purely decorative: the integrated capstone is itself a theological climax, demonstrating that the summit equals heaven, not ornament.

### 3.2.2 Kells

The monastic site of Kells, one of the principal Columban foundations in Ireland, stands at the heart of the Columban paruchia's response to Viking disruption. Following the devastation of Iona in the late ninth century, the community relocated inland, establishing Kells as a refuge and a new centre of Columban identity and authority in a move said to have been responsible for the collapse of the Iona school of sculpture.<sup>194</sup> By the early tenth century the monastery had become a formidable stronghold of Columban theology, scholarship, and artistic production.<sup>195</sup> Its crosses must be read in this light: as visual assertions of continuity and legitimacy, reaffirming the prestige of Columba's tradition in its new Irish setting while also negotiating its fraught relationship with Armagh.

Of the five known crosses at Kells—the North, East, West, Market, and the Cross of St Patrick and St Columba—only the last provides a sufficiently complete

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid, Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland 400-1200*, 252; Maclean, "Early Medieval Sculpture in the West Highlands and Islands of Scotland," 479.

<sup>195</sup> Adomnán, *Life of St Columba*, 82–83.

programme for sustained analysis. The North survives only as a base, the East is unfinished (with a solitary Crucifixion on its head), and the West, though richly ornamented, has lost its head. The Market Cross preserves more, including equestrian panels reminiscent of Ahenny, but it is fragmentary. The Cross of St Patrick and St Columba, by contrast, retains enough of its programme to show a deliberate and ambitious theological design (Figure 32). The tenon at its summit confirms the former presence of a capstone, aligning Kells with the Ossory and Durrow monuments and situating it firmly within the capstone tradition.



*Figure 30: Cross of St Patrick and St Columba, Kells, East Face*

### East Face

The inscription on the east face, *PATRICCI ET COLUMBAE CRUX* ('The Cross of Patrick and Columba'), is significant and decisive, typically dating the cross to around the year 900.<sup>196</sup> This is the only surviving high cross in Ireland that names both saints together, and it does so at a critical historical moment: as we have noted, Armagh had long advanced Patrick as the most important saint in Ireland, a move which secured its claim to ecclesiastical primacy, while Iona promoted Columba as a founder of equal stature. Their rivalry was sharpened in the ninth century, when Armagh attempted to extend its jurisdiction over Columban churches. The decision to inscribe both Patrick and Columba on a Kells monument was therefore not a devotional commonplace but a deliberate intervention in this contest. By naming both saints in equal measure, Kells asserted its Columban heritage while simultaneously acknowledging Armagh's authority, a strategy almost certainly influenced by Máel Brigte mac Tornáin, who served simultaneously as abbot of Kells and of Armagh.<sup>197</sup> The cross thus functioned as a visual treaty, projecting unity between the two saints as a heavenly model for reconciliation on earth. In the shadow of Viking incursions, when Irish monasteries faced external threat and internal fracture, this iconography proclaimed harmony and concord as essential to the Church's survival.

The base of the east face introduces this programme through what appears to be a hunting scene: the panel shows a man on the right, a spear in his left hand and a shield in his right, appearing to hunt animals towards the left, with two dogs in front of him. A number of

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<sup>196</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 178.

<sup>197</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 91.

animals can be seen, including a hare, a bird, a quadruped, a boar and a stag. All of the figures are set on a shared ground line and advancing in the same direction, with no clearly defined quarry or combat scene which could indicate a chase. The riders and animals are of comparable scale and are arranged in a relatively even, processional band, recalling Ahenny and Kilkieran. At Ahenny, we see this imagery working to balance martial display with allegories of conversion and deliverance, and the same polyvalence is likely operative here. The scene has occasionally been interpreted as Noah with the animals, largely because fragmentary quadrupeds appear beside a central human figure.<sup>198</sup> This proposal stems from the broader Insular habit of placing Old Testament episodes of salvation on cross-bases, and from the widespread association of paired or grouped animals with the Ark in manuscript art. However, in this instance the iconographic cues do not support a Noah identification. Noah is typically shown with a distinct narrative frame—an ark, a hatch or doorway, paired animals in orderly procession, or Noah extending his hands in prayer. None of these framing elements survive here. Instead, the animals are not paired, lack the hierarchical ordering characteristic of Ark scenes, and are positioned in ways that suggest encounter or adjacency rather than embarkation. Moreover, the central human figure lacks any attribute (such as an ark, tools, or sacrificial gesture) that would anchor a Noah reading. Given these absences, the Noah interpretation is possible but weak. The surviving visual logic aligns more convincingly with the patterns observed elsewhere on the cross-arms: figures of prophetic witness, suffering, or recognition, not narrative scenes of preservation from flood. The panel therefore sits more naturally within the typological cycle of prophet–martyr–apostolic witness identified on this face. While Noah remains a peripheral suggestion in the literature, the lack of Ark-defining elements and the panel’s integration into a broader theological sequence make it an unlikely primary identification.

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<sup>198</sup> Visser and W. Zandstra, *Die Ierse Kreuzigungsikonografie van de 7de tot de 13de Eeuw. I: Tekst; II: Catalogus*, 8, 39-40, 64, 98. Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 108.

Above the hunting scene, and inscription, panels of interlace and ornament give way to a compact series of Old Testament scenes: we see Adam and Eve in profile, hiding behind the apple tree as the serpent looks on, followed by Cain slaying Abel, and a depiction of the Three Children in the Furnace; here, an angel spreads its wings to protect three children as flames surround them, and soldiers stand on each side to feed the fire. Above this is a depiction of Daniel in the Lion's Den, showing Daniel with his arms rested on the heads of two lions, who face towards him, and seem to tug the garment he is wearing.<sup>199</sup> These narratives of sin, trial, and deliverance form a typological cycle, establishing the groundwork for Christian salvation. Strikingly, instead of a central Christological image, the mid-shaft contains a square of interlace enclosing seven bosses. Éamonn Ó Carragáin has suggested that this is a choice designed to reflect the significance with which the number seven resonated in both Eucharistic and eschatological registers: the seven loaves of the Feeding of the Five Thousand, the seven gifts of the Spirit, the seven seals of Revelation.<sup>200</sup> To insert this motif where one would expect a Crucifixion or Christ in Majesty is no accident. It marks Christ as the informing principle of scripture itself, the sustenance of the Church, and the source of all divine order. This Eucharistic reading is supported by the Sacrifice of Isaac on the south arm: we see Abraham seemingly

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<sup>199</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 108; Visser and W. Zandstra, *Die Ierse Kreuzigungsikonografie van de 7de tot de 13de Eeuw. I: Tekst; II: Catalogus*, 8, 39-40, 64, 98; Allen, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 134, 228; Williams, "The Old Graveyards in Durrow Parish," 134-47; Stokes, *The High Crosses of Castledermot and Durrow*, 11; Crawford, 'A Descriptive List of Early Irish Crosses,' 225; Lilian Cullen, *The High Crosses of Ireland and The Book of Kells* (Catholic Truth Society of Ireland, [ca. 1900]), 8; Henry, *La sculpture irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles de l'ère chrétienne*, 204; Henry, *Early Christian Irish Art*, 18, 30ff, 66; Henry, *Irish Art During the Viking Invasions, 800-1020 A.D.*, 136ff; Brandt-Förster, *Das Irische Hochkreuz: Ursprung, Entwicklung*, 123 and 167; Weir, *Early Ireland: A Field Guide*, 201; Henry, *Irish Art during the Romanesque Period 1020-1170 AD*; Henry, *Sculpture and Architecture*; Henry, "Les origines de l'iconographie irlandaise," 80-109; Macalister, *The Archaeology of Ireland*, 39-40; Roe, *The High Crosses of Western Ossory*, 52-56; Morris, "The Muiredach Cross at Monasterboice: A New Interpretation of Three of Its Panels," 207-10; Gsänger, *Irland: Insel des Abel: Die Irischen Hochkreuze*; 72; Judith Ann Calvert, "The Early Development of Irish High Crosses and Their Relationship to Scottish Sculpture in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1978), 105ff, 179ff, 211, 239, 242f, 299ff, 323; A. P. Smyth, *Scandinavian York and Dublin. The History and Archaeology of Two Related Viking Kingdoms*, vol. 2, 1st ed. (Templekieran Press, 1979), 289.

<sup>200</sup> Éamonn Ó Carragáin, "The Meeting of St. Paul and St. Anthony: Visual and Literary Uses of a Eucharistic Motif," in *Keimelia: Studies in Archaeology and History in Honour of Tom Delaney*, ed. by G. Mac Niocáill and Patrick F. Wallace (Galway University Press, 1988), 1-58.

kneeling, with a sword in one hand and fire in the other, as Isaac bends over the altar holding an axe, the ram above his head, and the scene of Paul and Anthony breaking bread in the desert on the north arm, with the two hermits facing one another, holding a crozier in one hand and a loaf of bread in the other: both typify the bread of life, both belong to the same exegetical chain. In this way, the east face moves from fall and trial to divine nourishment, uniting biblical typology with liturgical theology. Thus, the Eucharistic register—the seven bosses, Isaac, Paul & Anthony—is not incidental but deliberate, placing nourishment at the heart of the Columban-Patrician reconciliation.

Above these Eucharistic typologies, the narrative turns to kingship. Two figures sit in profile on high-backed chairs; the left holds a triangular harp, a feature that strongly identifies him as David, since harps appear almost exclusively in Davidic contexts in the high-cross corpus. The right-hand figure raises his right hand in a gesture of command or response, while holding a rounded object in his left. Between the two figures, and in two superimposed rows above them, a series of heads is carved, forming a compact audience or courtly retinue. Harbison's interpretation of this as David playing before Saul is, in my view, the most convincing.<sup>201</sup> Three elements in the carving align with this identification: the harp seems to be unmistakably signalling David's psalmist role, which is not shared by other biblical kings or prophets in this iconographic tradition. In addition, the hierarchical seating – two enthroned figures facing one another in a courtly setting, with an audience above, matches closely the narrative context in 1 Samuel where David plays in Saul's court. The raised hand of the right-hand figure also supports this narrative; this is a gesture that reads naturally as Saul's acknowledgement or command, fitting the dramatic tension of the biblical scene far better than alternative proposals (such as judges, generic kings, or a non-Davidic musician).

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<sup>201</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 109.

Crucially, this interpretation also integrates seamlessly into the surrounding typological logic. The preceding panels on this face rehearse a sequence of sin, trial, deliverance, and divine sustenance; David before Saul extends this trajectory by presenting the anointed king-in-waiting, whose music calms the tormented ruler and whose righteousness prefigures Christ's own kingship. The assembly of heads above the two figures reinforces this royal register: rather than a private devotional episode, the sculptor has chosen a moment of public, courtly recognition—appropriate to a monument deeply preoccupied with legitimate authority. For all these reasons—iconographic specificity, compositional logic, and thematic fit—the reading of the panel as David playing before Saul is the most coherent and best supported by the visual evidence.

### **West Face**

The west face of the cross develops the Christological climax which begins on the East face. The base again recalls processions, similar to the scenes seen at Ahenny North. A chariot procession appears to be in progress, with two horses drawing a chariot and passenger, with a dog and two horsemen in front. Another suggestion is the transfer of relics, but the lack of obvious relics or reliquaries casts some doubt on this interpretation.<sup>202</sup> The shaft contains the Crucifixion with Stepaton, Longinus, and the hovering bird of the Spirit. Above this, in the head, Christ appears in the centre, a cross staff over his left shoulder and a sceptre over his right, flanked by two beasts (Figure 33). The scene has been interpreted as Christ in Glory and the Apocalyptic Vision, but Harbison's interpretation of the *Majestas Domini*, Christ enthroned in glory, seems the best fit here; this fits with other examples in these crosses, such as the *Majestas Domini* on the Cross of Scriptures at Clonmacnoise.<sup>203</sup> Its placement directly beneath the missing capstone is critical: we have

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<sup>202</sup> Roe, *The High Crosses of Western Ossory*, 6-30; Hickey, *The Legend of Tara*, 91-92; Henry, *Early Christian Irish Art*, 21ff; Henry, "The Celtic Crosses of Slievenamon," 88-90; Henry, "Les origines de l'iconographie irlandaise," 89ff; Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period*, 153-3; B. Brandt-Förster, *Das Irische Hochkreuz: Ursprung, Entwicklung*, 31ff.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*

seen at Durrow that the house-shaped summit integrated the capstone into the monument's theological narrative, and here, Kells pursues the same logic. Christ in Majesty at the head is not the terminus but the penultimate stage, visually preparing for the capstone's presence as the point of contact with the heavenly court. The hierarchy can be read as intercession at the base, Passion in the shaft, enthronement in the head, heavenly mediation in the capstone. The cross thus becomes a cosmic ladder, structured to lead the viewer's eye and devotion upward from earth to heaven. The surrounding decoration—bosses, interlace, and roll mouldings—further enhances the sanctity and visual focus of the cross head, framing Christ in Glory within an intricate, ordered design that contrasts with the chaos or complexity of the secular world. Altogether, this arrangement asserts the supremacy of Christ at the heart of the cross's visual programme and reinforces the cross itself as a cosmic axis—a meeting point between earth, saints, and the divine. Placing Christ in Majesty directly under the capstone strongly argues against readings of the capstone as merely structural: the lost summit must have functioned as the theological climax, completing the cosmic ladder.



Figure 31: Cross of St Patrick and St Columba, Kells, West Face Head

### South and North Face

The south and north faces are dominated by interlace, zoomorphs, and vine scrolls, drawing on the Columban manuscript tradition exemplified by the *Book of Kells*. These ornamental vocabularies, far from being filler, belong to the same exegetical economy as the figural panels: they slow the viewer's gaze, invite meditation, and weave biblical narrative into an all-encompassing fabric of meaning. The manuscript-style ornament functions as visual exegesis, not filler: its very density teaches contemplation. At the summit of the north face, two seated figures are visible. They appear of similar scale and posture, seated side by side within a confined panel beneath the ring, with no obvious attributes to distinguish one from the other. Their equal treatment suggests a pair of

comparable status rather than a hierarchised master–disciple duo. While identification is uncertain, and Porter has suggested an interpretation of The Fall of Simon Magus and Roe Peter and Pal enthroned, the inscription itself compels us to read them as Patrick and Columba.<sup>204</sup> Their placement at the very top of the cross, just beneath the capstone, symbolises their role as intercessors—guardians of Kells’ dual identity as Columban stronghold and reconciled partner of Armagh. This placement rules out random saintly pairing: only Patrick and Columba, explicitly named, fit the summit role.

Taken together, the Cross of St Patrick and St Columba at Kells marks a decisive development within the Scripture Cross tradition. It retains the Ossory group’s processional and equestrian motifs, adopts Durrow’s strategy of integrating the summit into the theological programme, and expands these into a distinctly Eucharistic and reconciliatory register. What makes the cross unique is its explicit act of naming: Patrick and Columba are bound together in inscription, transforming the monument into a charter of ecclesiastical peace. Where Armagh had sought to monopolise Irish Christianity through Patrick alone, Kells offered a different vision—one that asserted Columban identity, acknowledged Patrician authority, and reconciled both within the unity of the Church. The iconography reinforces this theme. Panels of Isaac’s sacrifice, Paul and Anthony receiving the Eucharist, and the schema of seven bosses direct the viewer toward Christ as the sustaining principle of the Church. In this way, the monument expands the typological and Passion cycles already visible at Durrow into a theology of nourishment and reconciliation.

The base-processions, manuscript-derived interlace, and summit imagery are not incidental decoration but carefully integrated components of a programme that moves upward—from the trials of scripture and the struggles of earth to the triumph of Christ and the

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<sup>204</sup> Porter, *Crosses and Culture of Ireland*, 85-88; Roe, *The High Crosses of Western Ossory*, 52-56.

reconciliation of heaven.

The capstone, though now lost, was confirmed by the surviving tenon and must be understood as the final component of this vertical logic. Like the caps at Durrow and Clonmacnoise, it crowned the monument as a reliquary in stone, completing the ascent from biblical exempla to divine enthronement. Its absence today obscures what was once the theological summit of the monument: a sign that the reconciliation staged below found its fulfilment above, in Christ's resurrection and heavenly dwelling.

In this way, Kells encapsulates the Columban community's response to displacement, rivalry, and renewal. It materialises in stone the translation of relics, the negotiation of Patrician and Columban claims, and the struggle to sustain unity in the face of Viking disruption. At the same time, it anticipates the still more expansive programmes of Clonmacnoise and Monasterboice, where reconciliation yields to panoramic salvation history and cosmic judgement. Kells thus stands at the hinge: bridging the Ossory and Durrow precedents with the later Scripture Crosses, and in so doing, asserting that even amid crisis, the cross remained the stage where ecclesiastical politics, dynastic claims, and universal salvation were fused into one monumental theology.

### 3.2.3 Clonmacnoise

Clonmacnoise, founded in the mid—sixth century by St. Ciarán, was one of the most significant monastic centres in early medieval Ireland.<sup>205</sup> Strategically positioned along the River Shannon, it served as a major hub for religion, scholarship, and trade, attracting both ecclesiastical and royal patronage, including royal burial.<sup>206</sup> Over time, Clonmacnoise became a centre for manuscript

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<sup>205</sup> John Bradley, "The Monastic Town of Clonmacnoise," in *Clonmacnoise Studies*, vol. 1, ed. by Heather King (Dúchas, The Heritage Service, 1998), 42; Annette Kehnel, "The Lands of St Ciarán," in *Clonmacnoise Studies*, vol. 1, ed. by Heather King (Dúchas, The Heritage Service, 1998), 11–19.

<sup>206</sup> Cumman, *De controversia paschali*, ed. by Dáibhí Ó Cróinín and Maura Walsh (Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1988), 90, line 261.

production, learning, and stone carving, producing some of the most iconic high crosses in Ireland. The site was important enough to capture the attention of Adomnán, and to be considered a rival to Armagh,<sup>207</sup> according to Tírechán, who accused it of seizing churches which rightfully belonged to Armagh.<sup>208</sup> Its importance extended well beyond its role as a religious institution; it played a key role in shaping the power dynamics between different monastic traditions, ecclesiastical authorities, and political entities.<sup>209</sup> What distinguished Clonmacnoise was its independence: unlike Armagh, which consolidated primacy through the cult of Patrick, or Iona, which asserted Columba's legacy, Clonmacnoise advanced the sanctity of its own founder.<sup>210</sup> The possession (or claim to possess) Ciarán's relics placed him in symbolic parity with Patrick and Columba, embedding Clonmacnoise within the relic-focused strategies of its rivals while maintaining a separate identity.<sup>211</sup> Its central location and non-alignment allowed it to attract patrons from multiple dynasties, and most important among these were the Clann Cholmáin branch of the Southern Uí Néill, whose sustained support in the ninth and tenth centuries transformed the site into a stage where religious and political interests converged. This convergence is nowhere clearer than in the patronage of King Flann Sinna (r. 879–916). Flann's joint commemoration with Abbot Colmán mac Ailella on the Cross of the Scriptures materialised an alliance of dynasty and monastery: the inscription—or do rig Flain

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<sup>207</sup> Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland 400-1200*, 82.

<sup>208</sup> Adomnán, *Life of Columba*; Bradley, *The Monastic Town of Clonmacnoise*, 42; Ludwig Bieler, *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1979), 142, no. 25.

<sup>209</sup> Bradley, *The Monastic Town of Clonmacnoise*, 42-43.

<sup>210</sup> Pulliam, "Between the embodied eye and living world," 5.

<sup>211</sup> Bradley, *The Monastic Town of Clonmacnoise*, 42-55.

mac Mael Sechlainn, oroit do Colmán abb—fuses royal and ecclesiastical authority in a single devotional formula.<sup>212</sup> The same king financed the daimhliag mór (stone church), further consolidating the site’s monumental identity. By embedding their names in both architecture and sculpture, Flann and Colmán used Clonmacnoise to articulate a theology of kingship rooted in shared authority under God.

The crosses themselves extended this claim into stone. Clonmacnoise produced some of the most iconic high crosses in Ireland, including the Cross of the Scriptures, the North Cross, and the South Cross. Their iconography ranges from Old Testament narratives to Christ in Majesty, with Passion cycles and typological pairings that translate salvation history into a monumental programme. The Cross of the Scriptures in particular exemplifies how image, inscription, and form cohere: its panels move from biblical trial to resurrection glory, while its royal inscription grounds the monument in contemporary politics. The now-lost capstone would have crowned this ascent, marking the summit of both the monument and its theology. In its siting, Clonmacnoise reinforced these claims. Set on the Shannon, it controlled one of Ireland’s principal arteries of movement, ensuring visibility to travellers and pilgrims.<sup>213</sup> Within the monastery, the great crosses were placed in the *sanctus* zone, at the edge of the inner precinct. Unlike the innermost shrines, which were reserved for the community, the crosses were accessible to penitents and outsiders alike, as we will see in Chapter 4.4. This placement extended the protective and intercessory power of Ciarán outward, projecting sanctity into the public sphere. The monuments thus functioned as outdoor reliquaries: immovable, visible, and efficacious in zones where the widest audience could gather.

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<sup>212</sup> Raghnaill Ó Floinn, “Clonmacnoise: Art and Patronage in the Early Medieval Period,” in *Clonmacnoise Studies*, vol. 1, ed. by Heather King (Dúchas, The Heritage Service, 1998), 87.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*

Taken together, these factors explain why Clonmacnoise emerged as a third pole in Ireland's ecclesiastical landscape. By refusing absorption into either Patrician or Columban networks, it cultivated an identity both independent and central, drawing support from rival dynasties while asserting the universal relevance of its founder. Its monuments articulate this position with clarity: inscriptions that weld king and abbot into a single programme, iconography that fuses biblical history with dynastic commemoration, and capstones that crown the cross as reliquary-sign. Ultimately, Clonmacnoise represents a decisive stage in the development of the high cross tradition. Its monuments extend the compact, multivalent schemes of Ossory into more expansive programmes, while anticipating the panoramic 'scripture crosses' at Monasterboice and beyond. Here, theology, kingship, and spatial strategy are fused into monuments that are not only visual theologies but also charters of sovereignty, identity, and salvation.

### **South Cross**

The South Cross at Clonmacnoise (Figure 34) bears a close visual resemblance to the Killamery Cross, particularly in the shape and construction of its capstone. Unlike the Cross of the Scriptures, where the capstone is more defined and integrated into the overall design, the South Cross features a simpler, house-shaped capstone with slight ridging, distinctly separate from the main body of the cross, and carved from a separate piece of stone, though made of the same material. In contrast to the Cross of the Scriptures, which contains extensive biblical imagery, the South Cross is predominantly non figural.



*Figure 32: South Cross, Clonmacnoise*

### **East Face**

As seen on other high crosses, the base on each side of the cross appears divided into three panels on each face, with non—figural ornamentation framed within defined borders. The base on the east face is slightly stepped and bears faded carvings of animals and human figures, executed in a style reminiscent of the Ahenny crosses—possibly depicting hunting scenes, horseman, and similar motifs.<sup>214</sup> The surviving outlines suggest riders and quadrupeds aligned along a shared ground line, but their heads and limbs are too abraded to reveal clear action or direction. The fragmentary animals are, however, too eroded to sustain a secure narrative scene: while a hunt is possible, the absence of quarry and weapons makes a purely venatic identification weak; instead, they may function as generic allegories of vigilance or struggle, consistent with other Insular contexts.

### **West Face**

The west face of the base features two outer panels filled with curvilinear interlace, possibly incorporating six spirals connected by curved interlace, and a central panel of raised bosses. Above this, the first step appears to contain animal figures, possibly a hunting scene, though erosion makes interpretation difficult. The upper step is heavily weathered. The shaft of the west face is divided into three panels. The lowest panel contains interlace, while the middle panel features spiral patterns that incorporate cross shapes in the negative space. Above this, at the top of the shaft, is the only secure figural scene on the cross: a Crucifixion. Christ stands centrally, facing forward, flanked by two kneeling figures, likely Stepaton and Longinus, given their presence at Kells and Durrow. In the upper corners, two

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<sup>214</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 54.

additional figures—possibly angels—are carved.<sup>215</sup> This placement of the Crucifixion scene at the top of the shaft, rather than on the cross head, is unusual, and makes it difficult to sustain readings that treat the Crucifixion as an afterthought: instead, it signals a deliberate re-centring of Passion imagery within the shaft, leaving the cross head free for what appears to be ornamental reliquary coding (five-boss quincunx). The overall decorative approach aligns with metalwork traditions, reinforcing the long—standing connection between stone sculpture and Insular metalwork.

### **South Face**

The south side of this cross has a similarly faded base, and the lower panel on the plinth is also badly worn but appears to depict Adam and Eve by the tree in the Garden of Eden. Above this is another worn scene, tentatively identified as the Sacrifice of Isaac due to the composition of the figures, and the panels above this are to work to make out specific details, though interlace appears to be present on both.<sup>216</sup>

### **North Face**

The north face is similarly weathered, and appears to be comprised largely of non-figural decoration and interlace; any figures which may have once been present are now gone.

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<sup>215</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 56.

<sup>216</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 55.

### **Cross of Scriptures**

The Cross of the Scriptures (Figure 35) is perhaps the best known of the three crosses at Clonmacnoise. It is usually dated to between 902 and 916, and this is generally accepted on the basis of the epigraphic evidence present on the crosses.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 93.



*Figure 33: Cross of Scriptures, Clonmacnoise*

### East Face

Oriented toward the church precinct, reinforcing the argument that the crosses are serving both a liturgical and commemorative function, the east face integrates processional and royal material with ecclesiological climax.<sup>218</sup> The base depicts two chariots; above, three riders right-to-left—variously read as the Magi or as a stylised bringing of Christianity to Ireland (Figure 36).<sup>219</sup>



Figure 34: East Base Cross of Scriptures, Clonmacnoise. Image - The Discovery Programme.

<sup>218</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 151; Porter, *Crosses and Culture*, 134; Henry, *La sculpture irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles de l'ère chrétienne*, 204; Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period*, 173 and 181; Henry *Irish High Crosses*, 13, 55 and 65; Henry, *Irish Art During the Viking Invasions*, 136, 167, 194.

<sup>219</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 48; Porter, *Crosses and Culture*, 134; Henry, *La sculpture irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles de l'ère chrétienne*, 204; Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period*, 173 and 181; Henry *Irish High Crosses*, 13, 55 and 65; Henry, *Irish Art During the Viking Invasions*, 136, 167, 194.

Neither reading is fully convincing. The Magi interpretation is weakened by the lack of conventional attributes such as gifts, star, or Madonna and Child, while the ‘bringing of Christianity’ reading is still more tenuous, relying on an allegorical framework unattested elsewhere in Irish cross iconography. Yet within the compositional logic of the east face, the riders are most convincingly read as a reduced Magi type: the key elements of journey and homage are retained, but narrative detail has been stripped away in order to fit the compact register scheme. The inclusion of the Magi would also link this cross to Kilree, where a similar scene is suggested. Their parallel movement with the chariots below underlines the motif of pilgrimage and procession, grounding the base in the earthly realities of travel while elevating the riders into the realm of sacred journey. In this way, the panels work as the starting point of a larger theological sequence: movement at the base, revelation in the shaft, judgement and cosmic authority at the head, and finally intercession at the capstone. The riders thus act not as a free-floating vignette, but as an integral step in the east–west narrative economy of the monument, compressing the Magi’s role as archetypal seekers of Christ into a typological gesture that directs the viewer’s gaze upward, towards fulfilment and divine authority. Thus, the riders function as compressed Magi—journey without detail—rather than as generic ‘Christianity arriving in Ireland,’ which has little comparative support. The second principal inscription—ODOCOLMANDORRO...ANCROSSAAR RIGFL...ND’, translated as: ‘For Colman... who (made) the cross on King Fl...and on King Fl...nd’—explicitly pairs abbot and king as co-agents of the monument, and already establishes the framework in which the imagery above must be read: abbot and king appear together as co-agents of the monument.<sup>220</sup> Immediately above, we have two figures standing in profile, one on the left with a long robe and cloak, carrying a travelling bag, and one on the right with a short tunic and sword, both of whom are holding a stick which has been interpreted as the corner post of a church

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<sup>220</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 169.

(Figure 37). Harbison's proposal that this is Joseph Interpreting the Dream of Pharaoh's Butler is difficult to sustain.<sup>221</sup> Nothing in the costume, attributes, or setting evokes an Egyptian court. By contrast, all available evidence points toward a local historical pairing: the inscription immediately beneath identifies Colmán and King Flann as joint patrons, making their appearance directly above the text not only logical but expected, and the ecclesiastical/royal costuming perfectly matches this pairing: robe-and-bag for the abbot; sword and tunic for the king. The post between them also aligns with foundation iconography, making Ciarán–Diarmait or Colmán–Flann the closest conceptual matches, as they depict saint and king founding or renewing a site. In addition, elsewhere on the cross, similar dyads encode saint–king alliances—for instance, Patrick and Ciarán on the opposite face—showing that the sculptor intentionally used paired figures to signal cooperation between spiritual and temporal authority.<sup>222</sup>

Thus, whether understood as a record of collaboration in commissioning the cross, or as a typological echo of earlier alliances between saint and king, the essential point remains the same: the sculptor is deliberately representing the alliance of ecclesiastical and royal power. Other identifications are theoretically possible but function only at the level of reception—none match the inscriptional, iconographic, and programmatic evidence as well as the Colmán–Flann identification. The pairing mirrors that of Ciarán and Patrick on the opposite face, making the point unmistakable—secular and ecclesiastical authority are bound together, mutually legitimised, and raised into the sacred order inscribed on the monument. A further secular dyad above—sometimes misread as Joseph's court—fits more convincingly as another example of a royal encounter: this time, Flann with Diarmait or

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<sup>221</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 49

<sup>222</sup> Stokes, *The High Crosses of Castledermot and Durrow*, iv; Henry, *La sculpture irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles de l'ère chrétienne*, 204; Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period*, 173 and 181; Henry *Irish High Crosses*, 13, 55 and 65; Henry, *Irish Art During the Viking Invasions*, 136, 167, 194; Macalister, *The Archaeology of Ireland*, 39-40; Champneys, *Irish Ecclesiastical Architecture*; Porter, *Crosses and Culture*, 134; Gsänger, *Irland: Insel des Abel: Die Irischen Hochkreuze*, 72; Brandt-Förster, *Das Irische Hochkreuz: Ursprung, Entwicklung*, 123 and 167; Weir, *Early Ireland: A Field*, 201.

Cathal, particularly given costume and the known 900 truce at Clonmacnoise.<sup>223</sup> In addition, Heather Pulliam has argued that the horn depicted in the scene may reference this political agreement, as distributing ceremonial drinking horns was a known custom among sub-kings in Leinster, which strengthens this interpretation further.<sup>224</sup> Above this is another scene of two frontal bearded figures, each with a brooch and sword, one offering a long, horn-shaped object to the other. Once again, the interpretation of these figures as Colmán and King Flann or Ciarán and Diarmait seems the most convincing; Harbison's interpretation of the scene as the butler giving the cup to Pharoah seems unconvincing, and while the scene may depict neighbouring chieftains, it makes more sense for the figures we have already encountered, and who are named on the cross, to be present here once more.<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 162–64. See also Maggie McEnchroe Williams, “Dressing the Part: Depictions of Noble Costume in Irish High Crosses,” in *Encountering Medieval Textiles and Dress: Objects, Texts, Images*, ed. Desiree Koslin and Janet Snyder (Palgrave, 2002), 45–66, esp. 52–53.

<sup>224</sup> Pulliam, “Between the embodied eye and living world,” 10; Williams, “Dressing the Part,” 52–53; Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings*, 266.

<sup>225</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 49; Porter, *Crosses and Culture*, 134; Stokes, *The High Crosses of Castledermot and Durrow*, iv; Henry, *La sculpture irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles de l'ère chrétienne*, 204; Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period*, 173 and 181; Henry *Irish High Crosses*, 13, 55 and 65; Henry, *Irish Art During the Viking Invasions*, 136, 167, 194



Figure 35: *Flann and Abbot Colmán or Ciarán and Diarmait in dialogue. Cross of Scriptures, Clonmacnoise*

Just below the head, what appears to be a classic example of the *Traditio Clavium* shows Christ flanked by Peter and Paul, handing over the keys and the book (Figure 38). Several features anchor this interpretation. First, the tripartite structure—a central, enlarged Christ flanked by two smaller but authoritative disciples in mirrored stance—is the canonical compositional formula for the *Traditio Clavium* in both Insular and broader early medieval art. Second, the attributes visible in the surviving carving correspond precisely to this iconography: the object held by the left flanking figure is consistent with a key, and the object held by the right corresponds to a book, the standard pairing given to Peter and Paul respectively. Even in worn condition, this division of attributes is recognisable and not easily compatible with other narrative types.

By contrast, the alternative identifications fall away once the compositional and iconographic expectations of those scenes are considered. The seizure of Christ by the Jews requires multiple soldiers, dynamic movement, weapons, and an asymmetrical, chaotic composition—none of which is

present, while the Mission to the Apostles normally shows a broader group (typically twelve), not a focused triad, and involves Christ gesturing broadly rather than handing specific objects to two individuals. The Loaves and Fishes require baskets, loaves, fish, and a crowd; no such elements survive or are implied by the composition. The Traditio Legis typically shows Christ handing a scroll to Peter alone, often with Paul receiving a crown; again, the iconography does not match the paired key–book distribution here, and the Mocking of Christ favours gestural hostility, soldiers, or tormentors—none of which are present, and the dignified symmetry of this panel is antithetical to the scene.<sup>226</sup>

In short, only *Traditio Clavium* fits both the surviving attributes and the formal arrangement. Moreover, its theological relevance matches the broader programme: the panel’s location just below the head underscores the apostolic authority underpinning the monument’s claims about kingship, ecclesiastical lineage, and divine sanction. The cross repeatedly foregrounds apostolic commissioning elsewhere, and placing the *Traditio Clavium* at this prominent level strengthens a consistent visual grammar of authority transmitted from Christ to his chosen leaders. Thus, while alternative readings have been proposed, they fail iconographically, compositionally, and contextually. The *Traditio Clavium* remains the most coherent—and indeed the only compelling—interpretation. In addition, the scene is located exactly where one might expect an ecclesiological hinge beneath the Last Judgement (Figure 36). The head itself carries a compressed version of that scene: Christ enthroned, flanked by figures of the saved and the damned. The small bird carved behind Christ’s head recalls Muiredach’s cross, where it has been read as either the Holy Spirit or a sign of the soul’s return, embedding this cross within the same iconographic vocabulary.

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<sup>226</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 49; Allen, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 323; Brandt-Förster, *Das Irische Hochkreuz: Ursprung, Entwicklung*, 123 and 167; Porter, *Crosses and Culture*, 134; Henry, *La sculpture irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles de l’ère chrétienne*, 204; Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period*, 173 and 181; Henry *Irish High Crosses*, 13, 55 and 65; Henry, *Irish Art During the Viking Invasions*, 136, 167, 194; Crawford, “A Descriptive List of the Early Irish Crosses,” 230; Crawford, *Irish Carved Ornament from Monuments of the Christian Period*, 178; Crawford, *Handbook of Carved Ornament from Irish Monuments of the Christian Period*, 1–9.

The head of the cross shows Christ standing on a bar, carrying a cross staff and sceptre, flanked on the left by a figure playing a flute, with the righteous turning towards Christ in a depiction of the Last Judgement. This interpretation is enhanced by the carving on the north arm, where a figure holding a fork appears to be trying to push the wicked into eternal damnation.



Figure 36: *Traditio Clavium*, Cross of Scriptures, Clonmacnoise

Above, the capstone's east gable presents a *Majestas Domini* (Figure 39): Christ holding a book, flanked by two angels. Although rare in the Irish corpus, this motif appears with notable consistency on crosses with capstones, emphasising the summit as the place of divine

rule and judgement.<sup>227</sup> The capstone itself is worked as a reliquary in stone—its shingled roof and curved contours reinforcing the sense that the cross culminates not in ornament but in a sacred vessel, a meeting point between earth and heaven. Here, the capstone is not merely an addition but an integrated part of the cross, with its own distinct figural decoration. Its roof-like structure, covered in interlace resembling shingles, reinforces the connection between capstones and reliquaries. The ends of the capstone curve inward, mirroring reliquary shrines, further supporting the argument that the capstones on these crosses functioned as intercessory objects. This design choice highlights the holistic nature of the monument—it invites reading not panel by panel, but as a unified statement of power, faith, and kingship. By integrating the capstone into the overall design, the sculptors and patrons ensured that it played an active role in reinforcing the cross’s function as both a site of veneration and a political declaration.

The east face of the Cross of Scriptures serves as a powerful visual statement, blending monastic, royal, and ecclesiastical authority into a single artistic programme. As Maggie McEnroe Williams observes, the juxtaposition of scenes relating to the foundation and continuing prosperity of Clonmacnoise with an image of the ultimate source of Church authority links the history of the local community with the hub of Christianity.<sup>228</sup> In other words, panels that anchor the monument in Ciarán’s foundation and in the patronage of Flann Sinna are deliberately set in dialogue with the *Traditio Clavium* and Ascension imagery above, so that Clonmacnoise’s story is woven into the narrative of universal, Rome-centred Christianity. The inscriptions, figural panels, and capstone work together to legitimise the rule of Irish kings by tying them simultaneously to Clonmacnoise’s saintly founder, to the early

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<sup>227</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 49; Stokes, *The High Crosses of Castledermot and Durrow*, iv; Porter, *Crosses and Culture*, 134; Brandt-Förster, *Das Irische Hochkreuz: Ursprung, Entwicklung*, 123 and 167; Weir, *Early Ireland: A Field*, 201.

<sup>228</sup> McEnchroe Williams, “The Sign of The Cross: Irish high crosses as cultural emblems,” 132.

kings of Tara, and to the authority of the wider Church. The capstone, in particular, cements this connection, functioning as a reliquary-like vessel that transforms the cross into an object of intercession and a miniature martyrdom, further elevating the sacred and political status of Clonmacnoise. By integrating Christ, Peter, Paul, Flann, Colmán, and the Irish high kings within a single vertical axis, the cross asserts that political authority is divinely sanctioned—a message that would have resonated with both secular and religious audience.



*Figure 37: Majestas Domini, Cross of Scriptures, Clonmacnoise*

### West Face

The base of the west face is badly worn (Figure 38), but the upper panel shows Christ in the centre, his right hand raised in blessing, with a possible book in his left hand. He is approached by three figures on each side, who may be Apostles or Magi. Both Christ's Mission to the Apostles and The Adoration of the Magi have been posited as possible interpretations; the former would offer a configuration consistent with Irish presentations of apostolic authority, and one which has parallels with the crosses at Ahenny.<sup>229</sup>



Figure 38: Christ's Mission to the Apostles, Cross of Scriptures, Clonmacnoise.

<sup>229</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 169; Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 51, Porter, *Crosses and Culture*, 134.

The lower panel contains a figure with a long implement which appears to be a type of spear or staff, and which has been interpreted by Harbison as a compacted Entry into Jerusalem sequence alongside Resurrection/Women at the Tomb in adjacent fields.<sup>230</sup> Yet this identification is unconvincing: the essential attributes of Palm Sunday iconography—the donkey, palm branches, strewn garments, or city gate—are entirely absent, leaving little to anchor such a reading. By contrast, the figure corresponds more closely to the stock type of a spear-bearing soldier, a motif that recurs immediately above in the Arrest/Flagellation and Division/Stripping panels. More significantly, inserting an Entry at this juncture would sit uneasily within the tight Passion–Resurrection arc of the west face: from Christ in the Tomb at the base, through humiliation and violence perpetuated from the Mocking or Flagellation, identified by Christ who stands, hands bound, in the centre of two figures, one of whom is striking him, to Crucifixion and ultimate triumph.<sup>231</sup> In this narrative context, the figure functions more naturally as a guard within the Passion cycle, reinforcing the sequential logic of the programme rather than diverting it toward Palm Sunday. At the bottom of the shaft, there is an inscription, interpreted as ‘ORIT DO FLAIND MAC MAILSECHLAIND’ or ‘OR DO FLAVND MAC MAELSECHFLAIND’, referring to Flann Sinna, son of Máel Sechnaill, and his successor as King of Ireland (Figure 41).<sup>232</sup> This inscription has played a crucial role in dating the cross to the tenth

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<sup>230</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 50.

<sup>231</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 51; Allen, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 323; Stokes, *The High Crosses of Castledermot and Durrow*, iv; Crawford, “A Descriptive List of Early Irish Crosses,” 230; Crawford, *Irish Carved Ornament from Monuments of the Christian Period*, 178; Crawford, *Handbook of Carved Ornament from Irish Monuments of the Christian Period*, 3–9; Porter, *Crosses and Culture*, 131; Henry, *La sculpture irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles de l’ère chrétienne*, 204; Henry, *Early Christian Irish Art*, 18, 30ff, 66; Henry, *Irish Art During the Viking Invasions, 800–1020 A.D.*; Henry, *Irish Art during the Romanesque Period*, 136, 167, 194; Henry, *Sculpture and Architecture*; Henry, “Les origines de l’iconographie irlandaise,” 80–109; Calvert, *The Early Development of Irish High Crosses and Their Relationship to Scottish Sculpture in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries*, 124ff, 211ff, 229 and 323; Visser and W. Zandstra, *Die Ierse Kreuzigungsikonografie van de 7de tot de 13de Eeuw. I: Tekst; II: Catalogus*, 8, 39–40, 64, 98.

<sup>232</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 169.

century, linking it to Flann's patronage of religious monuments.<sup>233</sup>



Figure 39: Inscription on Cross of Scriptures, Clonmacnoise. Image: The Discovery Programme

It is also another example of the Uí Néill network in action, with Flann Sinna appearing to emulate the practice of his father, affiliating himself with the cross and, by extension, with Clonmacnoise, and outside the binary of Columba versus Patrick. Above this inscription, a compact Passion sequence runs upward: Christ in the Tomb beneath an enveloping angel, then Arrest/Flagellation, then the Division/Stripping of Christ's garments (an interpretation which strengthens the identity of the figures in the lower panel as being related to this incident, rather than the Entry to Jerusalem).<sup>234</sup> Each scene is rendered in a tight three-figure register with formal echoes of Carolingian/Byzantine compositional types.<sup>235</sup> The Crucifixion fills the ring (Figure 42): Christ with raised head

<sup>233</sup> Peter Harbison, "The Inscriptions on the Cross of the Scriptures at Clonmacnoise, County Offaly," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 79C (1979): 179.

<sup>234</sup> Pulliam, "Between the embodied eye and living world," 22; Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 51; Allen, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 323; Brandt-Förster, *Das Irische Hochkreuz: Ursprung, Entwicklung*, 123 and 167; Porter, *Crosses and Culture*, 134; Henry, *La sculpture irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles de l'ère chrétienne*, 204; Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period*, 173 and 181; Henry *Irish High Crosses*, 13, 55 and 65; Henry, *Irish Art During the Viking Invasions*, 136, 167, 194; Crawford, "A Descriptive List of the Early Irish Crosses," 230; Crawford, *Irish Carved Ornament from Monuments of the Christian Period*, 178; Crawford, *Handbook of Carved Ornament from Irish Monuments of the Christian Period*, 1–9; Visser, and W. Zandstra, *Die Ierse Kreuzigungsikonografie van de 7de tot de 13de Eeuw. I: Tekst; II: Catalogus*, 8, 39–40, 64, 98.

Gsänger, *Irland: Insel des Abel: Die Irischen Hochkreuze*; 72.

<sup>235</sup> Pulliam, "Between the embodied eye and living world," 21–22.

and outstretched arms; nails and a tiny angel are carefully indicated; four roundels sit where ring and arms overlap.<sup>236</sup> The capstone roof shows interlace set as shingles; its gables carry five bosses—visualising a reliquary roof and tying the summit to the examples at Killamery and Durrow, both of which are reminiscent of shrine-iconography.

The west face's lower Resurrection theology is explicit. Irish glosses on *Ephesians* 5:14 explicitly link the cross, Adam's burial, and the Resurrection, while the *Saltair na Rann* further affirms Adam's grave as a central element in salvation history, making this side a coherent ascent from tomb to triumph.<sup>237</sup> This ascent is reinforced epigraphically: Flann's name at the base anchors the Passion cycle not just in salvation history but in contemporary dynastic memory. In this framework, Adam's presence on the cross visually anchors the narrative of redemption and Resurrection in a distinctly Irish theological context.

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<sup>236</sup> Pulliam, "Between the embodied eye and living world," 20.

<sup>237</sup> Pulliam, "Between the embodied eye and living world," 22–23; Thomas O'Loughlin, "Adam's Burial at Hebron: Some Aspects of Its Significance in the Latin Tradition," *Proceedings of the Irish Biblical Association* 15 (1992): 77; John de Paor, "Adam's Grave, Adam's Soul and Our Souls, the Doctrine of the Three Letters and Clm 6235," in *The Scriptures and Early Mediaeval Ireland: Proceedings of the 1993 Conference of the Society for Hiberno-Latin Studies on Early Irish Exegesis and Homiletics*, ed. by Thomas O'Loughlin (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999), 96.



*Figure 40: The Crucifixion, Cross of Scriptures West Face. Image - The Discovery Programme.*

### **North Face**

The north face of the Cross of the Scriptures is the most complex, bringing together themes of sin, sanctity, and protection within a carefully structured hierarchy. The base panels (Figure 43) introduce the contrast immediately: in the lowest register, a line of animals is driven leftwards by a figure with an upraised implement; above, winged beasts and lions occupy a more tumultuous field, their bodies crossing and overlapping. Their entanglement with human forms recalls the

imagery of temptation and entrapment familiar from Insular manuscript art.<sup>238</sup> The plinth above the base contains two quadrupeds with contorted necks, their heads turned sideways

toward the viewer.<sup>239</sup> They are entangled in interlace, which seems to emanate from a centrally placed tree. This imagery suggests a deliberate contrast between order and disorder—one of spiritual harmony versus entrapment in sin—which reinforces the need for salvation and intercession, a role fulfilled by saints and relics.



Figure 41: North Face Base, Cross of Scriptures, Clonmacnoise

<sup>238</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 169; Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, p. 52

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*

This visual interplay frames the shaft above, where a tonsured figure, seated with book in hand, subdues a prostrate opponent by driving a staff into his eye (Figure 44). The figure's composure, combined with the Roman eagle perched above, suggests not chaos but victory—whether we read the seated figure as Anthony the hermit, or more plausibly as Ciarán or Patrick, his authority is both spiritual and institutional.<sup>240</sup> The eagle aligns the scene with Rome, echoing the *Traditio Clavium* on the east face, and so reinforces Clonmacnoise's claim to universal as well as local authority.<sup>241</sup> The saintly interpretation is particularly persuasive in context. Irish high crosses frequently pair saints with kings, not as decorative flourishes but as statements of intercession and legitimation. If Ciarán is present here, the message would be unmistakable: the founder mediates between the earthly patron—King Flann—and the divine sphere symbolised by the capstone above.

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<sup>240</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 52; Stokes, *The High Crosses of Castledermot and Durrow*, iv; Porter, *Crosses and Culture*, 134; Henry, *La sculpture irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles de l'ère chrétienne*, 204; Henry, *Early Christian Irish Art*, 18, 30ff, 66; Henry, *Irish Art During the Viking Invasions, 800–1020 A.D.*; Henry, *Irish Art during the Romanesque Period*, 136, 167, 194; Henry, *Sculpture and Architecture*; Henry, “Les origines de l'iconographie irlandaise,” 80–109; Calvert, *The Early Development of Irish High Crosses and Their Relationship to Scottish Sculpture in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries*, 124ff, 211ff, 229 and 323; Weir, *Early Ireland: A Field Guide*.

<sup>241</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 169; Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 54, Porter, *Crosses and Culture*, 30; Pulliam, “Between the embodied eye and living world,” 13.



Figure 42: North Face Base, Cross of Scriptures, Clonmacnoise

In this reading, the figure does not simply model ascetic virtue but anchors Clonmacnoise itself as a locus of protection and spiritual power. Pulliam's observation that vitae of both Patrick and Ciarán resonate with this imagery strengthens the case for reading the north face not merely as abstract allegory but as a visual hagiography, binding the local saint into the same theological programme that elevates Flann's kingship. If this were merely a hermit scene, one would expect desert attributes (hut, animals of solitude), but instead we have institutional cues (book, tonsure, eagle), favouring identification as Ciarán/Patrick in authority. The smaller details reinforce this structure of protection. At the margins of the shaft, a cat devours a mouse—a motif also found at Monasterboice and in the Book of

Kells.<sup>242</sup> Far from whimsical, these cats can be read as symbolising the safeguarding of sacred nourishment: just as they defended grain stores from vermin, so saints defended the Eucharistic body and the faithful from corruption. Thus, the cat-and-mouse is not whimsy but Eucharistic allegory, integrated into the same protective code as serpent-heads and interlace margins. Their repetition across sites signals a deliberate visual code, rooted in monastic life yet expanded into theological metaphor. Above, a scene shows a figure in a long robe, playing an instrument with three pipes, a cat to his left, and two lions behind. The scene has been interpreted as the Burial of St Paul the Hermit, thanks to the presence of the lions, who appeared to help dig the grave of the hermit, with the musician figure representing St Anthony, playing a lament for his fallen friend.<sup>243</sup> Alternative interpretations have included enchantment of the music of the Sidhe, a musician conveying to posterity the sound of the pipes, and even a representation of Lust, given the two animals beneath,<sup>244</sup> but the Burial of St Paul the Hermit, with lions helping Anthony bury Paul—is the only proposal that fits the basic iconographic template. Even this reading is strained, however, and there are three problems that weaken the hermit-burial interpretation. The first is a lack of obvious burial imagery; the classic burial scene requires a grave pit or shovelling motion. Here the musician pipes peacefully; no digging lions appear, nor any sign of a corpse. In addition, the musician's role is anomalous: Anthony is never depicted as a piper or as performing a musical lament and, as a rule, music simply does not belong to the iconography of Paul and Anthony. We should also note that the lions' posture is not

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<sup>242</sup> Pulliam, "Between the embodied eye and living world," 13–14.

<sup>243</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 53.

<sup>244</sup> Crawford, "A Descriptive List of the Early Irish Crosses," 230; Crawford, *Irish Carved Ornament from Monuments of the Christian Period*, 178; Crawford, *Handbook of Carved Ornament from Irish Monuments of the Christian Period*, 1–9; Porter, *Crosses and Culture*, 134; Weir, *Early Ireland: A Field Guide*.

funerary: we would assume that burial lions are shown actively engaged—digging or lowering their heads toward a grave. Here they stand passively, more emblematic than narrative. The other proposed identifications fare even worse: The “music of the Sidhe” proposal depends on importing purely vernacular, mythological content into a monument whose entire programme is dominated by biblical typology and ecclesiastical authority. Nothing else on the cross provides a mythological foothold; the reading lacks contextual support. The “Lust” interpretation (two animals beneath the figure) appears to be a projection of later moralising categories onto an Insular composition. The carving contains no specific sexualised cues, no gestural markers, and no medieval commentary that would support such an allegory. The attribution has therefore been largely abandoned in modern scholarship. Once weak alternatives are set aside, what remains is a consistent visual pattern, featuring institutional attributes such as the book and tonsure, protective animals such as eagles, lions and cats, margin creatures, such as the cat and mouse, employed as allegories of safeguarding sacred nourishment, and a hieratic, not chaotic, composition. These markers align with Clonmacnoise’s self-understanding as a site of protection, authority, and scriptural guardianship. They transform the north face into a visual hagiography of the community’s founding saint, embedding him within the same theological system that validates Flann’s kingship elsewhere on the monument. Thus, rather than hermit lore, pagan whimsy, or moralised fantasies, the imagery speaks a deliberate language of monastic protection, Eucharistic safeguarding, and institutional identity, making the Ciarán/Patrick reading not only the most coherent—but the most contextually necessary.

The scene above shows a seated figure with palms raised outward, a crosier

held between the knees, and a disc above the head. Another figure leans over from behind, grasping a curl of hair: the composition unmistakably suggests a moment of tonsure, the ritual marking of entry into clerical life. Earlier scholars proposed a range of figures—Paul and Anthony, Patrick and Martin of Tours, Matthew with a T-shaped cross—but these identifications rely more on conjectural analogy than on the carving’s internal logic.<sup>245</sup> The key elements are institutional, not eremitic: the crosier, the gesture of clerical initiation, and the hieratic posture of the seated figure. These cues strongly favour a reading grounded in ecclesiastical succession, not desert asceticism. Whether the sculptor intended Patrick receiving tonsure from Martin (a theme popular in Irish hagiography) or a more local saint receiving ordination, the emphasis lies on transmission of authority—the continuity of teaching, leadership, and sanctity that anchors the Clonmacnoise community.<sup>246</sup> The presence of musicians elsewhere on the face must likewise be interpreted through this institutional lens. These are not depictions of secular entertainment or vernacular folklore; within an ecclesiastical monument saturated with liturgical and sacramental motifs, musical scenes echo the soundscape of the monastery itself. As Ó Carragáin has shown, high crosses were embedded in the rhythms of chant and ritual.<sup>247</sup> Musical imagery here therefore reinforces the broader theme of ritual continuity and the audible life of the Church.

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<sup>245</sup> Harbison, *High Crosses of Ireland*, 53; Porter, *Crosses and Culture*, 134; Morris, “The Muiredach Cross at Monasterboice: A New Interpretation of Three of Its Panels,” 207–10; Henry, *La sculpture irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles de l’ère chrétienne*, 204; Henry, *Early Christian Irish Art*, 18, 30ff, 66; Henry, *Irish Art During the Viking Invasions, 800–1020 A.D.*; Henry, *Irish Art during the Romanesque Period*, 136, 167, 194; ; Henry, *Sculpture and Architecture*; Henry, “Les origines de l’iconographie irlandaise,” 80–109; Gsänger, *Irland: Insel des Abel: Die Irischen Hochkreuze*; 72; Weir, *Early Ireland: A Field Guide*.

<sup>246</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 1, 53; Pulliam, “Between the embodied eye and living world,” 13, Porter, *Crosses and Culture*, 29

This logic flows into the ring, where serpents curl around human heads and hands. The motif is too deliberate to be merely ornamental. Serpents in Insular iconography mark both entrapment and renewal—sin’s grip, but also the shedding of skin as a metaphor of baptismal rebirth. The entwined humans, positioned at the threshold of the head, dramatise humanity in need of release; the placement itself is theological. Below stands the saintly mediator; above rises the shrine-like capstone. The viewer is invited to see deliverance as mediated upward, from human vulnerability through saintly intercession to the divine presence signalled at the summit through the presence of the capstones.

Taken together, the north face is anything but a miscellany of beasts, musicians, saints, and hybrids. It is a structured meditation on obedience, transmission, and protection. The hierarchy that organises the entire monument is expressed compactly here, with Christ enthroned in the head, saintly mediators in the upper panels, founders and kings inscribed in the body of the cross, and subdued or devouring animals at the margins, symbolising the safeguarding of sacred goods. The capstone crowns this ascension. Far from being decorative surplus, it operates as a reliquary seal, the architectural sign of enclosure and intercession. In this face, the capstone’s meaning becomes unmistakable: it transforms the whole monument into a vertical axis of mediation, where saints guard, Christ rules, and kings are legitimated within a sacred order.

### **South Face**

The south face of the Cross of the Scriptures offers a rich interplay of narrative, ornamental, and theological motifs, structured to reinforce the same hierarchies of power and sanctity that dominate the monument as a whole. At the base, a hunting scene unfolds: human figures, deer, and attendant animals, echoing the equestrian

and venatic imagery already familiar from Ahenny and Kells. As we have discussed in our analysis of the Ossory group, although sometimes labelled “secular,” such venatic imagery elsewhere in the Insular world consistently carries allegorical weight, signalling royal mastery, spiritual vigilance, or the pursuit of the soul. Its position at the lowest register, beneath scriptural scenes and saintly iconography, encourages precisely this symbolic reading: earthly activity ordered and contained within a higher theological programme. Above this, a more ambiguous figural panel presents four armed figures and a pair of wrestlers locked in a tightly composed struggle. The carving’s compactness, the bodily interlock of the two central combatants, and the absence of any betrayal gesture or surrounding disciples argue against the Kiss of Judas interpretation. That scene requires a frontal embrace, a clearly identifiable Christ figure, and the presence of guards restraining him—none of which is securely visible here.<sup>248</sup> Likewise, the proposal that the panel represents the Children of Israel following Jacob lacks iconographic support: the biblical theme is not otherwise developed on the cross, and processional or journeying imagery would normally be expressed through forward movement rather than a static wrestling pose.<sup>249</sup> By contrast, the Jacob Wrestling the Angel interpretation coheres with both the structure of the carving and its theological placement.<sup>250</sup> The two central figures appear engaged in a symmetrical grappling motion rather than in an intimate kiss or a crowd scene. Their bodies intersect along a vertical axis, forming a characteristic X-shaped crossing—

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<sup>248</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 169; Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 50.

<sup>249</sup> Porter, *Crosses and Culture*, 131.

<sup>250</sup> Brandt-Förster, *Das Irische Hochkreuz: Ursprung, Entwicklung*, 123 and 167; Henry, *La sculpture irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles de l’ère chrétienne*, 204; Henry, *Early Christian Irish Art*, 18, 30ff, 66; Henry, *Irish Art During the Viking Invasions, 800–1020 A.D.*; Henry, *Irish Art during the Romanesque Period*, 136, 167, 194; Henry, *Sculpture and Architecture*; Henry, “Les origines de l’iconographie irlandaise,” 80–109.

precisely the visual grammar used elsewhere in Irish sculpture for moments of spiritual struggle or divine encounter. This is reinforced by the presence of the other figures flanking the wrestlers: they stand not as an armed arresting party, but as witnesses or attendants, a compositional logic much closer to the depiction of a theophany than to a Passion narrative.

Moreover, the placement of a scene of divine–human struggle immediately above a panel of earthly pursuit fits the **typological progression** that structures the south face: from human striving (the hunt) to spiritual wrestling (Jacob), to the higher scenes above. Theologically, Jacob’s struggle inaugurates themes of vocation, blessing, and divine encounter—key motifs in the Cross of the Scriptures, where kingship, sanctity, and scriptural authority are repeatedly interwoven. For these reasons, the most convincing identification is Jacob Wrestling the Angel; an image that we have seen elsewhere in this group. It fits the carving’s formal characteristics, integrates naturally with the surrounding iconographic programme, and avoids the inconsistencies that weaken the alternative proposals. We can argue, then, that the panel communicates confrontation and struggle, thematically consistent with the dialectic of sin and deliverance across the cross. Thus, even if Judas’ Kiss or Muiredach Master motifs are possible, the core meaning is confrontation and conflict resolved by vine, David, and divine sanction. The plinth above carries inhabited vine scrolls flanked by quadrupeds, a motif also found on the north face.<sup>251</sup> The vine scroll is more than ornament: it evokes Christ as the true vine (John 15:1), situating the imagery within a Eucharistic and ecclesiological framework. Above this, panels of interlace—including Chi-shaped patterns with

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<sup>251</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 169.

human terminals—signal the Christological centre, while the panel of four men linked by interlace recalls the visual strategies of Muiredach's Cross, where human figures are deliberately woven into the ornamental order.<sup>252</sup>

On the shaft, the carving shifts to a more explicitly figural scene: a seated figure on a high-backed chair, a lyre resting across his knees. The instrument is the crucial element. A seated figure with a harp or lyre is a stable and widely attested attribute of David in Irish monumental sculpture, appearing on the Muiredach Cross at Monasterboice, on the Castledermot South Cross, and on the cross at Kells. These parallels are not merely thematic but formal: the pose, the seated posture, and the triangular harp recur with notable consistency across the corpus. When placed in a sequence already populated with Old Testament subjects elsewhere on the monument, the Davidic interpretation becomes even more compelling. The alternatives proposed in earlier scholarship are markedly less convincing when measured against both iconographic logic and the internal evidence of the panel. Moses striking the rock requires the presence of a staff, an outstretched striking gesture, and the flowing water which is always central to that scene; none of these are present. The Raising of Lazarus depends on Christ standing before a tomb or niche and addressing a wrapped figure emerging from it, not a solitary seated man with a lyre. The Virgin and Child would require two figures and the unmistakable gestures of maternal presentation; these are absent. St Patrick banishing serpents is iconographically tied to serpentine forms beneath his feet or surrounding him, and

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<sup>252</sup> Pulliam, "Between the embodied eye and living world," 15.

again there is no trace of such imagery here.<sup>253</sup> By contrast, nothing in the carving contradicts a Davidic reading, and the presence of the lyre positively requires it: no other biblical or hagiographical figure in the Irish monumental tradition is consistently marked with this attribute. The scene's placement within a vertical typological sequence further strengthens the identification. David, as king, psalmist, and type of Christ, occupies a privileged interpretive position on high crosses: he embodies righteous earthly sovereignty and prefigures Christ's divine rule. Situated above the hunt, this Davidic register marks the transition from earthly order to spiritual kingship, preparing the viewer for the overtly ecclesiastical and Christological scenes that rise above, and simultaneously acting as a model of sacred kingship highly resonant in the context of Flann Sinna's patronage.<sup>254</sup> The underside of the ring is filled with twisted serpents entangling human heads: a familiar symbol of sin, deception, and the fallen condition, but also of baptismal rebirth, where the old life is shed and new life received. It is at this threshold that the Hand of God emerges—a rare but potent motif. Carved just beneath the south arm, it extends into the viewer's space, blessing and protecting those who stand before the cross. This is not abstract theology but participatory encounter: as Pulliam observes, the gesture transforms the cross into a site of direct address, where divine favour is offered in the immediacy of 'I' and 'you.'<sup>255</sup> This participatory quality rules out a purely ornamental reading: the Hand of God

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<sup>253</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 50; Stokes, *The High Crosses of Castledermot and Durrow*, iv; Allen, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 323; Henry, *La sculpture irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles de l'ère chrétienne*, 204; Henry, *Early Christian Irish Art*, 18, 30ff, 66; Henry, *Irish Art During the Viking Invasions, 800–1020 A.D.*; Henry, *Irish Art during the Romanesque Period*, 136, 167, 194; Henry, *Sculpture and Architecture*; Henry, "Les origines de l'iconographie irlandaise," 80–109; Brandt-Förster, *Das Irische Hochkreuz: Ursprung, Entwicklung*, 123 and 167; Weir, *Early Ireland: A Field Guide*.

<sup>254</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 170. See also Pulliam, "Between the embodied eye and living world," for more on this.

<sup>255</sup> Pulliam, "Between the embodied eye and living world," 13.

transforms this face into liturgical encounter. In this context, the Hand of God encapsulates the cross' liturgical and devotional function, mediating between heaven and earth with striking immediacy. The arm ends are filled with fretwork bosses and interlace, tying figural and ornamental schemes into a cohesive programme. Above, the capstone mirrors its northern counterpart: six bosses on the side and shingled interlace on the roof, deliberately replicating reliquary forms. Far from being an afterthought, the capstone here completes the theological ascent: from hunt and conflict at the base, through vine, David, and kingly alliance, to divine judgement and blessing, crowned by the reliquary-logic of the summit. The south face thus reinforces the monument's overarching claim: sin and struggle below, sanctity and authority mediated above, with the capstone sealing the cross as a vertical liturgy of power, protection, and divine intercession.

The Cross of the Scriptures at Clonmacnoise represents the culmination of the capstone cross tradition, where biblical exegesis, dynastic commemoration, and reliquary symbolism converge in a unified monumental programme. Its scale, sophistication, and inscriptions set it apart as a deliberate statement of ecclesiastical and royal power, crystallising Clonmacnoise's role as both monastic centre and dynastic stronghold. Each face contributes to this vision. The west side stages the Passion, Resurrection, and apostolic commission, anchored by Flann Sinna's inscription and thereby binding salvation history to contemporary kingship. The east side develops this further, pairing royal and abbatial imagery with a compressed *Traditio Clavium* and Last Judgement sequence, crowned by a *Majestas Domini* on the capstone. The north and south faces expand the programme through cycles of sin, struggle, and deliverance: hunting, wrestling, entangled beasts, Davidic kingship, saints and abbots, and the Hand of God. Taken together, these

panels narrate the human condition—fall, conflict, and mortality—set against the divine order mediated by Christ, saints, and kings. The integration of capstone and head is decisive. Here the summit is not an afterthought but the crown of the monument’s theological ascent. Its reliquary contours, bosses, and shingled roof situate it within the language of shrines, translating the cross itself into a monumental reliquary. Positioned above Passion and Judgement imagery, the capstone affirms the logic of intercession: Christ enthroned in majesty, flanked by angels, presides as cosmic judge, while the reliquary form signals the active presence of relics and saints. The whole monument thus functions as a vertical liturgy—base to capstone, earth to heaven—designed to guide the viewer’s gaze and devotion upward. Politically, the cross embodies a careful balance. By naming Flann Sinna and Colmán, it enshrines the partnership of king and abbot; by aligning itself with Adam, Ciarán, Patrick, and the universal apostolic church, it locates Irish kingship within salvation history. This is not vague symbolism but a precise statement: legitimacy derives from divine sanction, mediated through saints and monasteries, and displayed in stone for all to see.

In sum, the Cross of the Scriptures is more than a devotional monument. It is a theological and political manifesto in stone, a reliquary cross that fuses Passion narrative, saintly presence, and dynastic commemoration into a coherent whole. It articulates, with exceptional clarity, the central claim of the capstone tradition: that kingship, monastic authority, and the hope of salvation were inseparably bound, and that the high cross was the medium through which this union could be permanently inscribed into the Irish landscape.

### 3.2.4 Monasterboice

Monasterboice is a significant early medieval monastic site in County Louth,

Ireland, renowned for its towering high crosses, round tower, and association with early Christian scholarship. Founded in the around the sixth century, it became an important religious and artistic centre.<sup>256</sup> The site is best known for its high crosses, including Muiredach's Cross, often regarded as the finest surviving example of Irish high cross sculpture. These crosses feature intricate biblical carvings and serve as powerful visual expressions of Christian theology, monastic authority, and political patronage in medieval Ireland.

### **Tall Cross**

The Tall Cross (Figure 45) is the tallest surviving example of a high cross not only in Ireland, but across the surviving sample of high crosses in England and Scotland, hence the name. Standing at over seven metres, it dominates the site and, despite weathering, preserves an exceptionally ambitious iconographic programme. Its scale alone distinguishes it from other Irish monuments, but the Tall Cross also exemplifies the integration of figural cycles, biblical typology, and reliquary-inspired capstones into a coherent theological and political statement.

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<sup>256</sup> Roger Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 2.



*Figure 43: Tall Cross at Monasterboice, East Face*

## East Face

The east face consists of a stepped sequence of biblical panels. At the base, David stands with his left knee on the back of a lion, pulling apart its jaws, with a staff to his back and sheep in the upper right portion of the panel.<sup>257</sup> This image anchors the programme in divine deliverance: above, the Sacrifice of Isaac aligns Old Testament typology with Christ's Passion. The central register shows a standing bearded figure, , his left hand at his waist and his right; this has been read as Moses striking the rock—or, alternatively, the Worship of the Golden Calf.<sup>258</sup> Harbison and Stalley favour the former, but the latter is more consistent with the cross's polemic against idolatry, particularly when read alongside the judgemental imagery of the head and arms. Above this, the panel is divided into two halves, with the left showing David in profile, holding a stick in his right hand which bears the head of Goliath. To the right is Samuel, anointing the head of David with oil poured from a horn in his right hand, his left hand touching the forehead of David who is kneeled before him.<sup>259</sup> David kneeling before Samuel and David's triumph over Goliath stabilise the cross's emphasis on divinely sanctioned kingship, a theme that shapes how the next panel should be read.. Harbison and Stalley's Moses-at-the-Rock identification is weakened by the absence of rod, stream, or kneeling Israelites. Conversely, the

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<sup>257</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 147.

<sup>258</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 176; Roger Stalley, "Artistic Identity and the Irish Sculpture Crosses", *MMIAL* 153-66; Roger Stalley, "Irish Sculpture of the Early Tenth Century and the Work of the 'Muiredach Master: Problems of Identification and Meaning'", *PRIA* 114C (2014): 141-79; Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 147; Helen Roe, *Monasterboice and its Monuments* (County Louth Archaeological and Historical Society, 2003), 53; Porter, *Crosses and Culture*, 131; Gsänger, *Irland: Insel des Abel: Die Irischen Hochkreuze*; 72; Henry, *La sculpture irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles de l'ère chrétienne*, 204; Henry, *Early Christian Irish Art*, 18, 30ff, 66; Henry, *Irish Art During the Viking Invasions, 800–1020 A.D.*; Henry, *Irish Art during the Romanesque Period*, 136, 167, 194; ; Henry, *Sculpture and Architecture*; Henry, "Les origines de l'iconographie irlandaise," 80–109; Brandt-Förster, *Das Irische Hochkreuz: Ursprung, Entwicklung*, 123 and 167; Weir, *Early Ireland: A Field Guide*.

<sup>259</sup> Harbison, *Irish High Crosses*, 147; Roe, *Monasterboice and its Monuments*, 53; Porter, *Crosses and Culture*, 131; Gsänger, *Irland: Insel des Abel: Die Irischen Hochkreuze*; 72; Henry, *La sculpture irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles de l'ère chrétienne*, 204; Henry, *Early Christian Irish Art*, 18, 30ff, 66; Henry, *Irish Art During the Viking Invasions, 800–1020 A.D.*; Henry, *Irish Art during the Romanesque Period*, 136, 167, 194; Henry, *Sculpture and Architecture*; Henry, "Les origines de l'iconographie irlandaise," 80–109; Brandt-Förster, *Das Irische Hochkreuz: Ursprung, Entwicklung*, 123 and 167; Weir, *Early Ireland: A Field Guide*; O'Neill, *Illustrations of the Most Interesting of the Sculptured Crosses of Ancient Ireland*; Allen, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 134, 228.

Golden Calf reading, while less traditional, is strengthened by the idol-centric contrasts elsewhere (heretic/damned on the arms, demonic seizure beneath). The upper register, possibly Goliath's challenge, continues this sequence of promise and fulfilment. Above this sits a figure, likely Samson due to the long hair, in profile, holding a narrow house pillar in both hands with an inverted capital on top. Eight Philistines are seated in rows to his right, and this seems likely to be Samson rendering the pillars of the house or Goliath challenging the armies of Israel.<sup>260</sup> Three features point strongly in the Samson identification direction: the first is that there is no evidence of weapons, shields or armour, as one would expect in a Goliath scene—the upright pillar is unconvincing as a spear. As mentioned, eight seated figures in rows appear as spectators to Samson's right, and this matches the banquet setting of Judges 16, where the Philistine elite gather to mock the captive judge. It is not compatible with Goliath's battlefield challenge, which is public, open-air, and involves opposing armies—never a seated audience. In addition, identifying the long-haired figure as Goliath would double up Goliath imagery immediately after David's decapitation panel. Samson, however, extends the typology rather than repeating it. David represents deliverance and election, while Samson represents judgement on the enemies of Israel. This movement from election to judgement prepares the viewer for the eschatological content in the cross-head and, therefore, Samson is the stronger identification. The figure's long hair, the column, the inverted capital, and the banquet audience converge on a single reading, while the Goliath alternative lacks any supporting attributes and creates a thematic redundancy.

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<sup>260</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 147; Porter, *Crosses and Culture*, 131; R. A. S. Macalister, *Guide to Monasterboice* (Dundalgan Press, 1949), 240, 313; Roe, *Monasterboice and its Monuments*, 55; Gsänger, *Irland: Insel des Abel: Die Irischen Hochkreuze*; 72; Henry, *La sculpture irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles de l'ère chrétienne*, 204; Henry, *Early Christian Irish Art*, 18, 30ff, 66; Henry, *Irish Art During the Viking Invasions, 800–1020 A.D.*; Henry, *Irish Art during the Romanesque Period*, 136, 167, 194; Henry, *Sculpture and Architecture*; Henry, 'Les origines de l'iconographie irlandaise,' 80–109; Visser et al, *Die Ierse Kreuzigungsikonografie van de 7de tot de 13de Eeuw. I: Tekst; II: Catalogus*, 8, 39-40, 64, 98.

The chariot scene above extends this ascent decisively. A winged horse draws a two-wheeled chariot before a frontal figure who, despite weathering, retains enough of his outline to support identification as Elijah ascending into heaven rather than Porter's alternative suggestion of Brigit and Ailbe, for whom no chariot iconography exists.<sup>261</sup> The winged, fire-like chariot is one of Elijah's most widely attested visual attributes in Late Antique and Insular art, and its placement at the top of the shaft—immediately beneath the lost capstone—is structurally appropriate for a scene of heavenly translation. Elijah functions as the natural culmination of the sequence already established below: deliverance (David and the lion), sacrifice (Isaac), election (David's anointing), and judgement (Samson). His ascent is not an isolated vignette but the final stage in a vertically organised theology of salvation history. This identification also carries architectural significance. As we will discuss further, and as the comparative evidence from Ahenny and Kilkieran already suggests, capstones on high crosses signalled the heavenly realm, the resurrection, or the Holy Sepulchre—miniature architectural metaphors for Jerusalem. When read upward, the Tall Cross thus moves typologically from David, to Isaac, to David's consecration, to Samson's eschatological judgement, and finally to Elijah's ascent. Samson becomes the judgemental hinge that prepares the viewer for Elijah's translation into the divine realm, and the Elijah panel in turn anticipates the capstone as the "roof" of heaven. Together, Samson below and Elijah above articulate a coherent sequence of judgement to ascent, visually and theologically directing the viewer's gaze toward the capstone that once crowned the tallest cross in Ireland.

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<sup>261</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 147; Porter, *Crosses and Culture*, 131; Macalister, *Guide to Monasterboice*, 240, 313; Henry, *La sculpture irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles de l'ère chrétienne*, 204; Henry, *Early Christian Irish Art*, 18, 30ff, 66; Henry, *Irish Art During the Viking Invasions, 800–1020 A.D.*; Henry, *Irish Art during the Romanesque Period*, 136, 167, 194; Henry, *Sculpture and Architecture*; Henry, "Les origines de l'iconographie irlandaise," 80–109; Brandt-Förster, *Das Irische Hochkreuz: Ursprung, Entwicklung*, 123 and 167.

The head crystallises the programme. On one side, two soldiers advance toward the Three Children in the Fiery Furnace, while an angel protects them—an image of deliverance that echoes the shaft’s earlier emphasis on divine rescue. At the centre, however, the monument reaches its culmination: a frontal figure armed with sword and shield in his left hand and a staff or rod in his right, flanked by five soldiers. Although the scene has been variously interpreted—as David enthroned, as Christ in Glory, as the Ascension, or even through secular lenses—the martial attributes and the eschatological framing elsewhere on the cross make Christ in Judgement the strongest reading.<sup>262</sup> Davidic kingship has already been treated extensively below, and the presence of multiple armed attendants is inconsistent with Ascension iconography, which never equips Christ with weapons. By contrast, the sword, shield, and flaming or judicial rod accord closely with Insular representations of the returning Christ as warrior-judge. Read in sequence after Samson’s destruction of the Philistines and Elijah’s ascent, the armed Christ seals the vertical ascent as its inevitable climax: judgement following deliverance, sovereignty revealed after election, and the divine king enthroned above the typological chain that leads upward through the shaft.

At the summit, the capstone once again bears the architectural features that we have seen elsewhere – there appears to be a gable and finial to create the shape of a building, and the capstone also shows a four—legged animal with a diamond or medallion above its back (Figure 46).<sup>263</sup> Harbison interpreted this as the idolatrous King Manasseh, but this seems a strange choice, given the themes on the rest of this side and the fact that Manasseh is often depicted as evil, having practiced idolatry

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<sup>262</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 148; Allen, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 134, 228; Stokes, *Early Christian Art in Ireland*, 119; Crawford, *Irish Carved Ornament from Monuments of the Christian Period*, 4; De Paor and de Paor, *Early Christian Ireland*; Gsänger, *Irland: Insel des Abel: Die Irischen Hochkreuze*; Brandt-Förster, *Das Irische Hochkreuz: Ursprung, Entwicklung*, 123 and 167; Weir, *Early Ireland: A Field Guide*, Roe, *Monasterboice and its Monuments*, 57.

<sup>263</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 177.

and sacrificed his own son.<sup>264</sup> No universally accepted identification has emerged: beyond Harbison's suggestion of Manasseh, many commentators simply leave the figure and animal unnamed. In this context, I propose a new, tentative reading: that the figure and animal represent St Patrick and his goat. The gabled capstone shows a standing, halo-less figure in front of a four-legged animal; above the animal's back a small, now-ambiguous shape is carved. According to the *Vita Sancti Patricii* and the *Tripartite Life*, Patrick was in the process of converting the native people when he was banished from pagan Wicklow, forcing him to head to a collection of islands north of Ireland. While he was on the mainland, a group of locals discovered his camp and, feeling hungry, killed and ate his goat before heading home. Inconsolable and full of fury, Patrick confronted the locals. When they denied the act, they found themselves unable to speak, only to bleat, until they were ready to confess their sin, repent, and seek forgiveness from Patrick and, by extension, from God. This reading aligns suggestively with themes already present on this face and in the capstone repertoire—confession, repentance, and saintly mediation—though the carving remains too worn to allow a secure identification. The capstone here is not an afterthought but an integral part of the monument's design. Its architectural contours—gable, finial, and shingled 'roof'—visually crown the cross, ensuring balance and proportion, while its figural decoration signals that it was conceived as part of the iconographic programme rather than mere ornament. The inclusion of a saintly figure with animal companion situates the capstone within the broader logic of intercession and repentance: the very themes that structure the panels below.

Read in this way, the capstone functions as a stone reliquary, housing not relics but

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<sup>264</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 147; Porter, *Culture and Crosses*.

a narrative of saintly mediation.



*Figure 44: Tall Cross, Monasterboice. Capstone East Face*

Just as portable shrines offered access to divine grace through the presence of relics, so too does the capstone anchor the Tall Cross in the economy of intercession. If this identification is accepted, the imagery of Patrick and his goat, framed at the summit, underscores themes of sin, confession, and forgiveness, while the juxtaposition with David below reinforces divine mercy and kingship. The capstone thus emerges as the theological and visual climax of the cross, its reliquary form and saintly narrative directing viewers toward repentance and reconciliation with God.

## West Face

The west face of the Tall cross (Figure 47) bears a worn panel appearing to depict Christ in the Tomb at the base of the cross—shaft – the panel shows soldiers, holding a spear, placed above Christ, who is lying beneath a rock, with a cross dividing the panel into two visual halves.<sup>265</sup> This bears a resemblance to a similar panel found on the Cross of Scriptures at Clonmacnoise and, once again, provides a link and connection between the two sites, as well as being one of four examples of scenes attributed to the ‘Muiredach Master’.<sup>266</sup> This side also has a plinth which is worn, and it is impossible to make out what was once carved on it. The next panel appears to show the Baptism of Christ, with John the Baptist, book in hand, baptising Christ in the river Jordan – the unusual depiction of this river has been noted.<sup>267</sup> The next three panels all feature three figures each, with the first showing three unidentified figures holding a book, which has been suggested to represent the Holy Women in the Tomb, though the stone is now too degraded to make a positive identification.<sup>268</sup> The next panel also depicts three figures, two of whom are grasping or pulling the arms of the central figure, and has been interpreted as the Arrest of Christ, or alternatively the *Traditio Clavium*, if we take the object in the hand of the figure on the left

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<sup>265</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 149; Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 176; Stalley, “Artistic Identity and the Irish Sculpture Crosses,” 153-66; Stalley, “Irish Sculpture of the Early Tenth Century and the Work of the ‘Muiredach Master: Problems of Identification and Meaning,” 141-79; Roe, *Monasterboice and its Monuments*, 50; Porter, *Crosses and Culture*, 131; Macalister, *Guide to Monasterboice*, 240, 313 Gsänger, *Irland: Insel des Abel: Die Irischen Hochkreuze*; 72; Henry, *La sculpture irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles de l’ère chrétienne*, 204; Henry, *Early Christian Irish Art*, 18, 30ff, 66; Henry, *Irish Art During the Viking Invasions, 800–1020 A.D.*; Henry, *Irish Art during the Romanesque Period*, 136, 167, 194; Henry, *Sculpture and Architecture*; Henry, “Les origines de l’iconographie irlandaise,” 80–109; Brandt-Förster, *Das Irische Hochkreuz: Ursprung, Entwicklung*, 123 and 167; Weir, *Early Ireland: A Field Guide*; O’Neill, *Illustrations of the Most Interesting of the Sculptured Crosses of Ancient Ireland*; Allen, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 134, 228; Stokes, *Early Christian Art in Ireland*, 119; Crawford, *Irish Carved Ornament from Monuments of the Christian Period*, 4; De Paor and de Paor, *Early Christian Ireland*.

<sup>266</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 177.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>268</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 50; O’Neill, *Illustrations of the Most Interesting of the Sculptured Crosses of Ancient Ireland*; Gsänger, *Irland: Insel des Abel: Die Irischen Hochkreuze*; 72; Henry, *La sculpture irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles de l’ère chrétienne*, 204; Henry, *Early Christian Irish Art*, 18, 30ff, 66; Henry, *Irish Art During the Viking Invasions, 800–1020 A.D.*; Henry, *Irish Art during the Romanesque Period*, 136, 167, 194; Henry, *Sculpture and Architecture*; Henry, “Les origines de l’iconographie irlandaise,” 80–109; Brandt-Förster, *Das Irische Hochkreuz: Ursprung, Entwicklung*, 123 and 167; Porter, *Crosses and Culture*; Roe, *Monasterboice and its Monuments*, 53.

to be a key.<sup>269</sup> The *Traditio Clavium* reading is, in my view, more persuasive, given the presence of this iconography elsewhere. The panel above this is very badly worn, though there seem to be three figures, the two outsiders reaching out towards a motionless central figure, which Harbison suggests may be the Raised Christ due to comparisons to Muiredach Cross; again, the panel is too worn to be certain.<sup>270</sup> Above this is another damaged panel which shows figures appearing to walk towards the centre, and it has been suggested that this may represent the Soldiers Casting Lots for Christ's Garments, as a similar scene is seen in the same position at Clonmacnoise.<sup>271</sup>

The centre of the head of the cross on this side is dedicated to the Crucifixion, and once again is surrounded by other panels with figural decoration. The Crucifixion scene shows Christ with his head to the side, arms outstretched, and is distinctive thanks to the inclusion of large, fairly flat hands. The panel below Christ's feet shows two soldiers, and a bird sits between them. The figures appear to be struggling under the weight of the platform – another unusual feature. A purely Resurrection identification for the lower panels is therefore unconvincing; they are better understood as Passion and humiliation imagery within a tightly sequential arc. The surrounding images are all more familiar – Stephaton and Longinus are on either side of Christ's body, as seen elsewhere, and there are bosses to the sides of these, which may represent Sol and Luna, that is the Sun and

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<sup>269</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 176; Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 149; Stalley, "Artistic Identity and the Irish Sculpture Crosses," 153-66; Stalley, "Irish Sculpture of the Early Tenth Century and the Work of the 'Muiredach Master: Problems of Identification and Meaning,'" 141-79; Roe, *Monasterboice and its Monuments*, 53; Porter, *Crosses and Culture*, 131; Macalister, *Guide to Monasterboice*, 240, 313 c; Brandt-Förster, *Das Irische Hochkreuz: Ursprung, Entwicklung*, 123 and 167; Weir, *Early Ireland: A Field Guide*; O'Neill, *Illustrations of the Most Interesting of the Sculptured Crosses of Ancient Ireland*; Allen, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 134, 228; Stokes, *Early Christian Art in Ireland*, 119; Crawford, *Irish Carved Ornament from Monuments of the Christian Period*, 4; De Paor and de Paor, *Early Christian Ireland*; Gsänger, *Irland: Insel des Abel: Die Irischen Hochkreuze*; 72; Henry, *La sculpture irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles de l'ère chrétienne*, 204; Henry, *Early Christian Irish Art*, 18, 30ff, 66; Henry, *Irish Art During the Viking Invasions, 800–1020 A.D.*; Henry, *Irish Art during the Romanesque Period*, 136, 167, 194; Henry, *Sculpture and Architecture*; Henry, "Les origines de l'iconographie irlandaise," 80–109; Roe, *Monasterboice and its Monuments*, 50.

<sup>270</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 150; Brandt-Förster, *Das Irische Hochkreuz: Ursprung, Entwicklung*, 123 and 167.

<sup>271</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 176.

Moon – once again, these are elements seen in the crosses at Clonmacnoise. The south arm depicts the Arrest of Christ, or the Kiss of Judas, while the north arm shows the Mocking of Christ. The spaces between these and the hands of the crucified Christ are small scenes of figures shearing or milking sheep and are reminiscent of images that were present on Roman sarcophagi.<sup>272</sup> The sheep may also be a nod to Isaiah’s prophecy of the Crucifixion.<sup>273</sup> Peter is seen in the upper panel above the Crucifixion, where he appears to be drawing a sword to remove the ear of Malchus, and so this lends credibility to the interpretation of these figures as Peter. The ring on this face is decorated with three bosses, and quadrants of alternating animal interlace, and rolls are attached to the armpits rather than the ring – a similarity to the crosses at Kells and Muiredach’s cross, and a contrast to the monuments at Clonmacnoise and Durrow.<sup>274</sup> The theme on this face appears to be one of overcoming suffering, pain and humiliation, culminating in the ultimate sacrifice in the form of Christ’s death. Note that these images sit opposite the west face, a face focused on forgiveness and mercy, and we again have a sense of balance and harmony, as the two narratives coexist in the same space.

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<sup>272</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 176.

<sup>273</sup> *Isaiah* 52:13–53:12; *John* 18–20.

<sup>274</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 177.



*Figure 45: Tall Cross at Monasterboice, West Face*

Once again, we have the distinctive architectural features of the capstone (Figure 48), and what appears to be a figure sitting in front of a shape that may be an animal. We have seen images of figures and livestock, including cows in the form of the Golden Calf, elsewhere on this cross, and I argue that this interpretation is strengthened by a similar idea being presented here on the capstone: this time, in a depiction of St Ciarán of Clonmacnoise with his dun cow. According to the *Latin and Irish Lives of Ciaran*, the cow was part of a herd owned by the saint's family and, when he left to study under St Finian at Clonard, he asked permission to take a cow.<sup>275</sup> His mother refused, and so St Ciarán blessed one of the cows upon his departure, only to have her follow him to the monastery at Clonard with her calf. She had the ability to supply the entire monastery with milk and was a loyal companion to Ciarán until her death. Upon her death, her hide was kept as a relic at Clonmacnoise and there seems to have been a belief that whoever died on the hide would go straight to heaven.<sup>276</sup> In the carving, above the animal shape (the presumed cow), there appears to be an unclear or unusual form. If we accept the St. Ciarán interpretation, a plausible explanation is that this object represents the cow's calf, which followed Ciarán to the monastery. Depicting the cow with her calf would make iconographic sense – it emphasises the identity of the animal as Ciarán's miraculous dun cow, not just any bovine. Including the calf in the scene would strengthen the allusion to the legend, since the calf's presence is a distinctive detail of Ciarán's story (the cow miraculously defied Ciarán's mother's orders by following him, calf in tow). If the carving is weathered or stylised, the calf might appear as a small, odd shape above or beside the cow, which could be the object

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<sup>275</sup> *Latin and Irish Lives of Ciaran*, trans. R. A. S. Macalister (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1921), XVII:15.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*

above the animal. Interpreting that object as the calf provides a logical narrative explanation consistent with the saint's legend. Another possibility is that the form above the cow is a symbolic or supernatural element – perhaps an angel or a divine hand – indicating a blessing on the scene. Other panels have depicted angels in the top and background of scenes, and some high-cross carvings, holy figures or miracles are accompanied by divine symbols. For instance, elsewhere on Muiredach's Cross, the Hand of God appears on the bottom of the ring, acting as an intercessor. In Ciarán's legend, the cow's loyalty and miraculous milk-giving are implicitly due to divine favour (Ciarán blessed the cow before she followed him). Thus, an abstract form above the cow could be intended as a divine blessing or a heavenly sign related to the miracle, and this is an interpretation which links to the capstones.



*Figure 46: Tall Cross, Monasterboice, Capstone West Face*

It is worth noting that the Monasterboice crosses do feature animal and even bovine imagery in other panels, so a cow in this context would not be out of place. For example, as noted, on the nearby Tall Cross at Monasterboice, one scene on the east face has been interpreted as the Worship of the Golden Calf (Figure 27).

Even though that interpretation is debated (some see it as Moses striking water from a rock), the presence of a carved calf image is a strong possibility. This shows that the sculptors were indeed carving cattle on these crosses – whether as biblical idols or, in our capstone case, as a saint’s animal companion. In short, the object above the cow in the capstone scene can be reasonably explained as part of the intended subject (most likely the cow’s calf, given Ciarán’s story), rather than an unrelated oddity that contradicts the Ciarán interpretation. If, then, this image on the capstone is a depiction of Ciarán milking his dun cow, we can see this as another example of the capstone being decorated with a saint and, in this case, a direct connection to a relic: the hide of the dun cow. Monasterboice’s high crosses primarily depict biblical narratives, but they also include non-biblical themes tied to Christian monasticism and the cult of saints. Most notably, Muiredach’s Cross (the south cross) is crowned with a capstone carved in the form of a miniature house or oratory, widely understood as a reference to reliquary-shrines. As we have noted, house-shaped reliquaries were a familiar feature of Irish devotion, often containing the relics of local saints, and the capstone’s form signals its role as a symbolic reliquary in stone. Fittingly, the iconography on such capstones frequently concerns saints or holy figures rather than strictly biblical events. On one side of Muiredach’s capstone, for instance, the Desert Fathers, St Anthony and St Paul, are shown in the wilderness, miraculously fed by a raven. That Irish sculptors chose to depict these

Egyptian ascetics – revered as models of monastic life – demonstrates that saints could be integrated alongside scriptural scenes as part of a broader theology of memory. In carving them, the sculptors wove the biblical past, the ascetic exemplars of Egypt, and the Irish monastic present into a single continuum.

In this light, the proposal that another face of the Monasterboice capstone depicts St Ciarán of Clonmacnoise with his dun cow is not only plausible but thematically consistent. Ciarán, one of Ireland’s great sixth-century monastic founders, was by the ninth and tenth centuries a figure of pan-Irish significance, his cult deeply embedded in the devotional life of the country. Monasterboice itself had close intellectual and ecclesiastical ties to major centres such as Armagh, Slane, and Clonmacnoise, and its community would certainly have been familiar with Ciarán’s cult. Abbot Muiredach mac Domhnaill, who commissioned the cross, moved in precisely these networks, at one point abbot-elect of Armagh. In the same generation, Clonmacnoise produced the Cross of the Scriptures in partnership with King Flann Sinna, a contemporary of Muiredach. Ciarán, therefore, was hardly a local or marginal figure; his presence at Monasterboice would have been intelligible and resonant. Reading the capstone scene as Ciarán with his cow is not, therefore, an eccentric outlier but a coherent interpretation. It situates Monasterboice within Ireland’s interconnected ecclesiastical landscape, honours one of the island’s greatest saints, and aligns perfectly with the capstone’s reliquary form and function. The imagery is thus best understood as a visual sermon: a reliquary in stone that joins biblical salvation, ascetic exemplars, and Irish sanctity into a single programme.

Ciarán and his cow, no less than Anthony and his raven, embody God’s providence and the mediating power of saints, carried into stone at the summit of Ireland’s

greatest crosses.

### **South Face**

The South face of the Tall cross is badly worn at its lower levels, but enough survives to suggest a coherent programme. The plinth and the panel immediately above are largely illegible, though the first visible panel presents a distinctive design of five bosses linked by serpent-like interlace. The imagery is consistent with the cross's broader use of bosses and serpents as polyvalent symbols: at once ornamental, apotropaic, and theological. Serpents can signify sin and corruption but equally rebirth and baptism; their linkage with bosses here suggests a meditation on the tension between danger and protection, one of the recurring dialectics of the monument. Above this, a figural panel depicts two figures walking to the left, one holding a child, and the other with something else in their hands. These have been interpreted as Zacharias, with Elizabeth holding an infant John the Baptist, and have also been compared to similar scenes at Durrow which feature the Flight from Egypt.<sup>277</sup> Both identifications carry thematic resonance. If the Baptist is intended, the sequence stresses his role as the forerunner of Christ and aligns with later panels on this face; if the Virgin and Child, the typology of Exodus and deliverance would be foregrounded, a theme already embedded in the cross's wider programme. The small shapes above the figures' heads—described as distorted angels or reptilian forms—further complicate the reading, yet they may also be understood as a visual shorthand for divine oversight or as hybrid creatures marking liminality, a threshold between earthly narrative and heavenly sanction. The next panel, with animal interlace arranged in an X-shape, signals the pervasive Christological resonance of such ornament. As elsewhere on Irish crosses, the chi-form can be read as a cipher of the *nomen sacrum* (XP), embedding Christ's name in pattern. The following figural panel

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<sup>277</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 176; Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 149; Porter, *Crosses and Culture*; Macalister, *Guide to Monasterboice*, 240, 313.

shows two men holding a rectangular tablet, with one—partially naked and bearded—stretching above the scene. This has plausibly been identified as the Naming of John the Baptist, with Zacharias inscribing the name on the tablet.<sup>278</sup> The narrative flow from the panel below (the infant Baptist with his parents) to the naming scene above creates a rare but significant chronological sequence: the cross here does not simply juxtapose biblical episodes but stages them in order, inviting the viewer to read upwards. This is followed by two quadrupeds, and the panel above this is very worn. There is a winged creature at the top of the shaft on this side, perhaps signalling angelic presence or eschatological vision. The underside of the ring is filled with panels of interlace surrounding a recessed central patch, another example of the play between depth, surface, and visual dynamism that characterises the Tall Cross. The bottom of the cross arm has been left blank, and the end of the arm is decorated with a criss-cross pattern of interlace, and the upper section of the ring and the spandrels leading to the capstone are covered with interlace, visually binding the figural programme below to the reliquary-like summit. The capstone of this face is particularly striking. It is decorated with eight bosses linked by curved interlace, their rounded surfaces echoing the cosmological and reliquary associations explored elsewhere on the monument.

The roof retains shingle-like patterning and culminates in a finial, once again evoking architectural reliquaries. The duplication of bosses across multiple faces—here arranged as a dense sequence—suggests a deliberate symbolic climax. The bosses may be read as heavenly spheres, as protective seals, or as a tactile metaphor for relic-studded reliquaries. In all cases, the capstone integrates the south face into the cross's vertical liturgy: from biblical forerunners and scenes of the Baptist's life, through apotropaic serpents and chi-ornament, to a reliquary summit whose bosses proclaim divine authority and intercession. These capstones are not merely symmetrical decoration but theological

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<sup>278</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 146, and Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 176.

seals: their duplication across north/south guarantees that whichever axis the viewer approaches, reliquary logic crowns the ascent.

Read in this way, the south face reinforces the thematic logic of the cross. The Baptist functions as a liminal figure, the last prophet of the Old Covenant and herald of Christ, and his appearance on this side resonates with the cross's wider concern with continuity—between Scripture, saints, and salvation. The bosses of the capstone crown this sequence with reliquary symbolism, ensuring that John's role as witness and forerunner is inscribed within the same intercessory framework as the saints and founders elsewhere. The face as a whole can thus be read as an upward progression: forerunner, through to John the Baptist, through to Christological cipher in the form of the Chi/ornament, and up to the reliquary summit at the top.

### **North Face**

The North face is slightly trickier to view, as there is little room to manoeuvre between this side of the cross and the adjacent church. The plinth is once again worn away, and the first panel features seven bosses connected by channels of interlace that play with raised and recessed surfaces. The surfaces of the bosses appear to have some kind of detail, but this is very faint and worn – there has been a suggestion that they may be serpents, as seen elsewhere on this cross.<sup>279</sup> Above this, however, the iconography becomes unmistakably clear. The next panel presents a striking image of David enthroned: he sits frontally, flanked by a bird on his left and a hound positioned between his feet.<sup>280</sup> These details are not decorative fillers but interpretative cues. The bird signals divine inspiration—David the

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<sup>279</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 151.

<sup>280</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 151; Macalister, *Guide to Monasterboice*, 240, 313.

psalmist whose songs are breathed by the Spirit—while the hound evokes loyalty, guardianship, and David’s earlier identity as shepherd and protector. Their inclusion therefore *confirms* rather than complicates the identification: the sculptor is not depicting a generic enthroned figure but emphasising David’s dual vocation as inspired poet and divinely chosen ruler. This dual symbolism becomes still more pointed when the panel is read in relation to the boss–serpent register directly beneath it. If the lower band encodes the struggle between chaos and order—as serpent imagery commonly does in Insular art—then David enthroned above it embodies the triumph of God-given kingship over disorder. The vertical logic is deliberate: from subdued chaos (serpent-bosses) to divinely inspired rule (David), the panel sequence articulates a theology of ordered sovereignty that would have carried particular weight in an Irish royal-monastic context.

The panel above returns to non-figural ornament, with seven bosses arranged in the form of crosses. This deliberate echo of the cross shape within the cross itself underscores the face’s thematic coherence: divine kingship is framed and guaranteed by Christ’s own sign. At the summit of the shaft, Daniel in the Lion’s Den is depicted in a manner typical of Late Antique and Insular art: a frontal human figure flanked by two beasts in profile.<sup>281</sup> This formula, as Helen Roe has noted, recalls Eastern textiles and other Mediterranean models, situating the Tall Cross within an international iconographic vocabulary.<sup>212</sup> Daniel’s ordeal, a type of Christ’s Resurrection, reinforces the face’s concern with divine vindication—David as king, Daniel as prophet, both preserved by God. The underside of the ring contains dense interlace, and the end of the arm is decorated

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<sup>281</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 176; Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 151; Roe, *Monasterboice and its Monuments*, 60.

with fretwork, matching the treatment of the south side. The upper side of the ring here is undecorated, providing a visual counterpoint to the south side's ornamentation. This balancing of decoration and restraint seems deliberate: just as the east and west faces play with narrative oppositions (forgiveness versus judgement), so the north and south are paired in their alternation of ornament and blankness. Above the ring, a further panel of interlace leads into a capstone decorated almost identically to that of the south side. Once again, bosses dominate the surface, linked with interlace, while the roof displays shingle-like patterns capped by a finial. The repetition of this decorative scheme across both lateral faces is not a matter of convenience but of theological intent. The mirrored capstones reinforce the reliquary symbolism of the monument: the summit of each vertical axis is sealed with protective bosses and reliquary architecture. By doubling the motif, the sculptors ensured that viewers approaching from either side encountered the same message—divine protection, relic-presence, and intercession radiating outwards from the cross's crown.

Taken together, the north and south faces operate as thematic counterparts. The south traces the Baptist's birth, naming, and forerunner role, culminating in a reliquary of bosses; the north presents David and Daniel, royal and prophetic paradigms, likewise crowned with reliquary imagery. One face stresses herald and prophecy, the other anointed kingship and deliverance, but both converge in the capstone's intercessory climax. The paired sides thus expand the Tall Cross's theology of mediation: from serpent-haunted bases to reliquary summits, the viewer is invited to see salvation history not only as narrative but as vertical ascent—prophet and king alike secured under the protective seal of the reliquary-capstone.

### **Muiredach's Cross**

Muiredach's Cross, also known as the South Cross at Monasterboice, stands as one of the most celebrated achievements of early medieval sculpture in Ireland. Where the Tall Cross impresses by scale and verticality, Muiredach's Cross commands attention through the density and refinement of its figural carving (Figure 49). Its panels are crowded with biblical narrative, ornamental detail, and theological symbolism, executed with a precision that marks it as the work of a master craftsman. It is generally attributed to the so-called 'Muiredach Master,' the same hand traditionally associated with the Cross of the Scriptures at Clonmacnoise.<sup>282</sup> The visual and stylistic correspondences between these monuments—both in the treatment of Passion sequences and in the ornamental vocabulary—suggest not merely artistic coincidence but deliberate connection: Monasterboice and Clonmacnoise were linked through networks of patronage, intellectual exchange, and sculptural production.

The inscription naming Muiredach mac Domhnaill, abbot of Monasterboice (d. 923), anchors this monument in its political and ecclesiastical context.<sup>283</sup> This is not simply a cross for devotion but a statement of monastic and dynastic identity, placed within a site renowned for its round tower, scriptural learning, and artistic output. The cross's breadth, in contrast to the Tall Cross's height, creates a more expansive visual field for narrative carving: salvation history, Passion cycles, and eschatological judgement unfold in sequence across its faces. The result is not just decoration but a programme of visual exegesis, designed to instruct, commemorate, and assert authority.

Where the Tall Cross culminates in monumental scale and reliquary logic, Muiredach's Cross achieves its power through narrative and theological density. Its panels

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<sup>282</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 173.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*

embody the 'Bible in stone' ideal more fully than almost any other surviving cross, and they situate Monasterboice within the same artistic and intellectual currents as Clonmacnoise and other major ecclesiastical centres.



*Figure 47: Muiredach's Cross, Monasterboice, East Face*

## East Face

The east face of Muiredach's Cross is the most fully developed narrative programme on the monument, carefully structured to move the viewer from the Fall of humankind to the promise of redemption. The base is divided into two parts: the lower bears interlace in keeping with the ornamental vocabulary of the Ossory and Clonmacnoise groups, while the upper section combines animals and humans, though its details are now worn; it has been suggested that these are the Signs of the Zodiac.<sup>284</sup> Above this, the shaft is unusually divided into four figural panels, each contributing to a tightly organised salvation history. At the bottom, Adam and Eve's transgression is juxtaposed with Cain's murder of Abel—two primal acts of sin.<sup>285</sup> Above this, David's triumph over Goliath and Moses striking the rock shift the tone from rebellion to deliverance, each figure embodying God's intervention through anointed leaders.<sup>286</sup> At the top, the Adoration of the Magi introduces Christ as the fulfilment of these Old Testament anticipations: the Child recognised and worshipped, Mary enthroned beside Him.<sup>287</sup>

When read sequentially, the programme forms a theological arc: Fall to Deliverance to Fulfilment to Judgement. Just as at the Tall Cross and at Clonmacnoise, the shaft becomes a visual catechesis, guiding the viewer from human failure to divine salvation. The inclusion of the Magi resonates not only as biblical narrative but also as pilgrimage allegory: just as the Magi journeyed to Bethlehem, pilgrims' journey to Monasterboice, seeking both teaching and intercession. The imagery thus works on multiple levels—cosmic, biblical, and local, and once again, links the cross to Kilree. The head of the cross

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<sup>284</sup> Roe, *Monasterboice and its Monuments*, 38.

<sup>285</sup> Roe, *Monasterboice and its Monuments*, 40; Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 140.

<sup>286</sup> Roe, *Monasterboice and its Monuments*, 40; Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 176; Harbison, *the High Crosses of Ireland*, 149; Porter, *Crosses and Culture*; Macalister, *Guide to Monasterboice*, 240, 313.

<sup>287</sup> Roe, *Monasterboice and its Monuments*, 40; Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 176; Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 149; Porter, *Crosses and Culture*; Macalister, *Guide to Monasterboice*, 240, 313.

reinforces this movement with one of the most extensive Last Judgement scenes in Western art.<sup>288</sup> Christ stands enthroned at the centre, holding a flowering crosier and cross—a strikingly Irish inflection of a universal theme. Above him a bird hovers, perhaps the Holy Spirit or the soul being borne heavenward, flanked by angels with outstretched wings. Below, another angel kneels, holding the Book of Life, with a second open book above. The left arm of the cross presents the blessed, accompanied by David as harpist and another musician, integrating the Irish love of music into the heavenly liturgy. The right arm, in contrast, shows the damned being hurled into hell by demons, while below Christ's feet the psychostasia unfolds: Michael weighs souls as a demon attempts to tip the balance, only to be struck in the face by the archangel's crozier. This balance of blessing and damnation mirrors the duality of the shaft's narrative, completing the visual journey from sin to judgement.

At the summit, the capstone (Figure 50) is integrated as an essential part of the programme rather than an afterthought. Its church-like gabled form confirms its reliquary logic, while the figural scene on the east side adds a layer of intercession and protection. Here a cleric thrusts a crosier at a large bird, interpreted as a demonic creature, while a bearded warrior falls backwards with shield and spear. The composition evokes exorcism: the saintly figure rescues the imperilled man from demonic assault.<sup>289</sup> This reading coheres with the theological arc below: just as the shaft narrates salvation history and the head renders the final Judgement, the capstone embodies the continuing work of intercession—saints and relics defending the faithful from evil.

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<sup>288</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 176; Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 142; Roe, *Monasterboice and its Monuments*, 42.

<sup>289</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 176



Figure 48: Muiredach's Cross, Monasterboice, Capstone East Face

### West Face

The west face of Muiredach's Cross is no less ambitious than the east, its carvings shifting from scenes of ecclesiastical authority to the central mystery of the Crucifixion itself. At the base, a hunting scene with a medallion motif recalls the decorative vocabulary of other Irish high crosses, where such secular or bestial motifs often establish a visual contrast with the theological programme above. Immediately above this sits the crucial inscription (Figure 51): OR DO MUIREDACH LASERNAD IN CHROS ('a prayer for Muiredach, for whom this cross was made').<sup>290</sup> The reference is generally taken to be Muiredach mac Domhnaill, abbot of Monasterboice (d. 923), anchoring the monument firmly in its local community and continuing the established tradition of naming kings, abbots, and ecclesiastics on crosses (as at Clonmacnoise and Durrow).<sup>291</sup> The presence of two cats

<sup>290</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 143.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*

carved nearby is striking: cats appear repeatedly in Irish manuscripts and sculpture (notably in the Book of Kells), where they are associated with vigilance and Eucharistic protection. Their proximity to the inscription may have been a visual pun on protection—the monastery safeguarding Muiredach’s memoria as cats guard their charge.



Figure 49: Inscription on Muiredach’s Cross, Monasterboice, West Face

The shaft on this side is divided into three panels, rather than four as on the east. At the base sits the Mocking of Christ, followed by Doubting Thomas, and then the *Traditio Clavium*—Christ handing the keys to Peter and Paul (Figure 52).<sup>292</sup> The sequence reinforces ecclesiastical legitimacy: the humiliation of Christ leads to his vindication, and from there to apostolic succession. The small bird above Paul’s head may be the Holy

<sup>292</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 144.

Spirit, visually affirming this transfer of authority. The imagery thus functions not only as biblical narrative but as a visual theology of the Church's foundation. If we read the scene as merely the Mocking or Arrest, the *Traditio* panel becomes isolated. Only as a succession cycle does the sequence make programmatic sense. The head of the cross is dominated by the Crucifixion, one of the most powerful depictions in Insular sculpture. Christ is shown semi-naked, facing forward, arms outstretched. Unlike the Tall Cross, where Christ appears in visible torment, here He appears serene, triumphant, even majestic—a *Christus triumphans* rather than a *Christus patiens*. *Stephaton* and *Longinus* stand at His sides, anchoring the scene in familiar iconography, while below His hands appear two allegorical figures identified as *Terra* (Earth) and *Oceanus* (the Sea), personifications that acknowledge Christ's cosmic dominion.<sup>293</sup> At his feet, a small bird hovers, perhaps symbolising the soul or Holy Spirit. Snakes coil above and below, while spirals and bosses fill the empty spaces, reminding the viewer of the eternal cycle of death and rebirth. The arms of the cross extend the Passion narrative. On the left arm, six soldiers carry weapons—including sword, shield, and horn—recalling the forces that arrested Christ. The right arm is harder to discern, but figures appear in military array. Above, three angels hover, likely signifying the Resurrection: heaven already stands in witness to Christ's victory over death.<sup>220</sup>

Just beneath the capstone, two birds with intertwined necks appear, a common motif of unity and concord, and a deliberate visual link to the paired animals and interlace seen elsewhere on the monument. At the summit, the capstone itself continues the narrative (Figure 53). Its gabled reliquary form is carved with a dramatic figural scene: a central figure with arms raised high, flanked by winged attendants. This has been plausibly

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<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*



*Figure 50: Traditio Clavium, Muiredach's Cross, Monasterboice, West Face*

identified as the Ascension of Christ: the right-hand attendant is clearly an angel, while the left-hand figure is less certain, though likely also angelic.<sup>294</sup> As a result of this interpretation, the imagery crowns the Passion and Crucifixion sequence with the final triumph: Christ's return to heaven. The theological resonance is clear: just as the east face moved from sin to Judgement, the west moves from Passion to Ascension: humiliation to sacrifice to triumph, and the capstone acts as an integral element of this message: here, it is not an ornamental addition but the crowning reliquary element, presenting Christ himself ascending to heaven. For the viewer standing below, the visual logic is unmistakable: through the Passion comes redemption, and through the intercession of saints and relics (embodied in the capstone's reliquary form), the believer too may hope to follow Christ in ascent.

<sup>294</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 174.



*Figure 51: Muiredach's Cross, Monasterboice, Capstone West Face*

### **South Face**

Unlike other high crosses, the narrow sides of Muiredach's Cross are richly worked, their decoration extending the narrative and symbolic programme. At the base, a chariot and two horsemen echo designs seen at Kells and Clonmacnoise, signalling both martial triumph and the familiar theme of processional display. Above, two leonine creatures guard the lower shaft—lion imagery being deeply resonant in both biblical and Insular registers, where it signified vigilance, divine authority, and even Christ Himself as the Lion of Judah.

The shaft is divided into three registers: at the bottom, a panel of interlaced

human figures; above this, a band of spiral bosses; and at the top, an inhabited vine scroll. The vine scroll is particularly striking. Far from being mere ornament, it would have been read by patrons and viewers alike as a version of the Tree of Life, a fertile and providential image, vines designed to bear fruit and sustain birds and beasts. As Colleen Thomas has shown, vine scrolls in the Irish corpus often combine biblical allusion (Christ as the True Vine, John 15:5) with local resonances of fertility, growth, and continuity.<sup>295</sup> In this way, the south shaft articulates a visual theology of life, providence, and flourishing under divine order. The underside of the ring bears two entwined serpents, whose bodies form three boss-shapes edged with fretwork. This liminal zone, marking the threshold between shaft and head, presents the serpent as both a reminder of sin and a sign of transformation. On the underside of the south arm, two cats appear to fight over prey, continuing the cat imagery seen elsewhere on the cross (including near Muiredach's inscription). Whether read as Eucharistic guardians or moral exempla, their dynamic energy reinforces the theme of vigilance. At the edge of the arm, Pontius Pilate is carved washing his hands—literally distancing himself from the responsibility for Christ's death, and a rare moment where Roman political authority is visually undercut by theological narrative.

The capstone imagery crowns this side with a scene of Christ's Entry into Jerusalem (Figure 54). A rider on horseback, leaning back with a book in one hand, is accompanied by angels above his head. The detail of the book—whether gospel, law-book, or symbol of wisdom—underscores Christ's dual role as

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<sup>295</sup> Colleen M. Thomas, "The Fountain Sealed Up in the Garden Enclosed: A Vine Scroll at Kells," in *Insular Iconographies, Essays in Honour of Jane Hawkes*, ed. by Meg Boulton and Michael D. J. Bintley (Boydell and Brewer, 2019), 23-48; Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 175.

messianic king and divine teacher. The choice to place this scene on the capstone is highly significant. The entry into Jerusalem, traditionally read as Christ's final and triumphal arrival before his Passion, is here transposed from a historical procession to a cosmic one. Positioned at the summit of the monument, the carving signals Christ's movement not merely into the earthly city but into the heavenly Jerusalem itself, the eschatological goal of the Christian journey. This theological transposition is intensified by the reliquary form of the capstone. Worked to resemble a shrine with shingled roof and bossed gables, the capstone visualises the cross as a monumental reliquary, a vessel where presence and intercession were made tangible. In this context, the Entry becomes a liturgical ascent: Christ rides upward into the reliquary-space of the shrine, just as the faithful processed toward the cross in ritual. The imagery thus fuses Passion narrative, Eucharistic theology, and eschatological hope. Viewers standing before the monument would not only recall the gospel story but see it embodied in stone, where Christ the triumphant king enters not only the earthly city but the heavenly sanctuary, bringing with him the promise of resurrection.



*Figure 52: Muiredach's Cross, Monasterboice, Capstone South Face*

In short, the capstone does not merely finish the south side; it transforms the entire vertical axis into a drama of procession, triumph, and intercession. From the martial and leonine imagery at the base, through vine and vigilance on the shaft, to serpents subdued at the ring, the eye is drawn finally to Christ's ascent into the heavenly city, crowned by the reliquary logic of the capstone itself.

### **North Face**

The north face continues this dense iconographic cycle. At the base, a procession unfolds: two centaurs precede a horseman. Centaurs are unusual in the Irish corpus but appear in manuscript margins and on some crosses, where they are generally read as symbols of the untamed or bestial passions brought into order by divine authority. Their appearance here, leading a mounted rider, reinforces the theme of subjugated wildness and Christian mastery over chaos. Beneath the three main

shaft panels, a small vignette depicts two men pulling each other's beards—a motif with both satirical and moral overtones, perhaps warning against strife within the Christian community. Above this, three panels of interlace are arranged in paired circular patterns, creating a rhythm of order and balance. Beneath the ring, two serpents are entwined once again, this time surmounted by a single hand. This hand has been interpreted as the Hand of God, reaching into the carved world to assert divine presence. Its inclusion is crucial: it suggests that the cross was not simply to be looked at, but engaged with—the viewer standing beneath the Hand would experience the sense of being addressed, blessed, or admonished.

At the end of the north arm, the Flagellation of Christ is shown: Christ sits bound, flanked by two tormentors, while three angels fly above. The contrast is deliberate: earthly humiliation is countered by heavenly witness.<sup>296</sup> The capstone continues this dialogue between earth and heaven. Here, St Paul and St Anthony—the great Desert Fathers—are depicted receiving sustenance from a raven, with a chalice placed between them. This well-known monastic motif signals the continuity of divine provision: just as the raven fed the hermits in the wilderness, so God sustains His Church. The gabled roof of the capstone is decorated with spirals formed of serpents, culminating in a central boss. Once again, serpents appear not as merely negative emblems but as transformed into cosmic pattern, incorporated into divine order. The capstone therefore acts as the visual and theological climax of the north side: monastic exempla, divine provision, and cosmic order converge in its reliquary-like summit, reinforcing the high cross as an axis between ascetic tradition, saintly intercession, and heavenly ascent.

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<sup>296</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 146, 149; Roe, *Monasterboice and its Monuments*, 35; Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 174; Porter, *Crosses and Culture*; Macalister, *Guide to Monasterboice*, 240, 313.

The two great crosses at Monasterboice form a complementary pair, balancing scale and density, grandeur and intricacy. The Tall Cross, the highest surviving example in Ireland or Britain, projects visual authority through its sheer size and extended biblical cycles, while Muiredach's Cross condenses salvation history into a densely carved programme of unrivalled quality. Together, they demonstrate that Monasterboice was not merely a provincial monastery but a major centre of theological creativity and sculptural ambition. Read side by side, the two monuments articulate a coherent vision of salvation. The Tall Cross unfolds a monumental sequence from Old Testament types to eschatological fulfilment, insisting on the sweep of history and the universality of God's plan. Muiredach's Cross, shorter but richer, integrates that narrative into a tighter rhythm: Fall to Judgement, Passion to Triumph, kings and abbots bound into the same continuum as biblical heroes and monastic saints. Both crosses culminate in the same message—that through faith, penance, and saintly intercession, the human soul may move from sin and suffering into salvation and eternal life.

The capstones help to confirm this theology. Far from architectural afterthoughts, they function as reliquary-forms crowning the monuments, integrating saintly cult, relic-veneration, and biblical narrative into a single vertical liturgy. On the Tall Cross, the capstone imagery of Ciarán's dun cow or Patrick's goat situates Irish sanctity within the same visual logic as Anthony and Paul in the desert; on Muiredach's Cross, the capstone completes the Passion and Judgement cycles with Ascension and angelic mediation. The reliquary-form capstones integrate Passion cycles into theological ascent. Ascension, Entry into Jerusalem, and monastic exempla are not ornamental choices but climaxes, where reliquary logic fuses with biblical and saintly imagery. In both cases, the summit

serves as the point of contact between earth and heaven, echoing the role of reliquaries as vessels of saintly presence and intercession.

What emerges is a theology that is simultaneously biblical, liturgical, and local. These crosses are not mere ‘Bibles in stone’ but monumental sermons, binding scripture to the politics of kingship, the memory of abbots, and the cult of saints. They testify to the intellectual and artistic sophistication of early medieval Irish monasticism, which could weave together universal salvation history with local relics and dynasties. Monasterboice thus offers the fullest flowering of the high cross tradition: a site where biblical cycles, Irish saints, and reliquary capstones converge to proclaim salvation, resurrection, and the promise of heavenly ascent.

### 3.1 Summary: The Capstone Crosses

From the early Ossory examples at Ahenny through to the monumental crosses of Durrow, Kells, Clonmacnoise, and Monasterboice, a clear trajectory can be traced in the role of the capstone. At Ahenny, the domed ‘beehive’ caps already signalled more than architectural finish: their form echoed both the clochán huts of ascetic hermits and, as Richardson argued, the dome of the Holy Sepulchre itself. In either reading, the message was eschatological—marking the summit as a place of intercession, resurrection, and heavenly ascent.

The later Scripture Crosses expanded this principle into integrated programmes. Here the capstone is never an afterthought but the theological crown of the monument, deliberately carved with saints, angels, animals, or scenes of provision and triumph. At Durrow and Kells, the summit zones were worked into the cross itself, collapsing the distinction between monument and reliquary. At Monasterboice, house-shaped capstones directly evoked portable shrines, while

their figural decoration—Anthony and Paul fed by the raven, or the possible image of Ciarán with his dun cow—recalled relic-linked saints whose cults centred on miraculous provision and intercession. The Holy Sepulchre resonance remained implicit: just as Jerusalem’s shrine was the axis mundi of Christendom, these capstones marked the local summit of salvation, miniature sanctuaries in stone.

As we have seen, the capstone crosses exhibit numerous similarities with the broader corpus of high crosses: they include non-figural decoration such as interlace and step patterns, they are freestanding, and they are closely associated with monastic and ecclesiastical sites. However, this analysis has also identified several key differences that distinguish them. Apart from the capstones themselves, the inclusion of iconography such as Daniel and David, and the prevalence of the *Traditio Clavium* and Christ’s Mission to the Apostles, further differentiates these monuments. The survey therefore unveils a group of crosses that, while sharing decorative elements with the wider tradition, present a distinctive iconographic programme—integrating regional identity, political authority, and theological symbolism in specifically localised ways. As this analysis has demonstrated, the capstone crosses are not merely variations within the high cross corpus. Instead, they are deliberate and sophisticated monuments that integrate saintly intercession, theological messaging, dynastic politics, and reliquary symbolism into a cohesive visual programme. The capstones themselves—distinct in form, function, and placement—were not decorative additions but deeply meaningful elements that elevated the cross into a site of spiritual mediation. In the next chapter, we will explore these capstones more closely, examining their patterns, forms, and symbolic resonances, and assessing how they functioned as stone reliquaries within the liturgical and eschatological imagination of early medieval Ireland.

## Chapter 4: Patterns and Significance

The carved high crosses of early medieval Ireland are not inert stone markers, but dynamic artefacts that fuse theology, devotion, politics, and landscape into enduring symbols of authority and faith. Exploring their form and decoration reveals a deliberate structuring of meaning: they were conceived not as mere ornament but as visual texts, designed to be interpreted at multiple levels. Like scripture itself, the crosses could be ‘read’ in different ways—by the unlearned visitors as images of salvation, by the trained churchmen as typological and exegetical programmes, and by patrons and ecclesiastical elites as vehicles of political and theological claims.

A central concern of this chapter is the way in which the high crosses operate through patterns: patterns of decoration, patterns of number, repetition, and placement, and patterns of inscription that embed layers of meaning beyond the immediately visible. Medieval culture, drawing on patristic traditions, regarded neither numbers nor repetition as neutral: the multiplication of crosses, the structuring of panels, and the recurrence of biblical motifs may all have been understood as exegetical design, transforming stone into a medium of theological commentary. To see these monuments only as disparate sequences of disconnected images is therefore insufficient: they must instead be considered holistically, and read as structured systems in which geometry, number, and arrangement themselves carried doctrinal and devotional weight. Following the themes of this thesis, this analysis will, of course, consider the capstones: just like decoration and iconography, these must also be considered within the context of their placement, decoration and creation: they are, I argue, perhaps the most important element of the overall design and decoration of the crosses.

This perspective shifts the study of high crosses beyond a mere catalogue of iconography to an exploration of the interpretive frameworks that shaped them. Their

repeated motifs, their architectural settings, and their royal inscriptions suggest a conscious encoding of meaning accessible to audiences attuned to scriptural, liturgical, and political traditions. The chapters that follow pursue this claim in three directions: first, by examining the non-figural decoration and numerological significance of the crosses; second, by considering their placement in landscape and their inscriptions as instruments of dynastic power; and third, by assessing how they were received by different audiences. In short, this chapter argues that the high crosses are best understood as monumental theologies: structures in which form, iconography, inscription, and capstone together articulated the convergence of dynastic kingship and divine authority. By decoding their patterns, we uncover how these monuments staged both earthly sovereignty and heavenly promise, offering medieval viewers not only images to contemplate but gateways into the intertwined worlds of scripture, cult, and power.

#### 4.1 Decoration as Exegetical Field

To pursue this holistic reading, we must treat decoration, including non-figural decoration, as an exegetical field rather than ancillary embellishment. Interlace, spirals, rectilinear panelling, bosses, mouldings, and, above all, the capstone, work together as a grammar of approach, pause, and ascent. These devices choreograph how a viewer moves through the monument's argument: they slow the eye, frame thresholds, and mark doctrinal pivots from Passion to Resurrection, from local memoria to universal salvation. In the crosses in our discussion, the capstone acts as the decisive terminus of that movement; their distinctive forms, whether house shaped or beehive, index shrine and martyrrium alike, functioning either as a 'Jerusalem in miniature' that visually transposes Golgotha and the *Anastasis* into the Irish landscape, or as a reliquary which offers a connection to saints and, ultimately, the divine. This upward movement finds a useful analogue in early medieval exegetical thought. In *De Templo*, Bede interprets sacred architecture as a vertical theology: lower zones signify

labour, discipline, and the Church in via, while the uppermost structures mark the sphere of divine presence and contemplative rest. Although the Irish high crosses are not literal temples, their choreographed ascent—culminating in a shrine-like cap—echoes this hermeneutic logic. The summit is therefore not merely a decorative endpoint but the architectural sign of arrival, the point at which patterned ascent yields to presence. Read through this wider medieval grammar, the capstone becomes the monument's theological crown: the place where ornament, geometry, and typology are gathered into a sign of sanctity. Read this way, the cross is not merely a stack of pictures, but a built theology: geometry and ornament cue typology, placement and inscription bind patrons to apostolic authority, and the capstone crowns the whole with a sign of presence and intercession. What follows, therefore, turns first to decoration as a meaning-bearing system—how patterns teach viewers to read the monument—before tracking how this system interfaces with figural scenes and names. Far from neutral background, these patterns taught audiences how to 'read' the monument; interlace, spirals, grids, and bosses acted as exegetical cues, structuring the experience of the viewer and guiding interpretation upward toward the capstone. Only with this knowledge can we gauge how specific images (most notably the *Traditio Clavium*) change valence when set beneath a shrine-sign, and how capstones mediate between local politics and the topography of Jerusalem. This upward grammar of decoration culminates in the capstone, whose shrine-like form signals that the summit was not merely decorative but theological: it operated within the same conceptual world as relics and shrines, marking presence and authorising access to sanctity. Read within Ireland's reliquary culture, the capstone does not need to *contain* relics to function as a reliquary-sign. As Overbey has noted, Irish cults typically prioritised objects associated with saints, such as bells, books, staves, and house-shrines, whose power lay in their use, movement, and public display, rather than in bodily remains

alone.<sup>297</sup> In that same conceptual world, a beehive or gabled cap operates as a petrified reliquary: a visible, immovable marker that localises resurrection-topography (the Anastasis) and sanctity in situ. In a sense, it does what portable shrines do, marking presence, authorising access, and organising approaches to and contact with relics, but it does so architecturally, crowning the monument with a Jerusalem-sign legible to monastic and lay audiences alike. Put simply, reliquaries, portable shrines, oath-relics, and capstones all worked as part of the same toolkit for making space sacred. The first three did their work in motion—carried in procession, moved in translation, or sworn upon in oaths—while the capstone fixed that same sacred charge in place, anchoring it visibly and permanently at the summit of the cross. This shrine logic is sharpened when the cap is read with the founder's presence. Bitel and Overbey emphasise that founders' shrines served as loci of ongoing agency within their communities, and capstones help to replicate that function in miniature, creating another means of accessing the founders presence.<sup>298</sup> Lisa Bitel notes that clerics at Irish monastic settlements 'demonstrated the importance of relics by spending as much wealth, space, and labour as they could spare to set apart a special place for the saints' remains'.<sup>299</sup> It seems, then, that the capstones are extending this demonstration by offering another method of access to the founder saints and their relics. At Clonmacnoise, the gabled cap reads as a stone echo of Ciarán's shrine, projecting his protection from above and structuring approach to his locus below. At Kells, the enthronement of Patrick and Columba beneath (or immediately adjacent to) the summit performs the same move: the capstone is a house for their combined oversight, while the panel images announce it explicitly. In both cases, the capstone localises universal sanctity—it makes Jerusalem's topography present

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<sup>297</sup> Overbey, *Sacral Geographies*, 5-6.

<sup>298</sup> Overbey, *Sacral Geographies*, p5-6; Bitel, *Isle of the Saints*, 57.

<sup>299</sup> Bitel, *Isle of the Saints*, 57.

while binding it to the site's own patronal identity.

Adomnán of Iona provides an important bridge between this shrine-logic and wider Insular articulations of Jerusalem. As ninth abbot of Iona, he composed both the *Vita Columbae* and the *De locis sanctis* in the late seventh century.<sup>300</sup> The latter text, based on the testimony of the pilgrim-bishop Arculf, circulated widely across northern Europe, not only in its original form but also in Bede's shortened version. Scholars such as O'Loughlin have emphasised that the *De locis sanctis* was not a mere travelogue but a sophisticated work of exegesis: it addressed scriptural discrepancies about the Passion, described the buildings of the Holy Sepulchre in remarkable detail, and offered one of the earliest medieval ground-plans of sacred architecture.<sup>301</sup> In doing so, it provided Irish and Anglo-Saxon readers with both an exegetical key and an architectural imagination of Jerusalem, where relics, shrines, and topography were understood as mutually explanatory. Yet Adomnán's text was not received in isolation: its vision of the Holy Sepulchre was already being materialised in Columban foundations, most strikingly at Iona, where landscape itself was organised to echo Jerusalem. Adomnán's *De locis sanctis* ensured that the Holy Sepulchre and its Anastasis rotunda were imaginatively present in Ireland, but these images did not remain abstract. On Iona itself, as Campbell and Maldonado have argued, the monastery's layout was deliberately conceived as a 'New Jerusalem at the ends of the earth.'<sup>302</sup> Paved routes, shrine-chapels, and monumental crosses were arranged to facilitate a sequence of devotional stations, enabling a localised pilgrimage that echoed the rhythms

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<sup>300</sup> Ewan Campbell and Adrián Maldonado, "A New Jerusalem 'At The Ends of the Earth': Interpreting Charles Thomas's Excavations at Iona Abbey 1956-63," *The Antiquaries Journal* 100 (2020): 37; *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St Columba*; Thomas O'Loughlin, *Adomnán and the Holy Places* (T&T Clarke, 2007); D Jenkins, *Holy, Holier, Holiest: the sacred topography of the early medieval Irish church* (Brepols: 2010); Ó Carragáin, *Churches in Early Medieval Ireland*.

<sup>301</sup> O'Loughlin, *Adomnán and the Holy Places*

<sup>302</sup> Campbell and Maldonado, "A New Jerusalem," 57; Thomas O'Loughlin, "The *De Locis Sanctis* as a Liturgical Text," in *Adomnán of Iona: Theologian, Lawmaker, Peacemaker*, ed. J. Wooding (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2010), 181-92.

of the Holy Land. The implication is clear: the Columban familia sought not only to narrate Jerusalem through text but to inscribe its topography into their own island landscape.

If capstones operate as petrified reliquaries, they also frame how the rest of the monument is read. The shrine-form at the summit supplies the interpretive key: the entire cross below becomes a reliquary surface, charged with the same logic of presence, intercession, and access. Ornament is no longer decorative backdrop but part of the reliquary grammar—its spirals, knots, grids, and bosses choreograph the eye and body as surely as the shrine-cap crowns the structure. Just as portable reliquaries wrapped sacred matter in precious metalwork, the cross wraps biblical typology and dynastic claim in patterned stone. To read its interlace or tally its numbers was already to participate in a shrine-economy, where geometry and repetition mediated between the visible and the divine.

### **Interlace**

Interlace on the Ossory crosses ranges from tight single-strand meshes to looser double-strand lattices and diagonal knotwork.<sup>303</sup> Variants are deployed strategically: dense fields slow the eye, while open weaves direct focus toward bosses, inscriptions, or narrative panels. Choices that sacrifice perfect symmetry to preserve the dominant cross-form (e.g., around the east head of Ahenny South) show conscious prioritising of hierarchical elements.<sup>304</sup> Interlace thus participates in the cross's 'reading order,' staging approach, pause, and emphasis rather than functioning as neutral ornament.

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<sup>303</sup> Niamh Whitfield, "The Earliest Filigree from Ireland," in *Pattern and Purpose in Insular Art: Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on Insular Art held at the National Museum & Gallery, Cardiff 3-6 September 1998*, ed. by Mark Redknap, Nancy Edwards, Susan Youngs, Alan Lane and Jeremy Knight (Oxbow Books, 2001), 141.

<sup>304</sup> See Cynthia Rose Thickpenny, "Making Key Pattern in Insular Art, AD. 600-100" (PhD diss., Glasgow University, 2018).

### **Spirals**

Spiral ornament—familiar from pre-Christian monuments such as Newgrange and reimagined through La Tène curvilinear vocabularies—operates as a layered sign. Its cyclical energy supports both Christian readings, such as regeneration, or Eucharistic abundance, and a cultivated play of positive and negative space that permits multiple, concurrent meanings.<sup>305</sup> When spirals flank or underlay Passion and Deliverance scenes, they contribute a theology of return and renewal that the capstone will then crown with Resurrection space.

### **Rectilinear Patterns**

Rectilinear units and step-bands, echoing metalwork logics (*millefiori*, *champlevé*) and manuscript page-layouts, order the cross into discrete yet interlinked fields. On Ahenny North, the repetition of rectilinear cells generates ‘hidden’ equal-armed crosses, multiplying the cross-sign through geometry. Twisted-wire-like mouldings frame figural panels as exegetical units, signalling that what lies within is to be read as part of a greater whole. If ornament and form reveal how the high crosses communicated through rhythm, geometry, and symbolic allusion, they also open onto a deeper layer of meaning: the structuring role of number. Decoration on these monuments was never arbitrary; interlace, spirals, bosses, and panels were carefully arranged to embody harmony, balance, and theological resonance and similarly, in early medieval thought, geometry and repetition were not neutral design choices but signs of divine order.

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<sup>305</sup> Michael Ryan, “The Derrynaflan Hoard and Early Irish Art,” *Speculum* 72, no. 4 (1991): 995–1017; E. C. Nelson and Roger Stalley, “Medieval Naturalism and the Botanical Carvings at Corcomroe Abbey (County Clare),” *Gesta* 28 (1989): 165–74; Brent R. Doran, “Mathematical Sophistication of the Insular Celts: Spirals, Symmetries, and Knots as a Window into Their Worldview,” in *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 15, ed. K. Chadbourne, L. J. Maney, and D. Wong (1995), 263; George Coffey, “Some Monuments of the La Tène Period Recently Discovered in Ireland,” *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy: Archaeology, Culture, History, Literature* 24 (1902–4): 257–66, pl. XXI.

Decoration, then, is not ancillary, but instead inherently constitutive of meaning. Interlace, spirals, rectilinear grids, and bosses do not simply fill space; they pattern the viewer's ascent, preparing the eye and mind to recognise the theological claims concentrated at the summit. In this sense, ornament functions analogously to the shrine-cap itself: both mediate between the visible and the divine, guiding interpretation toward presence, memory, and intercession.

This patterned logic shades naturally into another mode of medieval reading—number. As the following section argues, the numerical structuring of panels, bosses, and steps was not incidental but part of the same hermeneutic system. Geometry and repetition were understood to embody divine order, and the high crosses deployed these numeric cues deliberately. It is to this numerological dimension, and its integration with figural and architectural meaning, that we now turn.

#### 4.1.2 Iconography and Beyond: Numerology and Exegesis

If ornament provided the visual rhythm through which the high crosses structured attention, number supplied the hidden architecture of meaning that underpinned that rhythm. In early medieval thought, numbers were never neutral: they expressed divine order, encoded theological truths, and shaped how scripture, liturgy, and even architecture were understood.<sup>306</sup> To some, numbers were ‘the blueprint of a divinely designed creation... and therefore the key to understanding the mind of Creation’s God,’ and medieval scholars and theologians used number symbolism to interpret the Bible, finding hidden meanings and connections in the numerical patterns within the scriptures, and number symbolism influenced various aspects of medieval life, including architecture, liturgy, and

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<sup>306</sup> Vincent F. Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism: Its Sources, Meaning and Influence on Thought and Expression* (Columbia University Press, 1938; repr., Dover Publications, 2003).

the arts, with even cathedrals being designed with symbolic numbers in mind.<sup>307</sup> Yet despite Hilary Richardson’s foundational observations, the numerological dimension of Irish high crosses—especially its systematic deployment—has received surprisingly little sustained analysis.<sup>308</sup> Medieval writers, drawing on both Pythagorean inheritance and Christian exegetical tradition, regarded numbers as intrinsic to the structure of creation: one is the creator of all numbers, as God was the creator of all things.<sup>309</sup> From the Classical world up to the period under discussion, the number one, or the ‘monad’, was considered a representation of God and, in medieval thought, symbolised God as the ultimate unity and the source of all creation, representing singularity and supremacy.<sup>310</sup> Two was often interpreted as the two Testaments, New and Old,<sup>311</sup> and was also seen to represent duality, representing diversity and the material world, and associated with the dual nature of Christ and the opposition between spiritual and material.<sup>312</sup> Unsurprisingly, three was considered ‘fundamental’ to the Christian concept of the Divine Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit, conveying unity in diversity. According to Pythagorean theory, odd numbers are masculine, and even numbers are feminine, and this means that three is elevated further as the first real ‘masculine’ number. Four was often used to represent the four gospels, the four evangelists, the four winds, the four elements, the four rivers of paradise, the four seasons and the four humours.<sup>313</sup> Five was the sum of two male and female numbers, three and two, and so can be considered a number to

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<sup>307</sup> Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism*, 112; Faith Wallis, “Number Mystique in Early Medieval Computus Texts,” in *Mathematics and the Divine: A Historical Study*, ed. T. Koetsier and L. Bergmans (Elsevier, 2005), 181–99, at 182.

<sup>308</sup> Hilary Richardson, “Number and Symbol in Early Christian Irish Art,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 114 (1984): 28–47.

<sup>309</sup> Lawrence P. Schrenk, “God as Monad: The Philosophical Basis of Medieval Theological Numerology,” in *Medieval Numerology: A Book of Essays*, ed. Robert Leo Surles, *Medieval Casebooks* 7 (New York: Garland, 1993), 3–10.

<sup>310</sup> Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism*, 235.

<sup>311</sup> Joseph Sauer, *Symbolik des Kirchengebäudes und seiner Ausstattung in der Auffassung des Mittelalters: Mit Berücksichtigung von Honorius Augustodunensis, Sicardus und Durandus*, 2nd ed. (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder & Co., 1924), <https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/sauer1924> (accessed March 23, 2025).

<sup>312</sup> Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism*, 83.

<sup>313</sup> Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism*, 31.

represent life and marriage, and, in Christian symbolism, the number five represented the flesh and the material world, emphasising the human condition and its earthly nature, as well as the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament, foundational to the Old Law and the Jewish faith, and the five wounds of Jesus Christ (hands, feet, and side), representing his sacrifice and the redemption of humanity.<sup>314</sup> Five was also seen as a balance between the first four numbers (representing the material world) and the higher numbers (representing spiritual and divine aspects), symbolising harmony between the physical and spiritual realms.<sup>315</sup> Six was the first ‘perfect’ number, as its factors add up to their products (1+2+3, and 1x2x3).<sup>316</sup> Seven was another important number, representing spiritual completeness and perfection, associated with the seven days of creation, seven sacraments, and seven gifts of the Holy Spirit.<sup>317</sup> Eight was considered the number of resurrection, salvation and regeneration, reflecting the eighth day as the day of Christ’s resurrection.<sup>318</sup> Nine was described as: ‘of all the number symbols of the Middle Ages, few were so specifically meaningful as the number 9, which is always, first and foremost, the angelic number, representing the nine orders of angels, and the square of the number three.’<sup>319</sup> Ten represented completion, and the Ten Commandments.<sup>320</sup> While medieval numerologists used a Pythagorean tradition in their analysis, meaning changed and developed as Christianity spread and took hold in Europe, and these numerological theories were naturally adapted and expanded to align with Christian teachings and theology. The symbolism of numbers like three, seven, and nine took on new layers of meaning, closely linked to the sacred narrative of creation, salvation, and divine order.

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<sup>314</sup> Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism*, 86, 135; Plutarch, *Moralia*, trans. by Frank Cole Babbitt (Harvard University Press, 1936), 5.

<sup>315</sup> Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism*, 43.

<sup>316</sup> Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism*, 47; Plutarch, *Moralia*, 5.

<sup>317</sup> Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism*, 84.

<sup>318</sup> Sauer, *Symbolik des Kirchengebäudes*, 78-79; Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism*, 77.

<sup>319</sup> Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism*, 138.

<sup>320</sup> Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism*, 85.

These numbers were not only thought to represent abstract theological concepts but also served as a method to convey divine truths in a language that transcended the written word, communicated through architecture, art, and sacred objects. This marriage of numerology and Christian symbolism reflects a broader medieval worldview, in which material structures were seen as having spiritual significance, and where the numbers used in these structures were integral to their religious and philosophical messages.

To appreciate how the high crosses functioned as theological objects, we must therefore consider how number and geometry were deliberately built into their forms. This is especially evident on the Ahenny North Cross, whose sequence of panels, bosses, and structural divisions reveals a carefully constructed numerological programme. What follows examines that programme in detail, beginning at the base and moving upward to the capstone, to show how numerical patterning contributed to the monument's exegetical force. The base is composed of three distinct levels: a large plinth, a step divided into six panels, and another step decorated with three spirals. The shaft is divided into two panels—one containing nine shapes and another five—while the head is decorated with five bosses. Crowning the monument is a single capstone, which serves as the culmination of this numerical and theological programme. Its elevated placement emphasises unity and completion, echoing the symbolism of the monad—the number one—as a sign of God's supremacy and ultimate origin of all things. The capstone's distinctive house-like form further reinforced its function: it recalled beehive huts and shrine reliquaries familiar within Irish monastic culture, evoking the dwelling of saints and the presence of the divine. In this way, the capstone marked the cross as more than stone; it became a visible sign of intercession and heavenly protection.

Each layer resonates with symbolic numerology. Three evokes the Trinity; six, the number of creation; nine, the angelic orders; five, the Pentateuch and the wounds of Christ; four, the evangelists and the cosmos. The accumulation produces a dense field of meaning, where geometry itself becomes exegesis. One panel of

nine identical shapes exemplifies this logic. Constructed from rectilinear units, the negative space generates four equal-armed crosses— ‘hidden’ within the pattern. This multiplication of the cross within the cross turns ornament into a theology of abundance, embedding the sign of salvation everywhere the eye rests. As noted, the programme culminates in the capstone. Perched at the summit, it both completes the numerical sequence and translates it into presence: the dwelling of God, the protection of the saints, the promise of resurrection.

In this way, Ahenny illustrates the central claim of this chapter: that non-figural decoration and number symbolism were not secondary but integral, structuring the monument’s ascent from ornament to theology, from geometry to capstone. The structuring role of number at Ahenny shows how decoration prepared the viewer to read the cross as a theological whole. Yet numbers and ornament were only one layer. The same principles of pattern and significance extended into figural imagery and inscriptions, where biblical typology, apostolic authority, and dynastic power were made visible in stone. Just as the hidden crosses of Ahenny multiplied salvation through geometry, so too did scenes such as the *Traditio Clavium*, Christ in Majesty, and David, while and the names of kings multiply authority, binding local rulers into the economy of divine order. In the next section, we turn to this interplay of figural iconography, inscription, and capstone, and ask how they worked together to materialise sovereignty, sanctity, and salvation in the Irish landscape.

## 4.2 Images of Kingship

If number and geometry at Ahenny mapped a divine order into stone, figural imagery added another layer to this monumental exegesis. As we have seen, Irish high crosses are adorned with many biblical scenes, including Daniel in the Lions’ Den, Paul and Anthony in the

Desert, and Adam and Eve, amongst others, and these are repeated widely across both capstone and non-capstone crosses.<sup>249</sup> Others, however, are a much rarer occurrence and, in particular, the iconography of the *Traditio Clavium*. There are two clusters which matter when we consider the argument of this chapter. First are images that articulate kingship and right governance (above all David). Second are images that articulate jurisdiction and mediation—pre-eminently the *Traditio Clavium* (Giving of the Keys). Read together and in relation to the capstone and inscriptions, they make a single political-theological claim: dynastic authority is licensed by scriptural exempla, ordered under apostolic power, and crowned by saintly presence.

#### 4.2.1 The Traditio Clavium

As we have noted, the Irish high crosses have a number of important iconographical Biblical figures and scenes – but there is one image which stands out for its rarity and its presence. The *Traditio Clavium*, or Giving of the Keys, is a striking image found almost exclusively on a small group of Irish high crosses featuring capstones: though virtually absent from the wider corpus of high crosses, it recurs with notable consistency among this elite subset. This selective deployment is more than decorative; it reflects a deliberate and meaningful choice of iconography. By concentrating the *Traditio Clavium* on these specific monuments, their patrons made a pointed visual statement linking their high crosses—and their political claims—to Rome and the authority of St. Peter. These monuments were not merely devotional objects, but public declarations of dynastic and ecclesiastical legitimacy.

The theological weight of the iconography likely explains why its presence was so carefully restricted. In Christian iconography, the *Traditio Clavium* scene (often paired with the *Traditio Legis*, the giving of the Law or Gospel) represents Christ transferring authority to His apostles, and, in particular, to Peter. The typical depiction shows Christ at the centre (sometimes enthroned),

handing a set of keys to St. Peter on one side and a book or scroll (symbolizing the law or doctrine) to St. Paul on the other. Biblically, it is found in Matthew 16:13—20, when Peter named Jesus as the Messiah:

<sup>13</sup> When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples,

‘Who do people say the Son of Man is?’

<sup>14</sup> They replied, ‘Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’

<sup>15</sup> ‘But what about you?’ he asked. ‘Who do you say I am?’

<sup>16</sup> Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’

<sup>17</sup> Jesus replied, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.

<sup>18</sup> And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

<sup>19</sup> I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’

<sup>20</sup> Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.<sup>321</sup>

In patristic and medieval exegesis, Peter’s keys signified both the power to bind and loose sins and the authority to open heaven itself.<sup>322</sup> Through apostolic succession this authority was claimed by Rome, making the keys an emblem of papal jurisdiction, and by the ninth century, as Carolingian mosaics and ivories attest, the *Traditio Clavium* was a

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<sup>321</sup> *The Bible*, ed. by John Stirling (Oxford University Press, 1957). Matthew 16:13-20.

<sup>322</sup> Roger Collins, *Keepers of the Keys of Heaven: A History of the Papacy* (Basic Books, 2009), 22.

standard visual shorthand for Rome's authority, depicted as Christ enthroned at the centre and Peter and Paul flanking him on either side.<sup>323</sup> In Roman Catholic understanding, the authority given to Peter did not end with Peter's life but was passed on through apostolic succession – an unbroken line of bishops leading up to the Pope in Rome.<sup>324</sup> Thus, every bishop is seen as an heir to the apostles, wielding spiritual authority that ultimately originates from Christ's commission to Peter. Peter's keys, in effect, symbolize the continuity and unity of Church authority from Christ to Peter, and from Peter to all successors. By the early Middle Ages, the imagery of Peter with keys had become an explicit emblem of the Papacy and the Church's power to administer salvation (through sacraments, binding/loosing sins, etc.). To reproduce this motif on Irish high crosses, therefore, allowed the Uí Néill high kings to make a direct claim on apostolic succession and papal legitimacy. Combined with capstones—forms already resonant with reliquaries and the Holy Sepulchre—the imagery doubled its force. The capstones crowned the crosses, depicting architectural tokens of the tomb of Christ or of saints through reliquaries, and the Giving of the Keys beneath declared that access to that heavenly Jerusalem passed through Peter. In effect, the crosses staged a theology of mediation in stone: capstone as shrine and locus of presence, imagery of the keys as charter of authority, inscriptions as guarantors of dynastic patronage. Together they created a monument that was not only devotional but jurisdictional, situating local rulers and churches within the cosmic and Roman order.

One of the most prominent examples of this iconography in action is on the Cross of Scriptures at Clonmacnoise: here, the keys are depicted in the top panel of the shaft

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<sup>323</sup> Megan Henvey, "History, Iconography and Theology: Re-examining the Downpatrick High Cross", *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 71 (2012), 23.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*

directly below the cross-head (Figure 55).<sup>325</sup> As we have discussed in our analysis of the monument, this cross also bears an inscription naming King Flann Sinna, situating the royal patron beneath this scene of Petrine authority. Here, the *Traditio Clavium* scene literally crowns the monument, emphasising that the foundation of the local church (Clonmacnoise) stands under the authority of the Church of Rome founded by Peter.<sup>326</sup> In addition, the Cross of Scriptures features a key scene which has been interpreted as the founding of the church at Clonmacnoise by St Ciarán and King Diarmait mac Cerbaill, or of Colman and King Flann.<sup>327</sup> With either interpretation, the placement of this scene, located below the *Traditio Clavium*, visually connects the foundation of the church at Clonmacnoise with the foundation of the Church in Rome.<sup>328</sup> Flann Sinna is thus associated with both churches through the inclusion of the inscription. Another example of the scene is found on at Monasterboice: both high crosses at the site display the *Traditio Clavium* in prominent positions. On the west face of Muiredach's Cross, the top panel of the shaft shows Christ flanked by Peter and Paul, handing the keys to Peter (and a scroll to Paul), and, as on the Cross of Scriptures, this is in addition to an inscription on this cross, asking for a prayer for Muiredach (likely the patron, perhaps an abbot or local king). The neighbouring Tall Cross also includes a *Traditio Clavium* scene near the top of its shaft, reinforcing the Petrine theme at the site.<sup>329</sup>

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<sup>325</sup> Ibid.

<sup>326</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 94–95. See also Dáibhi Ó Cróinín. “Hiberno-Latin Literature to 1169,” in *Prehistoric and Early Ireland*, ed. by Dáibhi Ó Cróinín, A New History of Ireland, 1 (Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 376.

<sup>327</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 169.

<sup>328</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 94–95.

<sup>329</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 177.



Figure 53: *Traditio Clavium*, Cross of Scriptures, Clonmacnoise

The scene is also present on the Durrow high cross (Figure 56), and this example is unique in that the capstone itself is carved with the *Traditio Clavium* scene. Rather than appearing on the shaft, the image literally crowns this cross: the composition places the symbol of Petrine authority at the highest point of the monument, as if to underscore that the very summit of the cross is opening heaven's gate. An inscription (now weathered) on the base of the Durrow cross is interpreted as a prayer for Máel Sechnaill mac Máele

Ruanaid, the High King of Tara (d. 862).<sup>330</sup> As with the examples at Clonmacnoise and Monasterboice, Durrow's capstone therefore connects the king's name with Peter's authority in a direct, physical way: the king's commemoration and the Petrine image are fused into one object, implying that Máel Sechnaill's legacy is literally under the keys of Heaven. While the examples at Kells have lost their capstones, tenon suggest that these were once present, and we can plausibly assume that the *Traditio Clavium* would have featured here also, with the designers at Kells deliberately following the template seen at Durrow, Monasterboice, and Clonmacnoise, ensuring that Kells too was linked visually to Rome and St. Peter. Art historians have suggested that the Kells crosses originally emulated Durrow's design, and this becomes more likely when we consider Roger Stalley's attribution of carving of several of these monuments to the same master sculptor (dubbed the Muiredach Master), noting similarities in style and iconographic programs.<sup>331</sup>

There is seemingly an exception to this trend: the Killamery High Cross in County Kilkenny, although including a capstone and an inscription, does not include a *Traditio Clavium* panel, and this makes it a notable exception among capstone crosses. These omissions do not undermine the thesis but instead highlight the range of ways in which capstone crosses enacted mediation between earth and heaven. If the *Traditio Clavium* offered one mode—rooted in Rome and Petrine succession—the non-Petrine capstone crosses of Ossory and Killamery point to another: a Jerusalem-focused theology, expressed not in apostolic imagery but in architectural form. The beehive and house-shaped capstones of Ahenny, Kilkieran, and Killamery signal a form of intercession no less potent than the Petrine panels of Durrow or Clonmacnoise. Their distinctive domes and gables

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<sup>330</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 172.

<sup>331</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture*, 1.

deliberately evoke two overlapping traditions. On one level, they echo Irish monastic *clocháin*—beehive huts that embodied ascetic prayer and withdrawal. On another, they resonate with the universal Christian geography of Jerusalem: the rounded form recalls the dome of the Anastasis, the rotunda over the Holy Sepulchre, while the gabled capstone of Killamery mirrors the house-shrine reliquaries that themselves were modelled on the *domus Dei*.

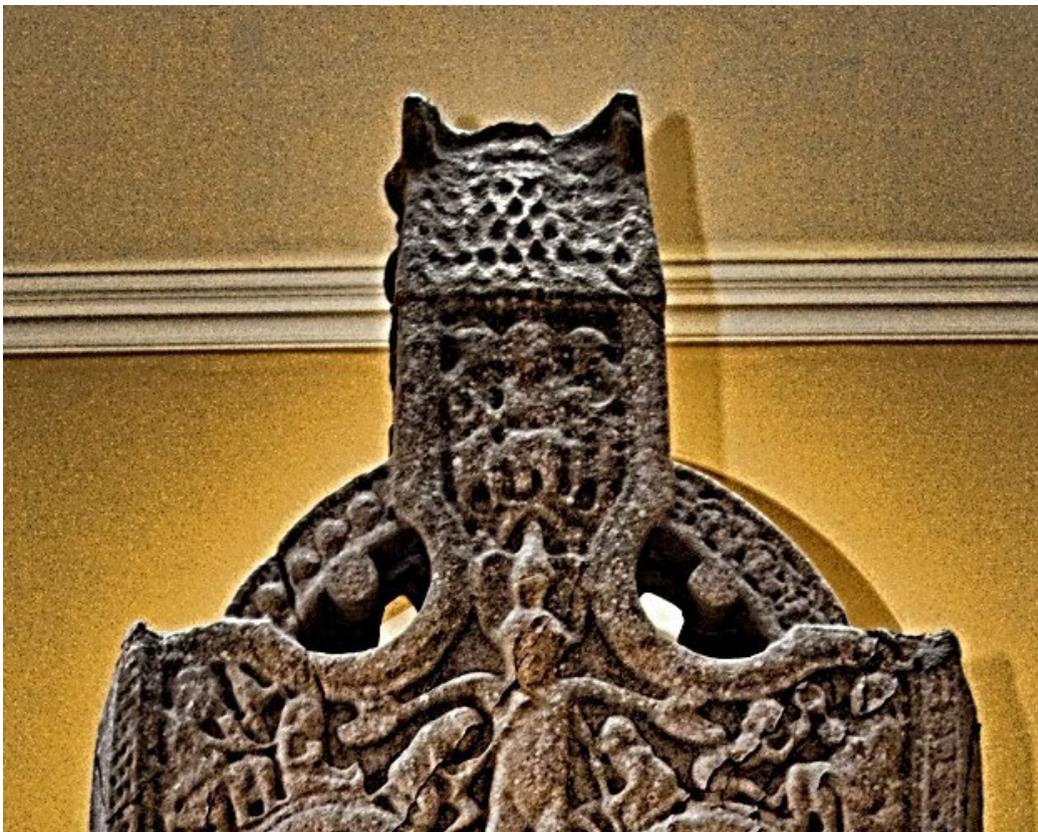


Figure 54: *Traditio Clavium*, Durrow High Cross

In this way, the capstones translate Jerusalem into Irish stone. They materialise the tomb of Christ and the heavenly city not in Jerusalem but in Ossory, offering Irish worshippers a local Sepulchre where resurrection and intercession could be encountered without pilgrimage. Where the Petrine crosses claimed legitimacy by binding kingship to Rome, the Ossory monuments claimed sanctity by rooting themselves in Jerusalem. Their silence on the *Traditio Clavium* is not accidental but programmatic: these monuments look not to Peter's keys but to Christ's empty tomb, and Killamery makes this Jerusalem-logic

explicit. Its shrine-shaped capstone elevates reliquary form into monumental architecture, while the serpentine imagery and royal inscription bind Máel Sechnaill's authority to Christ's triumph over sin and death. In these actions, the monument re-centres kingship and devotion not through Petrine, but through resurrection. Far from being lesser variations, these non-Petrine capstone crosses articulate a complementary strategy of monumental theology: they localise Jerusalem in Irish landscapes, transforming boundary-sites and monastic precincts into visible fragments of the Holy Sepulchre. By crowning their monuments with domes and shrines, their patrons claimed for Ossory what others sought in Rome: a direct participation in the geography of salvation.

Taken together, the evidence from Clonmacnoise, Monasterboice, Durrow, and likely Kells reveals a coherent visual programme. These crosses staged a theology of mediation in stone: the capstone as a reliquary-like form, evoking ideas of saints, relics and intercession, the *Traditio Clavium* as a charter of ecclesiastical authority, and the inscriptions as guarantors of dynastic patronage. The image of Peter receiving the keys visually articulated a claim to spiritual continuity with Rome, while the physical form of the cross connected that claim to the sacred architecture of relic-shrines. In effect, these monuments fused biblical symbolism, political aspiration, and Roman influence into a single material expression. The concentration of the *Traditio Clavium* on capstone crosses was, therefore, no accident. On the contrary: the choice reflected a conscious, programmatic effort to link Irish kingship and monastic authority to Rome's apostolic foundation by crowning their monuments with the same sign that crowned the heavenly city.

#### 4.3 Enthroned Saints and Apostles: Visual Hierarchy of Kingship and Church

Beyond the imagery of the keys, the capstone-group crosses also employ a broader iconographic program that creates a sacred visual hierarchy, linking local kingship to biblical and apostolic models. One notable strategy is the depiction of enthroned or seated

holy figures – especially kings and apostles – as parallels to earthly rulers. As we have noted in our analysis of the crosses, many high crosses of this period include scenes from the Old Testament David Cycle, portraying King David (the prototypical God-anointed monarch) in various roles: as shepherd, as victor over Goliath, as psalmist, and as enthroned king. On the Tall Cross at Monasterboice, a sequence of panels shows David’s divinely sanctioned rise to kingship – David presenting Goliath’s severed head to King Saul, and the prophet Samuel anointing David as king. The act of Samuel pouring holy oil on David’s head (depicted on this cross) is a direct biblical visualisation of legitimate kingship conferred by God’s authority: by carving this scene, therefore, the Irish artists drew an implicit analogy to contemporary Irish kings: just as David was chosen and approved by God (through his prophet), so is a rightful Irish king approved by God (through his Church). Indeed, the enthroned or anointed David in these carvings serves as a model for Christian kingship – a model to which the Uí Néill and other dynasts eagerly laid claim in their quest to be seen as *ríg dé*, kings under God. As Hawkes has observed, these ‘aulic’ (courtly) images of David enthroned among musicians on Irish high crosses were not mere biblical illustrations; they were deliberate evocations of a sanctified royal court, meant to resonate with the audience’s understanding of their own kings’ status.<sup>332</sup> In short, King David’s presence on the crosses ennobles Irish rulers by analogy: the local king is to Ireland what David was to Israel – the chosen of the Lord.

The apostles and saints are likewise given pride of place in this visual hierarchy, often depicted in ways that suggest enthronement or authoritative posture. On the Clonmacnoise and Monasterboice crosses, St. Peter himself appears as the chief Apostle

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<sup>332</sup> Jane Hawkes, “The Non-Crucifixion Iconography of the Pre-Viking Sculpture in the North of England: Carvings at Hovingham, Masham, Rothbury, Sandbach, and Wirksworth.” (PhD diss., Newcastle University, 1989), 106.

receiving Christ's commission. While Peter is shown humbly receiving the keys (rather than sitting on a throne), the symbolism effectively *enthrones* him as the leader of the Church on earth. He is distinguished from other figures by virtue of the keys he alone receives – a mark of singular authority. As noted in our discussion of the *Traditio Clavium*, in these compositions, Peter stands in for the institutional Church (and, by extension, for Rome's primacy), visually affirming that the Church's authority flows from Christ through Peter. Some crosses reinforce this point by including St. Paul alongside Peter, receiving the book of Scripture (the *Traditio Legis*) as Peter receives the keys. The pairing of Peter and Paul, the two chief apostles, underscores the idea of apostolic foundation. It is notable that in the examples where the *Traditio Clavium* occurs, both apostles are shown flanking Christ (as in Rome's own art) – thereby connecting the local Irish church to the very roots of apostolic authority. Heather Pulliam notes that such imagery 'underlines Peter's authority as an extension of that of Christ' and reminds viewers that the clergy, as Peter's successors, 'hold the key to the Church and its sacraments' in this world.<sup>333</sup> In the social context of early medieval Ireland, this was a powerful visual reminder that kings and laypeople alike were spiritually dependent on the Church's ministrations – the sacraments that open the gates of heaven, and that this access may be possible through affiliation with the individuals whose names were inscribed on the crosses.

Significantly, the key saints of Ireland also appear in the capstone group iconography, effectively joining the apostolic hierarchy. Capstone were also often tied to the local saint's presence, reinforcing the idea of mediation. At Clonmacnoise, for example, the capstone's form and context invoke St. Ciarán, the monastery's sixth-century founder. The cross was erected near Ciarán's tomb-shrine, and the capstone's gabled shape

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<sup>333</sup> Pulliam, "Between the embodied eye and living world," 30.

deliberately echoes that shrine's architecture. As Hutchison notes, 'the visual appearance of the capstone...worked to establish St. Ciarán's presence and authority at Clonmacnoise by evoking the containers of his holy remains' – namely, the wooden church-like shrine that housed Ciarán's relics.<sup>334</sup> The capstone thus functioned as a petrified reliquary, symbolically holding the saint's blessing over the community.<sup>335</sup> The Cross of St Patrick and St Columba at Kells adapts the same strategy on a broader canvas: a panel below the capstone holds the images of Saints Patrick and Columba, suggesting their spiritual oversight of the monastic community. While Patrick and Columba were not 'local' in the sense of Ciarán, they were the saints who most defined the ecclesiastical and political landscape of Ireland: Patrick as apostle and national patron, Columba as the founding saint of the Columban familia. Their entronement at the summit of the Kells cross echoes what Ciarán does at Clonmacnoise: saintly presence visibly crowned the monument, mediating between earthly rulers and divine authority. Here, however, the message expands beyond the monastery's founder to signal reconciliation between rival ecclesiastical traditions. Where Ciarán rooted authority in place, Patrick and Columba projected authority across Ireland as a whole. Read together, the two strategies are complementary. Both Clonmacnoise and Kells used the capstone to visualise saintly intercession at the apex of the monument, as both fused stone form with relic logic, making the cap itself a reliquary-sign. The sites did, however, apply the logic differently: Clonmacnoise localised it, binding king and community to Ciarán's shrine; Kells universalised it, presenting Patrick and Columba in concord as guarantors of both Roman and Columban inheritance. In each case, however, the capstone crowns the cross with a theology of mediation: saintly patrons above, rulers and abbots below, Christ beyond.

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<sup>334</sup> Hutchison, "The Multivocality of the Cross of the Scriptures," 293.

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.*

All of these iconographic choices come together at the summit of the high crosses – the capstone – which in these monuments functions as a theological keystone between the earthly and the divine. As we have seen, the capstones of the Irish high crosses are physically distinctive: they are carved in the shape of a small gabled house or shrine, set atop the cross head and, far from being merely decorative, they carried profound symbolism. As we have noted, alongside scholars such as O’Floinn and Stalley, the capstones closely resemble the portable reliquary shrines of the early medieval Irish Church: house-like boxes or caskets (e.g. the eighth-century Monymusk Reliquary), which were seen as *arcae* of holy presence. By crowning their monumental crosses with a carved stone in the form of a reliquary, the Irish sculptors signalled that the cross itself was a sacred container – a vessel of divine truth and a locus of holy presence. In essence, the capstone turned the entire cross into a kind of giant reliquary or shrine in the open air. It created a visual theology in which the top of the cross marked the point of contact between earth and heaven, temporal and eternal. As Catilin Hutchison notes, the capstone’s reliquary-like form ‘calls to mind...the ark of the covenant and other containers of holy things’, deliberately evoking the idea that God’s covenant and presence are housed here.<sup>336</sup>

Moreover, the capstone was often embellished with its own imagery that reinforced this mediating role. For example, the Cross of the Scriptures at Clonmacnoise includes an image of *Majestas Domini* (Christ in Majesty) on one face of its capstone, depicting Christ enthroned in glory, flanked perhaps by angels.<sup>337</sup> Placing the *Majestas* (a symbol of the heavenly Christ) literally at the pinnacle of the monument hammered home the notion that the cross’s true capstone was Christ’s divine authority. On Muiredach’s Cross, the west face

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<sup>336</sup> Hutchison, “The Multivocality of the Cross of the Scriptures,” 287.

<sup>337</sup> Hutchison, “The Multivocality of the Cross of the Scriptures,” 80.

of the capstone contains a carved triad interpreted by Caitlin Hutchison as Moses supported by Aaron and Hur – an Old Testament scene where Moses’ upraised arms (with the help of his aides) ensure victory for God’s people.<sup>338</sup> This image not only prefigures the Crucifixion (Moses with outstretched arms foreshadowing Christ on the cross), but also delivers a message about mediated divine aid: as long as Moses’ arms (raised heavenward) are upheld, Israel prevails. Transposed to the capstone, this motif signifies that when earthly leaders (Moses, or by extension the abbot/king) are supported in prayer (by Aaron/Hur, symbolising the clergy or supportive nobles) under God’s oversight, the community triumphs. Thus, the capstone imagery in the Irish crosses underscores a partnership between the divine and the human in governance and salvation. Additionally, the capstones of some crosses carried non-figural but cosmological motifs – bosses, interlace, and trumpet spirals – which can be read as symbols of the heavenly realm (the firmament or the ‘roof’ of heaven) covering the cross. In all cases, the capstone forms an uppermost register of meaning: it is the visual theology crowning the entire iconographic program.

The strategic placement of key motifs relative to the capstone further highlights the capstone’s role as mediator. Notably, the *Traditio Clavium* scenes we discussed are typically carved directly beneath the capstone zone, just below the ring of the cross: in the case of Durrow, this scene is actually on the capstone itself. This is not coincidental. By positioning Christ handing the keys to Peter at the threshold of the capstone, the artists situated the transfer of authority at the liminal point between the cross’s narrative shaft (the worldly realm) and its roof (the heavenly realm). In essence, Peter receives the keys at the doorway to Heaven – a doorway represented by the little stone shrine above him. Here, therefore, we have the Church (in the figure of Peter) entrusted with the keys that unlock

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<sup>338</sup> Hutchison, “The Multivocality of the Cross of the Scriptures,” 80.

the house of God, precisely at the place where the earth meets the sky. Heather Pulliam notes of Clonmacnoise that the panel of Peter receiving the keys, placed beneath the Last Judgment scene and the ringed cross-head, ‘underscores Peter’s authority’ and reminds viewers that what is bound or loosed on earth is bound or loosed in heaven.<sup>339</sup> Immediately above Peter, the capstone’s presence – resembling a church or reliquary – visually represents Heaven’s vault and the Church itself. Thus, the handover of the keys happens at the visual mediating point: the capstone (Heaven/Church) literally overshadows Peter receiving authority, and Peter in turn overshadows the kings and faithful depicted below. The entire cross from base to capstone can be read as a vertical allegory: at the bottom, on the base or lower shaft, we find inscriptions naming kings and abbots (the earthly patrons); moving upward, we see narrative scenes of biblical history and perhaps contemporary history (linking those patrons to sacred story); higher up, we encounter the *Traditio Clavium* – the investiture of the Church by Christ; above that, in the cross head, the Crucifixion and Resurrection – the redemptive acts of Christ; and finally at the capstone, a shrine symbol or, in the case of the Cross of Scriptures, *Majestas Domini* – the transcendent presence of God. In this way, the cross’s design creates a sacred continuum from earth to heaven. The capstone serves as the *visual theology* uniting the whole: it is simultaneously the roof of the Church (covering Peter and the saints), the reliquary of the founding saint’s spirit, and the threshold of the heavenly city. As the thesis argues, these capstones acted as mediators between the earthly and the divine – not only symbolically but in the experiential reality of viewers who gazed up from the ground. The faithful standing before a capstone cross would see their worldly rulers commemorated at eye level, their biblical exemplars above, and finally the little ‘house’ of heaven crowning the monument,

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<sup>339</sup> Pulliam, “Between the embodied eye and living world,” 30.

inviting their eyes – and their hearts – to ascend from the temporal to the eternal.

In summary, the group of Irish high crosses with capstones achieved a remarkable fusion of art, ideology, and theology, and this can be read through their iconography. The *Traditio Clavium* motif, rare in Ireland, was concentrated in this group because it carried the precise message these monuments were built to convey: that the authority of local kings and churches flowed directly from Christ through Peter's keys. Irish high kings of the Uí Néill and their clerical allies seized on this imagery – alongside depictions of enthroned biblical kings and saintly patrons – to craft a sacred visual hierarchy in stone. In that hierarchy, the high king's worldly power was not self-derived but was nested within a continuum of authority reaching back to Davidic kingship and Petrine apostleship. By literally carving this message in stone and crowning it with the shrine-like capstone, they created monuments that were at once political statements and devotional objects. These high crosses stood (and still stand) as mediators between the earthly and the divine: teaching tools that link local narratives to salvation history, and towering symbols that knit together the earthly kingdom of Ireland with the heavenly kingdom of God. Each capstone cross, with its house-shaped summit and its panorama of sacred art, embodies a *visual theology* of kingship under God – a theology in which the earthly ruler, the holy community, and the divine patrimony are united in a single, soaring composition. Such was the genius of the capstone group of Irish high crosses: in them, art became a language of authority, and stone became a bridge between heaven and earth.

#### 4.4 Royal Inscriptions and Petrine Imagery: Linking Kings to Apostles

If the *Traditio Clavium* (Christ handing the keys to Peter) gave visual form to apostolic authority on Ireland's high crosses, the inscriptions carved onto capstone crosses made that authority immediate and local. Images could articulate theology, but names fixed it in lived

reality: they bound the universal claims of Petrine succession to the particular identities of Irish rulers and their ecclesiastical partners. Where Peter received the keys to heaven, Máel Sechnaill and Flann Sinna had their names etched beneath; where Rome claimed apostolic succession, Uí Néill high kings staked their place in that chain of legitimacy. Each such cross operated on two registers at once: it participated in a transnational Christian visual language of power, while simultaneously embedding the king's authority into the sacred fabric of local monasteries and landscapes.

The Uí Néill strategy becomes clear when we examine the surviving inscribed crosses. Máel Sechnaill's name at Durrow, Killamery and likely Monasterboice, ties him to powerful monastic federations, while Flann Sinna's inscription at Clonmacnoise binds him to one of Ireland's greatest ecclesiastical centres and to its saintly founder, Ciarán.<sup>340</sup> These associations wrapped kingship in the sanctity of local cults while, at the same time, the Petrine imagery projected authority onto a universal canvas. By placing Flann's name directly beneath an image of Peter receiving the keys at Clonmacnoise, the designers were suggesting that just as Christ entrusted Peter with the Church, so divine sanction undergirded the high king's rule. In this visual rhetoric, the king stands almost as a secular bishop – a ruler whose power, like Peter's, is ordained by heaven. This was not simply piety but purposeful propaganda. In a fragmented early medieval political landscape, apostolic imagery bolstered a king's claims to primacy, helped ward off rivals, and displayed loyalty to orthodox Christian authority. It also resonated internationally: by adopting iconographies familiar from Carolingian and Roman art, Irish kings signalled that they were participants in the wider Christian order, projecting Ireland's place within apostolic Christendom.<sup>341</sup>

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<sup>340</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture and the Art of the High Crosses*, 169.

<sup>341</sup> Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland*, 166.

Notably, only a small and distinct group of high crosses bear these royal inscriptions, most prominently those linking Máel Sechnaill and Flann Sinna to the sites of Durrow, Killamery, Monasterboice, and Clonmacnoise.<sup>342</sup> This is no mere ornamental variation: it represents a deliberate innovation in the use of the high cross. These inscriptions are typically phrased as public prayers (*orait do... / pray for...*) that perform allegiance between people, place, and prince. An example can be seen on the cross at Killamery, which bears an inscription ‘OR DO MAELSECHNAILL’, ‘a prayer for Máel Sechnaill,’ referring to the high king. The Durrow cross is similar: though now weathered, scholars believe it once included Máel Sechnaill’s name and title through the inclusion of phrases like ... ‘*ri Éreinn...*’ meaning ‘king of Ireland’.<sup>343</sup> Crucially, these are petitional inscriptions – prayers on behalf of the king – rather than mere labels. The *oróit* formula casts the king as a subject of prayer within a sacred setting, framing royal office as under God’s authority: the king is favoured by divine grace yet answerable to divine justice. By inscribing their names into prominent devotional monuments, these kings literally inserted secular authority into sacred space, fusing kingship with sanctity and carving dynastic legitimacy into the landscape of Christian worship. A key example of this is the Cross of Scriptures at Clonmacnoise. Here, the inscription prays for Flann Sinna—‘OR DO RIG FL[A]IN M[AC] MAEL SECHLAINN, OROIT DO RIG HERENN OR’, and for abbot Colmán mac Ailella, embedding royal and ecclesiastical authority within the same monument.<sup>344</sup> Here the collaboration between king and churchman is enshrined in stone. What makes the Clonmacnoise cross even more powerful is its imagery: one face of the cross depicts David as Psalmist (King David), an archetypal just ruler and a Christological

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<sup>342</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 23.

<sup>343</sup> Stalley, *Early Irish Sculpture and the Art of the High Crosses*, 174.

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.*

precursor, while nearby the text calls out the contemporary king by name and asks the community to pray for him. The pairing is deliberate: in effect, the cross presents David as the model for holy kingship, and then immediately identifies Flann as the king in need of upholding that model. The community reading the cross is prompted to see Flann's rule in biblical perspective – David provides the exemplar, and the inscription welds that exemplar to Flann, the living ruler, enlisting the faithful to support him with prayer. In this way, an older tradition of boundary-stone inscription (which might simply record a patron's name or lineage) is transformed into a public theology of kingship – a statement that royal authority must be exercised under divine law and sustained by communal intercession.

It should be noted that not all inscriptions name kings. Muiredach's Cross at Monasterboice famously invokes an abbot—'OR DO MUIREDACH LASNDERNAD...RO'—yet what is distinctive here is the clustering of royal names in association with a subset of capstone crosses. The capstone—a conspicuous architectural crown—intensifies the message: the Uí Néill were not merely patrons of ecclesiastical art but shapers of a new monumental type that bound vertical capstone form to the permanence of royal text. We see an illuminating contrast at Kells: the so-called Cross of Patrick and Columba at Kells does not name a living king at all, but instead carries the inscription '[This is] the Cross of Patrick and Columba.' Here the Uí Néill dynasty chose to monumentalise its sacral ancestry rather than any one ruler – foregrounding the two patron saints (St. Patrick and St. Columba) most closely tied to Uí Néill spiritual legitimacy. This strategy brought together two previously separate ecclesiastical traditions (the Patrician church based at Armagh, and the Columban federation of Iona/Kells) under the Uí Néill banner. In effect, against the examples of Durrow, Killamery, Monasterboice and Clonmacnoise – where kings advertise themselves – Kells presents the dynasty's saintly patrons as the source of authority. Sovereignty is here rooted in the holiness of Patrick and

Columba, an eternal legitimacy that transcends any single reign. In combination, these two modes of political theology complemented each other: sometimes elevating the living king as God's anointed, at other times effacing the king in favour of incontestable saintly authority. Together, they transformed the high cross into a dynastic instrument of sacred power. It seems, then, that the Uí Néill were experimenting with two parallel strategies for sacral kingship on the high crosses: the first were inscriptions designed to elevate the reigning king, whether Máel Sechnaill or Flann, by naming him in prayer and linking him with biblical and apostolic imagery. The second was using inscriptions that invoked foundational saints, such as Patrick and Columba at Kells, in the place of a king's name, linking the dynasty itself to holy predecessors, rather than highlighting any one monarch. These approaches worked in tandem to bolster Uí Néill claims: one strategy asserted contemporary authority with divine approval, while the other rooted that authority in a longer sacred continuum.

This raises the question: why did a Petrine image paired with a royal name carry such weight in Ireland? The answer lies in the hybrid ecology of Irish church authority. Peter was the archetypal bishop—the first Bishop of Rome—signalling episcopal hierarchy, and yet Ireland's seventh–ninth-century landscape did not mirror Continental diocesan models. Authority was negotiated between bishops and abbots: bishops retained sacramental prerogatives (ordinations), while major monasteries—often governed by presbyter-abbots—functioned as mother churches presiding over paruchia that mapped kin-networks as much as territory.<sup>345</sup> Irish canon law reflects this tension: the eighth century *Hibernensis* asserts, for instance, that no new monastery may be founded without the command or approval of the local bishop, reinforcing the principle that ultimate

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<sup>345</sup> Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland*, 166; James F. Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland, volume I: Ecclesiastical Sources*, ed. by Ludwig Bieler, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Columbia University Press, 1966, repr. Four Courts Press, 1993), 324; Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland*, 166.

ecclesiastical authority rests with the bishop.<sup>346</sup> At the same time, however, the compilers of *Hibernensis* (Irish scholars Cú Chuimne of Iona and Ruben of Dairinis) included content acknowledging the reality of monastic power and the need to regulate it.<sup>347</sup> Notably, the text cites the Council of Orléans in Gaul, which forbade monks from establishing new cells without their abbot's permission 'lest he be driven mad by ambition or vanity, suggesting a precedent for the regulation of monastic autonomy, which was later extended to abbots in Ireland.<sup>348</sup> The very inclusion of such citations shows an awareness of contention between monastic autonomy and episcopal oversight.<sup>349</sup> In practice, Ireland developed a hybrid system: it was not devoid of bishops—bishoprics existed, and some monasteries had bishops in their community—but the typical Roman diocesan model had been altered and adapted to meet local conditions. In some prominent monasteries, the abbot was the dominant figure, sometimes even holding quasi-episcopal authority. A famous commentary by the Venerable Bede, writing in the early eighth century, underscores how unusual this was by Roman standards. Describing the monastery of Iona, Bede marvelled that:

This island [Iona] has always for its ruler an abbot, who is a priest, to whose authority the whole province, including its bishops, are subject—an unusual arrangement of things, following the example of their first teacher [Columba], who was not a bishop but a priest and monk.<sup>350</sup>

This commentary underscores how unique the Irish situation was: monastic leaders could outrank bishops, a scenario virtually unknown in the contemporary Roman Church order.

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<sup>346</sup> Roy Flechner, *The Hibernensis: A Study and Edition*, 2 vols (CUA Press, 2019), 42.1

<sup>347</sup> Edel Bhreathnach, *Monasticism in Ireland* (Four Courts Press, 2024), 67.

<sup>348</sup> Flechner, *The Hibernensis*, 42.1; See also Bhreathnach, *Monasticism in Ireland*, 67.

<sup>349</sup> Flechner, *The Hibernensis*, 42.1.

<sup>350</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 115 (III.iv).

Against this backdrop, a king seeking legitimacy had to work both registers of ecclesiastical power. On one hand, the king needed the alliance and blessing of the great monasteries (and their abbots) to secure local prestige among important tribal networks. On the other hand, he also needed to invoke the authority of apostolic succession and the episcopal hierarchy (symbolised by Peter and Rome) to situate his rule within the universal Christian order. The inscribed, image-rich high crosses encapsulate this double strategy perfectly. They were often erected at major abbatial centres (such as Durrow or Clonmacnoise) – thus rooted in monastic landscapes – but they prominently display Petrine imagery (the keys of Peter) – thus invoking the authority of the universal Church. In essence, the capstone crosses literalise that double alliance: abbatial centres host these monuments, and Petrine keys authorise them. By carving Peter’s image and the king’s name together, the Uí Néill rulers signalled that they had the backing of both the local monastic saint (through site and collaboration with abbots) and the Prince of the Apostles himself (through iconography) for their reign.<sup>351</sup> Seen against the backdrop of earlier Irish tradition, these royal inscriptions represent a striking evolution of epigraphic practice. Early medieval Ireland had its own distinctive epigraphy in the form of Ogham stones, which often recorded a person’s name and lineage (X son of Y) to mark territory or honour the dead.<sup>352</sup> The high-cross inscriptions of the Uí Néill kings use a similar mac-formula (‘Flann *mac* Máel Sechnaill’) to signal descent and title, but they fundamentally recast that descent as a Christian vocation under divine law. Instead of a simple lineage marker, ‘X mac Y’ on a cross now ties the king into

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<sup>351</sup> Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland*, 166; Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland*, 324.

<sup>352</sup> Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland*, 38.

sacred history – effectively saying this son of so-and-so is under God’s authority and in the lineage of God’s plan. The capstone cross thus amalgamates the functions of a boundary stone, a reliquary shrine, and a proclamation of sovereignty.

Moreover, as we have noted in Chapter 1, the placement of these monuments in the landscape was highly strategic, turning them into what we might call epigraphic beacons. Many high crosses, including those with royal names, were erected in liminal, conspicuous locations – at monastery boundaries, along major roadways or near fords and river crossings, key places where many people would pass by. A key example, Clonmacnoise, sat at a crossroads of river and land routes in the centre of Ireland, and Durrow was near important route networks. Set in such viewsheds, the tall stone crosses could catch the eye from afar, and their inscriptions and symbols would assert authority to all comers; as we will discuss momentarily, many of these crosses, and their inscriptions, would have been accessible to the laity: in effect, these were public charters in stone. They broadcast in durable, permanent form the alliance of king and church, the prayer of the community for just rule, and the king’s accountability before God. One can imagine travellers or pilgrims pausing to read the carved names and to pray for the king as instructed, thereby continuously renewing the royal legitimacy in the public conscience. It is a fusion of legal memory (the way an ogham stone might mark a claim) with liturgical invitation (soliciting prayer) – a kind of liturgy in stone. The concentrated combination of elements on these monuments is truly remarkable and appears to be unique to the Uí Néill program. Each such cross synthesises multiple layers of meaning: inherited ancestral logic (through inscriptions of lineage), biblical ideology of kingship (through Davidic and Petrine imagery likely influenced by Carolingian art), and the politics of visibility (through their prominent siting in the landscape). This purposeful synthesis amounts to a new, explicitly Christian grammar of power in medieval Ireland. Few monuments elsewhere in Europe at this time

so explicitly weave together text, image, architecture, and location to assert a cosmic order of governance.

To highlight the elements combined in these crosses, we can enumerate the key features Uí Néill patrons brought together into a single monument of royal propaganda: they used a capstone ‘crown’: a distinctive roof- or dome-shaped capstone crowning the cross, evoking reliquaries and the heavenly *domus Dei* (House of God).<sup>353</sup> This was accompanied by a royal inscription, with the king’s name and title carved with a prayer formula, linking dynastic lineage to Christian intercession. Imagery such as King David playing the harp (the Psalmist) was added to the crosses, offering a scriptural exemplar of righteous kingship and thanksgiving for victory. Similarly, apostolic images, such as the *Traditio Clavium* scene of Christ handing the keys to Peter, asserting the concept of apostolic authority and its continuity. Finally, strategic placement at a visible, liminal site (boundary, road, or assembly place), ensured that the monument’s message reached both local and itinerant audiences.

This combination is rarely found all together elsewhere, and this thesis proposes for the first time that this was a deliberate Uí Néill strategy. It shows how Irish high crosses evolved into complex media, uniting inherited tribal claims with Carolingian-influenced iconography and a keen awareness of audience, to produce a new kind of sacred kingship rhetoric. On a spiritual plane, these capstone crosses functioned as more than stone billboards – they were conceived as active sites of intercession and sacred presence. Their very forms recall portable oratories, shrine-boxes, and even the idea of the church as the House of God. The capstone made the cross into a little church, a *sanctuary* where heaven

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<sup>353</sup> Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, 23.

and earth meet.

The imagery of Peter receiving the keys directly beneath a domed capstone visually suggests that this cross is an axis between our world and the Heavenly City – Peter opens the gate, and the cross’s capstone is the gatehouse. That these monuments were seen as loci of divine aid is hinted by later folklore: at Killamery, local tradition held that touching the capstone of the cross could cure headaches – a likely echo of medieval beliefs in the cross’s healing, protective power (much as relics or holy wells were believed to cure ailments).<sup>354</sup> Such folklore, even in fragmentary form, confirms that people perceived these high crosses as living sacred instruments, not just inert memorials. They were places where one could reach out and *touch* the sacred, a tangible interface with divine help.

On a political plane, meanwhile, the crosses unmistakably broadcast dynastic authority. To carve one’s name literally beneath St. Peter’s keys was to insert oneself into salvation history and the hierarchy of Christian authority. The Uí Néill kings, by doing so, positioned themselves as rulers who were not merely warlords but quasi-priestly figures – kings under God’s mandate. It proclaimed that their right to rule was sanctioned *ab initio* by Heaven, just as Peter’s leadership of the Church was. These monuments also signalled close cooperation between the crown and the cloister: the kings did not act alone but in concert with prominent churchmen (hence the frequent pairing of king’s name with an abbot’s name on the same cross).<sup>355</sup> By collaborating with monastic communities in raising these crosses, Uí Néill rulers in effect fused their political authority with the spiritual prestige of Ireland’s greatest ecclesiastical centres. The high crosses thus projected

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<sup>354</sup> Ibid.

<sup>355</sup> Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland*, 166; Kenney, *Sources for the Early History of Ireland*, vol. I, 324.

their sovereignty in two dimensions: locally, they stood on monastic ground, reinforcing the king's integration into the heart of each region's religious life; universally, their iconography and inscriptions connected the king to the backbone of Christendom (Rome and the Bible), making a claim that Irish kingship itself was part of the divine order recognized across Christendom. Indeed, foreign visitors or scholars familiar with Christian art would recognise the imagery and understand the statement being made – that Ireland's high king is a legitimate Christian monarch in the style of Constantine or Charlemagne, not a barbarian outside the fold.

Ultimately, therefore, the capstone high crosses embody a deliberate monumental grammar. Through their form, iconography, texts, and placement, they made visible a cosmic vision of society: one in which kings' rule under God's authority, the Church mediates divine grace, and the faithful find protection and salvation in the shadow of the cross. These monuments stand as bridges between earth and heaven, uniting crown and altar, dynasty and divinity, in a single symbol, where power and piety are literally fused into stone. The kings who sponsored them, and the clerics who advised on them, created in these crosses a powerful statement about what kingship meant in Christian Ireland.

If the inscriptions and capstones proclaimed legitimacy in stone, their impact depended equally on where these monuments were set. As noted, high crosses were not hidden within cloisters but raised in liminal, visible spaces—at boundaries, roads, river crossings, and monastery precincts—where their layered meanings could be encountered by diverse audiences. Their placement in the landscape made them not only dynastic charters and surrogate relic-shrines, but also landmarks of devotion and authority in the everyday movement of people. To understand their full force, we must now turn to the contexts in which they stood: the sacred geography of Ireland itself.

#### 4.5 Sites and Visibility, Access and Audience

As we have discussed above, the placement of high crosses within the Irish landscape was deliberate and carefully considered. Far from standing as isolated monuments, these crosses formed part of broader sacred and political environments. Their siting—at boundaries, thresholds, river crossings, and other transitional spaces—ensured that they were encountered at charged moments of movement between zones of access: between secular and sacred, lay and monastic, earthly and divine. In this sense, they operated as liminal objects, materially anchoring thresholds and visibly asserting both religious and political authority. The shaping of their ‘viewshed’ appears intentional: crosses were placed so that they commanded attention from certain vantage points, approached along pilgrimage routes, or viewed against prominent natural landmarks. Their scale and form heightened this effect: monumental, elevated, and architecturally distinct, they stood out within the landscape, reinforcing their role as markers of sanctity and power. Their very visibility was part of their meaning, broadcasting the presence of monastic communities and the dynasties that supported them.

At the regional level, the siting of crosses often aligned with territorial boundaries. Kathleen Hughes has observed of the Ahenny crosses that: ‘the crosses of Ahenny, Kilkieran and Killamery lie now on or near the boundary between Kilkenny and Tipperary, which must once have been the border between the kingdoms of Osraige and Eoganacht Caisil,’<sup>356</sup> and Peter Harbison suggests that this boundary was the Lingaun river, which flows ‘through a ravine at the foot of the slope where Ahenny stands on the Eoganacht bank and looks straight across to Osraige on the far side.’<sup>357</sup>

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<sup>356</sup> Kathleen Hughes and Anne Hamlin, *The modern traveller to the early Irish church* (SPCK Publishing, 1977), 29.

<sup>357</sup> Peter Harbison, “A High Cross Base from the Rock of Cashel and a Historical Reconsideration of the ‘Ahenny Group’ of Crosses,” *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy C: Archaeology, Culture, History, Literature*, 93.1 (1993): 16.

While such arguments always risk circularity, there is a persuasive comparative framework in earlier traditions of inscribed stone monuments. Pictish symbol stones, for example, are now widely understood to have acted as boundary markers, a function also associated with ogham stones.<sup>358</sup> Gearóid Mac Niocall’s reminder that ogham inscriptions could serve as legal evidence of boundaries underscores the continuity between these earlier traditions and the later high crosses.<sup>359</sup> Ogham stones, potential predecessors to the high crosses, were often placed at settlement edges or liminal sites across Ireland and Wales,<sup>360</sup> and it follows that the siting of monumental high crosses in similarly charged places was not accidental, but part of an ongoing cultural practice of fixing authority — legal, political and spiritual — into the very fabric of the landscape. The riverside locations of several key cross-sites further emphasise this point. The Ahenny group lies close to the River Luanan, Clonmacnoise was set directly on the Shannon, and Monasterboice on the Boyne. Natural landmarks such as rivers and hills functioned as territorial boundaries, and the positioning of crosses beside them transformed these natural features into political-spiritual markers. In doing so, ruling dynasties—above all the Uí Néill—reinforced their authority, materially inscribing their control onto landscapes of power.

Two cautions temper the argument: first, we must note that some element of movement and re-setting is likely to have occurred over the years, meaning it is highly likely that some crosses have been relocated — we know this is the case for

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<sup>358</sup> Gordon Noble, Martin Goldberg, and Derek Hamilton, “The Development of the Pictish Symbol System: Inscribing Identity beyond the Edges of Empire,” *Antiquity*, 92.365 (2018): 1344; C Swift, *Ogham stones and the earliest Irish Christians*. (St. Patrick’s College, Maynooth, Department of Education, 1997), 44; M.P. Barnes, *Runes: a handbook*, (Boydell, 2012), 11; E Bhreathnach, *Ireland in the medieval world: AD 400–1000* (Four Courts, 2014), 42-44.

<sup>359</sup> Gearóid Mac Niocall, “Christian influence on early Irish law,” in *Ireland and Europe: the early church*, ed. by Próinséas Ní Chatháin & Michael Richter (Four Courts Press, 1984), 153.

<sup>360</sup> Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland*, 38. See also Kenneth Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain: a chronological survey of the Brittonic languages* (Cambridge University Press, 1953), 155 n. 1.

certain at Clonmacnoise — and this means that where contexts are uncertain, present positions must be treated as probable rather than definitive. The second is equifinality: boundaries, routes, and vistas often attract monuments for a variety of overlapping reasons, making it difficult to determine whether their placement was deliberate or merely coincidental. For instance, a shrine located at a crossroads might have been intentionally sited to mark a territorial boundary, to serve travellers along a major route, or simply because the location offered a commanding view of the landscape. To address such ambiguities, comparative epigraphy and ecclesiastical topography provide complementary tools: inscriptions can reveal the intended audience or commemorative purpose of a monument, while spatial analysis of church sites and sacred landscapes can clarify whether its position reflects intentional design or incidental circumstance.

Building on Forsyth and Driscoll's account of monumental sculpture as a technology of visibility and control, the high crosses under discussion can be understood as instruments through which kings staged their power in the open, at symbolically charged—and sometimes contested—sites. Such acts of patronage and largesse, as Forsyth and Driscoll note, 'demonstrate [the kings'] control of economic and cultural resources, their relationship to ecclesiastical power structures and thereby their access to the saints.'<sup>361</sup> In this sense, the crosses became vehicles of political authority: their decoration visually encoded claims to power, at times made explicit in inscriptions. Crucially, their placement in the open, at 'symbolically significant locations,' ensured that these messages were maximally visible at strategic nodes in the landscape.<sup>362</sup> Forsyth and Driscoll further argue that such monastic associations were not incidental but formed part of a longer tradition of

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<sup>361</sup> Katherine Forsyth and Stephen Driscoll, 'Symbols of power,' *Territorial Sociedad y Poder* 2 (2009), 32.

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.*

rulers deliberately manipulating places of symbolic potency—whether pagan ritual sites, hill-forts, or ancestral foci—for political ends, a practice paralleled across Britain and the Continent between the eighth and eleventh centuries.<sup>363</sup>

This performative use of place intersects with an older epigraphic grammar. Ogham stones—often set at boundaries and graves—use genitive formulae (‘X son of Y’) to anchor memory, descent, and title to land; their inscriptions could function as object-witnesses in legal arguments over inheritance and territory.<sup>364</sup> The present chapter concentrates on the where and how of that legibility; the who (named kings, abbots, and saints) and the iconographic programmes that accompany them are treated in the preceding sections on Petrine imagery and royal inscriptions. As noted, scholars now recognise that ogham’s roles ranged from burial commemoration to devotional foci and boundary marking, with some stones contemporary with early free-standing crosses rather than simply antecedent to them. The upshot is that inscription, placement, and kinship language together constituted a practice of making authority legible in the landscape. In this light, the royal inscriptions on a small cluster of capstone high crosses look less like isolated anomalies and more like a deliberate, dynastic retooling of an established epigraphic-landscape tradition—scaled up, Christianised, and made public. This study’s original contribution is to identify and define that cluster as a coherent capstone-inscriptional group associated with the Uí Néill, and to show how its strategies of viewshed, capstone, and text cohere as a single political-theological programme rather than as scattered instances.

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<sup>363</sup> Ibid.

<sup>364</sup> Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland*, 38.

Within monastic precincts, siting is just as intentional. At the local level, the positioning of crosses within monastic sites demonstrates equally careful planning, and here, Clonmacnoise provides the clearest example (Figure 57).<sup>365</sup>

Archaeological excavation has shown that the site was laid out in concentric zones of access, echoing the divisions prescribed in the *Collectio canonum Hibernensis*:

There ought to be two or three *termini* around a holy place: the first in which we allow no one at all to enter except priests, because laymen do not come near it, nor women unless they are clerics; the second, into the streets the crowds of common people, not much given to wickedness, we allow to enter; the third, in which men who have been guilty of homicide, adulterers and prostitutes, with permission and according to custom, we do not prevent from going within. Whence they are called the first *sanctissimus*, the second *sanctior*, the third *sanctus*, bearing honour according to their differences.<sup>366</sup>

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<sup>365</sup> Conleth Manning, "Clonmacnoise Cathedral," *Clonmacnoise Studies Volume 1*, 57.

<sup>366</sup> Doherty, *The Monastic Town in Early Medieval Ireland*, i, 45-75; See: Adomnán, *Life of Columba* Book 1 Chapter 3 for a contemporary account.

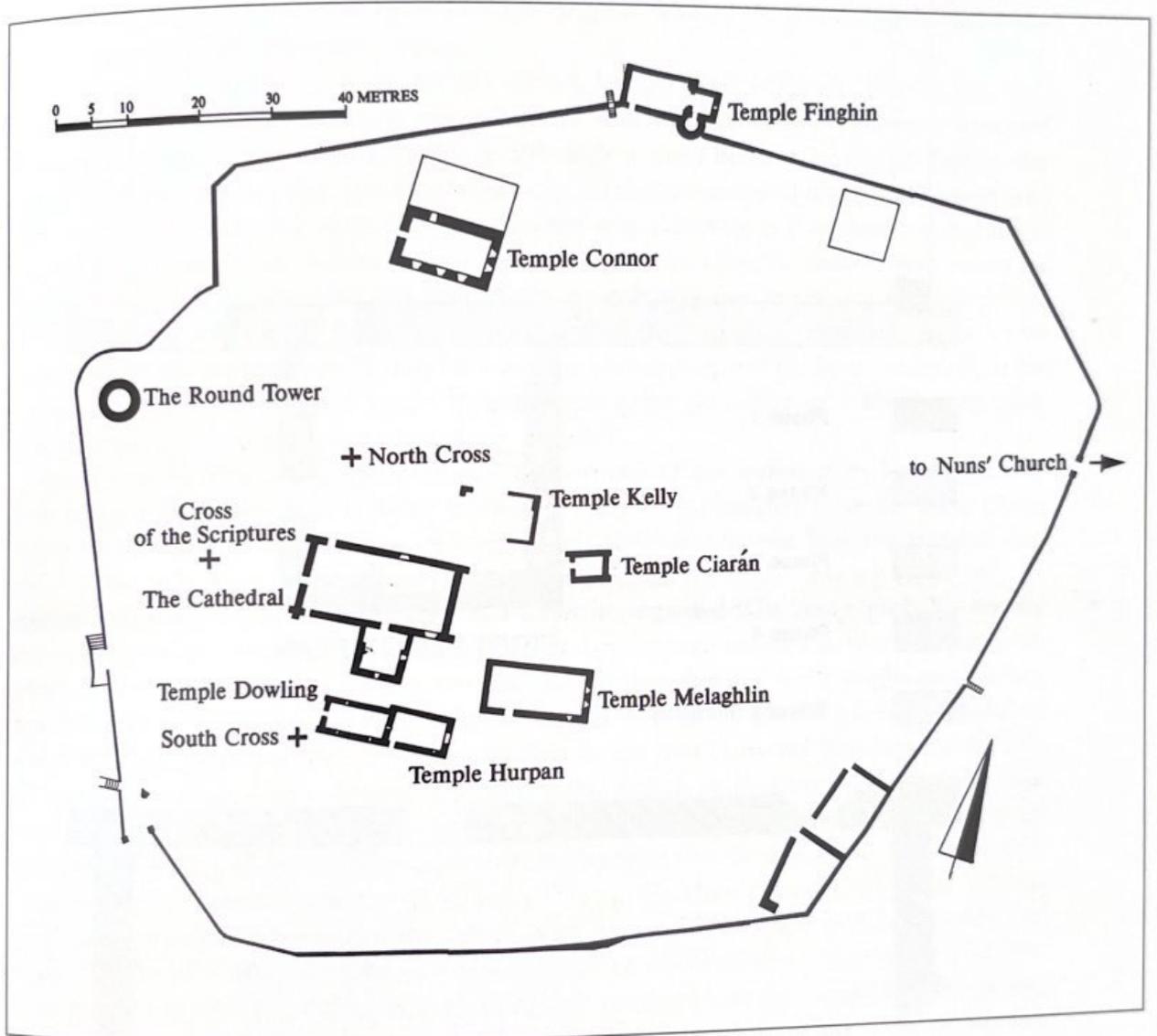


Figure 55: A plan of the old graveyard at Clonmacnoise

At the heart of Clonmacnoise stood Temple Ciarán, the shrine-tomb of the founder, tightly enclosed and reserved for the inner community. By contrast, the great stone crosses, including the celebrated Cross of the Scriptures with its capstone, were deliberately set at the western edge of the enclosure, in the *sanctus* zone. This placement ensured that the crosses could be encountered by the widest possible audience, including those excluded from the holiest precincts. Functionally, they extended the protective and intercessory power of the saint outward, projecting his presence into the most accessible and public part of the site.

The implications of this placement are significant. The great crosses, positioned in areas accessible even to those considered sinners, could be encountered by all who entered the monastery precinct. The contrast between the restricted shrine at the centre and the monumental crosses at the periphery suggests that the crosses functioned as public focal points of devotion and intercession, extending the spiritual authority of the saint into a more accessible space. The physical relationship between the capstone crosses, the monastic buildings, and the natural setting of the site along the River Shannon embeds these monuments into both the built and natural landscape. Similar questions of placement arise at Monasterboice. Although the original arrangement of the site is difficult to reconstruct because of later burial activity, the presence of multiple monumental crosses within the enclosure suggests that they, too, demanded space and visibility. Roger Stalley has observed that the tallest crosses, such as Muiredach's Cross, require distance in order to be viewed properly, implying that they were positioned with both their physical scale and visual impact in mind.<sup>296</sup> Even where the relationship with churches is now obscured, it seems unlikely that such carefully carved monuments were sited haphazardly.

The funerary and relic-related context of these sites adds a further dimension. Archaeological evidence demonstrates that early Christian cemeteries were organised concentrically around shrines, with the most desirable burials closest to relics. The layout of Clonmacnoise reflects this pattern, with the shrine of St Ciarán at its core and high-status burials radiating outward. By contrast, the monumental crosses with their capstones provided a fixed, visible focus for devotion in more accessible areas of the site. In this sense, they functioned like reliquaries in stone: immovable markers that extended the sanctity of the relics housed at the centre to the wider community. Processions, preaching stations, and penitential circuits likely moved to and around these nodes, yoking liturgy to landscape and

extending the saint's charisma into public space. Taken together, form, placement, and inscription coalesce into a single semiotic programme. Through our examination of the capstones on Irish high crosses, it becomes clear that these architectural elements function as profound semiotic markers, connecting the realms of the living and the divine. The capstones are positioned at the highest point of the cross, they occupy a distinct space, both physically and metaphorically—above the reach of pilgrims, yet fully visible, symbolising an intermediary between the earthly and the celestial. In their elevated form, the capstones signify the final stage of the spiritual journey, with their iconography guiding the faithful towards divine salvation. Their iconic forms—reminiscent of monastic huts, reliquaries, and tombs—serve as tangible symbols of the path to heaven, while also acting as indexical signs that point to the intercession of saints and the authority of the kings who commissioned them. Through these semiotic functions, the capstones reinforce the ongoing connection between the holy living and the holy dead, serving as permanent markers of both spiritual devotion and political power. Ultimately, the high crosses and their capstones transcend their material form. They become powerful symbols of the intercessory relationship between the sacred and the earthly, offering both spiritual guidance and political legitimacy. Through their design, their iconography, and their placement within sacred landscapes, these crosses acted as monumental reliquaries, shaping the religious and political narrative of early medieval Ireland. Just as relics were seen as conduits between the divine and the human, the capstones on these crosses guide the faithful towards heaven, reinforcing the unity of sacred and secular authority in the journey toward eternal salvation.

Yet reliquary logic was not their only meaning. At their summit, the

capstones also carried eschatological imagery—above all the Ascension—that made the crosses not only shrines of presence but beacons of salvation. The theme of salvation is vividly expressed through capstone carvings of a figure with arms raised in prayer, often read as Christ ascending to heaven, and this is seen on the capstone of Muiredach’s Cross at Monasterboice. This image, placed at the highest point of the monument, represents the culmination of the spiritual journey: the moment where Christ’s earthly mission ends and divine grace is made available to all believers. Angelic figures, sometimes shown alongside him, deepen this symbolism by acting as guides between earth and heaven, reinforcing the hope that through prayer and devotion the faithful too might be received into the divine presence. The so-called ‘disappearing feet’ motif, well known in manuscript depictions of the Ascension, and present on Muiredach’s Cross, offers a parallel. In such images, only Christ’s feet remain visible as he departs from earthly sight, symbolising both absence and promise: his body gone from earth, his presence assured in heaven. The capstone works in the same way—marking the threshold between the temporal and the eternal, the final step of the spiritual ascent. Just as relics acted as conduits of divine power, so the capstone signalled the believer’s passage from earthly life to eternal grace.

This interpretation aligns closely with early medieval Irish perceptions of the afterlife, where salvation was imagined less as a single moment of judgement than as an ongoing journey of ascent. Elizabeth Boyle notes that pre-tenth-century texts often describe Purgatory as part of Hell, but one from which souls might eventually be freed—a realm with ‘purgatorial qualities’ rather than endless doom.<sup>367</sup>

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<sup>367</sup> Elizabeth Boyle, “The Afterlife in the Medieval Celtic-Speaking World,” in *Imagining the Medieval Afterlife*, ed. by Richard Matthew Pollard (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 65.

Similarly, Bede's vision of Drythelm likewise recounts a landscape of zones: places of fire and frost for those in need of cleansing, pits of damnation for the irredeemable, and beautiful meadows for those awaiting perfection before entering heaven.<sup>368</sup> Adomnán's *Vision* goes further, describing souls ascending through 'seven heavens,' each with its own guardian angel and threshold, where they are either cleansed or damned:

Seldom indeed may a spirit, after its converse and co—habitation with the body, in slumber and repose, in freedom and luxury, win its way to the throne of the Creator, unguided of the angels; for hard of essay are the seven heavens, nor is any one of them easier than the rest. Six guarded doors confront all those of mortal race who reach the Kingdom. There sits a porter and warder of the Heavenly Host, keeping guard over each door.<sup>369</sup>

Such accounts portray the afterlife as a dynamic process of testing and transition.

Against this background, the capstone's elevated imagery would have carried immediate resonance. The crosses did not merely commemorate Christ's past Ascension; they mapped the believer's own hoped-for ascent, stage by stage, toward salvation. The sequence of panels on many crosses—with their narrative transitions and fluid movement from one register to another—echoes this idea, as though the very design of the monument was a roadmap of spiritual progress. From base to shaft to capstone, the cross mirrors the ascent of the soul: beginning in the earthly realm, moving upward through biblical exempla and intercessory petitions,

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<sup>368</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 253–58 (V.12).

<sup>369</sup> *Fis Adamnán* (*The Vision of Adamnán*), trans. by C. S. Boswell, Medieval Irish Series (In Parentheses, 1999), 6.

and culminating in the threshold to heaven marked by the capstone itself.

In this light, the capstone becomes a spiritual beacon. It is the highest and most visible point of the monument, the visual completion of the cross's theology in stone. Just as Christ's feet disappear into heaven in the Ascension motif, so the capstone stands as the final sign, the last step between earth and divine grace. For pilgrims at sites such as Monasterboice, Killamery, and Clonmacnoise, the journey to the cross and the act of prayer before its capstone could be understood as participation in that ascent. The patron's name carved below, and the Ascension depicted above, created a single continuum of meaning: sovereignty under God, sanctity in stone, and salvation made locally accessible.

### **Pilgrimage**

To understand the capstone high crosses as intercessory monuments, we must also consider pilgrimage. In early medieval thought, pilgrimage was not only the physical journey to a holy site but a metaphor for the soul's journey toward God. For Irish Christians, who were often unable to travel to Rome or Jerusalem, monuments at home could serve as substitutes, offering access to the same promises of intercession and salvation. The capstone crosses—raised in public sanctus zones, crowned with reliquary-like roofs, and inscribed with royal names—operated as *localised pilgrimage stations*. They translated the prestige of the great centres of Christendom into the Irish landscape, so that kings and commoners alike could encounter in miniature what Rome and Jerusalem embodied at scale.

Unsurprisingly, Rome was the great magnet for pilgrimage in the West, and pilgrims flocked to the tombs of Peter and Paul from the second century, seeking

intercession from the apostles.<sup>370</sup> By the sixth century, access to relics there was tightly controlled, but devotion flourished through ampullae of oil and other tokens carried away by the faithful.<sup>371</sup> Jerusalem held even greater symbolic prestige: the Holy Sepulchre and the Anastasis rotunda embodied Christ's death and resurrection, and to stand there was to stand at the axis of salvation history. Irish pilgrims almost certainly travelled to Rome by the seventh century, and the wider Christian imagination of Jerusalem was well known through texts and liturgy.<sup>372</sup> Yet the logistical and political difficulties of long-distance pilgrimage meant that for most, access to these holy places was impossible.

Ireland therefore developed its own pilgrimage traditions. In the sixth and seventh centuries, *peregrinatio pro Christo*—pilgrimage as exile—saw saints such as Columbanus and Fursey leave Ireland as spiritual wanderers, their journeys conceived as living pilgrimages toward God.<sup>373</sup> By the eighth and ninth centuries, however, pilgrimage had become more structured and site-focused.<sup>374</sup> Monastic saints like Patrick, Brigid, and Ciarán drew devotion to their shrines, and penitential circuits around monasteries mirrored the stages of spiritual ascent. Viking disruption reinforced this localisation: when long-distance travel grew dangerous, Irish monasteries invested heavily in their own sacred landscapes.<sup>375</sup> Rather than a

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<sup>370</sup> Peter Harbison, *Pilgrimage in Ireland: The Monuments and the People* (Barrie and Jenkins, 1991), 15.

<sup>371</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>372</sup> Ora Limor, "Willibald in the Holy Places' in *East and West in the Early Middle Ages: The Merovingian Kingdoms in Mediterranean Perspective*," ed. By Stefan Esders, Yaniv Fox, Yitzhak Hen and Laury Sarti (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 230.

<sup>373</sup> Kathleen Hughes, "The Changing Theory and Practice of Irish Pilgrimage," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 11 (1960): 144–48.

<sup>374</sup> Hughes, "The Changing Theory and Practice of Irish Pilgrimage," 144–146.

<sup>375</sup> Hughes, "The Changing Theory and Practice of Irish Pilgrimage," 146–50.

generic journey to relics, early Irish pilgrimage was an experiential making of sacred space—penitential rounds, boundary circuits, preaching stations—performed in the sanctus zone where access was broad. Capstones clarify that economy: they are visual shrine-beacons that anchor those movements, concentrating prayer at thresholds and outer precincts where most people stood. In this sense, pilgrims did not just come to a fixed holy locus; through ritual circuits around capped crosses, they made the locus palpable, re-inscribing site, saint, and sovereignty with every pass. Against this background, the capstone cross emerges as a powerful surrogate. Its reliquary form, often evoking house-shrines or miniature domes, signalled the presence of the saint; its Petrine imagery proclaimed apostolic succession; and its accessibility in outer precincts ensured that even those excluded from the holiest spaces could encounter its power.

In this sense, the capstone crosses condensed pilgrimage into stone. They provided a visible, permanent focus for prayer and intercession, positioned where pilgrims and lay visitors could approach, touch, and circle them. The capstones themselves reinforced this meaning: their forms recalled reliquaries and tombs, their iconography evoked the cult of relics, the Ascension, and the heavenly city, and their elevated placement suggested the culmination of spiritual journey. For the faithful, standing before such a cross was a form of pilgrimage: a local ascent from base to shaft to capstone, from earth to heaven. At the same time, these monuments served dynastic strategies. Just as pilgrims scratched their names into Roman catacombs to seek apostolic intercession, Irish kings had their names carved beneath Petrine panels, situating themselves within salvation history. The faithful encountered a cross that promised access to heaven; the king's name inscribed upon it proclaimed who held authority on earth. Together, form, iconography, and

inscription fused local and universal pilgrimage: the monument was both shrine and charter, reliquary and dynastic stage.

In short, the capstone crosses of Ireland were more than decorated stone. They were pilgrimage stations in the landscape, accessible to all, where kingship and sanctity were bound together. They brought Rome and Jerusalem into Irish soil, materialising intercession, sovereignty, and salvation in a single monumental form.

#### 4.1 Conclusion: Capstones as Intercessory Architecture

The physical relationship between carved stone, monastic architecture, and natural features—rivers, ridges, and paths—produced landscapes thick with meaning. Placed at boundaries, entrances, and outer precincts, the high crosses were encountered at thresholds of all kinds: between lay and monastic, earthly and divine, sinner and saint. Their siting ensured that they operated not only as theological statements but also as territorial and dynastic markers, inscribing both spiritual and political control into the very fabric of the landscape. Funerary and relic practice reinforces this spatial theology: just as cemeteries clustered concentrically around saints' shrines, so too the monumental crosses offered fixed foci of devotion in more accessible zones. In this sense, the capstone cross behaves like a reliquary in stone—immovable, visible, and efficacious at the edge where most people could stand, touch, and pray. Processions, preaching stations, and penitential circuits likely moved to and around these monuments, making them hinges between liturgy and landscape.

The power of the high cross lies as much in where it stands and who sees it there as in what it depicts. Boundaries, routes, rivers, and precinct edges turned each monument into a public stage where sanctity and sovereignty were performed. With this frame in place, the content of the crosses—royal names, Petrine panels, Ascension imagery, numerically structured decoration—can be read as messages optimised for that stage. Their grammar is

holistic: decoration choreographs the eye and embeds number as divine order; iconography translates scripture and exegesis into stone; inscriptions anchor these claims in dynastic names and prayer formulae; and siting ensures that all these messages were visible to audiences ranging from kings and clerics to pilgrims, penitents, and local communities.

What emerges is a pattern rather than a scatter of anomalies. This chapter's original contribution is to identify and define a capstone–inscriptional group associated with the Uí Néill, and to demonstrate that its elements—form, ornament, iconography, text, and placement—interlock as a deliberate political-theological strategy. Far from being decorative flourishes, the capstones themselves miniaturise reliquaries, oratories, and the *domus Dei*. Their gabled and domed silhouettes evoke Jerusalem, the Holy Sepulchre, and the heavenly city, ‘roofing’ the cross as a tabernacle in stone. Elevated above all else, they gave the monuments their theological summit, crowning them as shrines in the open air, reliquaries accessible to all. The iconographic programmes reinforce this reading. Panels on these monuments are not miscellaneous decoration but tightly coordinated theological statements. The *Traditio Clavium* links rulers to Petrine succession; David-as-Psalmist frames kingship under divine law; and Ascension imagery crowns the whole with a vision of salvation. The vertical flow of imagery—from biblical exempla at the base through apostolic authority on the shaft to the Ascension at the summit—mirrors the believer's own hoped-for ascent, transforming the cross into a roadmap of spiritual progress. Ornament and geometry participate in this structure: hidden crosses, spiral symmetries, and patterned repetitions rehearse themes of eternity, harmony, and renewal, ensuring that even non-figural decoration carried doctrinal weight.

The inscriptions anchor these theological claims in dynastic politics. Unlike most high crosses, which remain anonymous, this cluster names kings in the prayer formula ‘orait do....’ Inscriptions for Máel Sechnaill, Flann Sinna, and their associates reframe

descent and title into prayer and accountability: ‘pray for the king’ rather than merely ‘remember the king.’ Carved into sacred fabric, the inscriptions inserted secular sovereignty into liturgical space, welding dynastic legitimacy to sanctity. The rhetorical force is clear: kingship is presented not as brute power but as divinely sanctioned office, accountable to God and mediated through prayer. By inscribing themselves beneath Petrine imagery and beneath capstones evoking relic-shrines, Uí Néill rulers presented their reigns as both locally anchored and universally authorised. The strategic siting of these monuments further amplified their claims. At Clonmacnoise, for instance, the Cross of the Scriptures was placed in the sanctus zone—open to the widest audience, even those excluded from the holiest precincts. Other sites, such as Monasterboice or the Ahenny group, were positioned at rivers, boundaries, or routes where their visibility was maximised. In such contexts, crosses became instruments of communication at scale: monumental proclamations of dynastic authority and theological promise encountered not only by monastic elites but also by pilgrims, penitents, and passers-by.

Taken together, these elements—form, decoration, imagery, inscription, and placement—constitute a monumental grammar, and within this, the capstone is the hinge. It crowns the monument as reliquary, marks the Ascension as theological climax, and embodies the threshold between temporal and eternal. It transforms the high cross into an intercessory architecture: a medium where the saint’s presence, the king’s authority, and Christ’s promise of salvation converge. This synthesis reframes the capstone crosses not as eccentric variations but as the product of a programmatic Uí Néill project, a monumental type designed to fuse kingship with sanctity in the most public of ways. It shows how Irish rulers and their monastic allies developed complementary strategies: sometimes elevating the living king beneath apostolic imagery, at other times monumentalising saints and dynastic patrons. Both converge in the capstone cross as a dynastic instrument of sacred

power. Finally, by integrating Ascension imagery and reliquary form with images of saints, inscriptional and spatial strategies, these monuments make a striking theological claim. They are not static memorials but active loci of intercession: monumental shrines where heaven and earth meet, where sovereignty is bound to sanctity, and where the faithful are invited to participate in the ascent to salvation. In this way, the capstone high crosses stand at the centre of a uniquely Irish experiment in political theology: stone instruments through which rulers, saints, and communities together enacted the grammar of Christian kingship under God.

Capstones thus complete the cross's work as intercessory architecture. They translate portable shrine-logics into a fixed, public crown; they make Jerusalem local while proclaiming the founder's continuing presence; and they stage ecclesiastical claims in the very spaces where people could touch, circle, and pray. In Ireland's dynamic sacral geography, capstones are the immovable nodes that hold the web together: miniature martyria whose form, placement, and iconography bind text, cult, and power into one visible summit.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

Of the approximately sixty—five surviving Irish high crosses, only around ten possess extant capstones or structural evidence suggesting they were once present. This makes capstones a rare but significant feature—appearing on around ten crosses—yet they are consistently found at major ecclesiastical and dynastic centres: Ahenny, Kilkieran, Killamery, Durrow, Kells, Clonmacnoise, and Monasterboice. These sites were not randomly distributed; they were carefully selected nodes in a network of political affiliation, territorial control, and religious prestige. Despite this pattern, capstones have often been overlooked in scholarly discourse, relegated to the status of decorative finials. This thesis has argued the opposite: This thesis has argued the opposite: that capstones were integral to the high cross programme—multivalent devices that mediated between sacred and secular, between political authority and saintly intercession, and between earth and heaven itself.

### 5.1 Reframing the Capstone: Visual Form and Theological Function

Capstones were not relics, nor did they contain relics, but they operated as reliquary analogues—visual surrogates that gestured toward divine presence. Their elevated position crowned the monument and drew the viewer’s gaze upward, marking the summit of a spiritual journey inscribed in stone. Their resemblance to architectural reliquaries, shrine-chapels, or domed sanctuaries connected them to traditions of relic veneration and sacred architecture. At the same time, their very visibility and accessibility to the laity, unlike relics hidden within shrines, allowed capstones to democratise intercession. They stood as permanent, public reliquaries in stone—objects where sanctity was encountered not through physical relics but through monumental form and communal devotion. Rather than semiotic abstractions,

capstones should be understood through the multivalent lens of medieval reception. As Jennifer O'Reilly, Gregory the Great, and Michael Camille remind us, religious images in the early medieval period were 'read' as sacred texts by audiences attuned to theological meaning. To a monk, a capstone might evoke the shrine of a founder-saint; to a pilgrim, it could act as a surrogate Jerusalem; to a king, it proclaimed dynastic legitimacy under divine sanction. The openness of the form was its power: it invited layered readings, shifting with audience, context, and liturgical use.

Throughout early medieval Ireland, kings and ecclesiastical leaders sought legitimacy through association with saints, and the capstones extended this strategy in stone. Inscriptions naming rulers such as Máel Sechnaill and Flann Sinna inserted dynastic authority directly into sacred space, where the community was invited to pray for the king's soul. These names did not stand alone: they were placed alongside carefully chosen biblical and apostolic imagery. David as psalmist framed kingship within divine law, thanksgiving, and just rule. The *Traditio Clavium* proclaimed apostolic succession, visually tethering Irish kingship to Petrine authority and Rome itself. To place a royal name beneath Peter's keys was to claim, in stone, that Irish sovereignty was sanctioned as apostolic office.

When combined with these inscriptions and panels, the capstone tradition emerges as a crowning feature that reinforced sovereignty and sanctity alike. It rests on two distinct but complementary architectural models. House-shaped capstones drew on the language of reliquaries, tomb chapels, and oratories. Their pitched roofs mirrored house-shaped shrines such as the Moneymusk or Emly reliquaries—objects designed to contain saints' remains. Transposed into stone, these capstones acted as visible reliquaries: not containers of relics, but forms that invoked them. In this context, they reinforced monastic authority and the cult of the holy dead, while

also aligning dynastic power with institutional sanctity. Beehive-shaped capstones, by contrast, recall not clocháin but Jerusalem itself. Their domed profiles echoed the Anastasis rotunda of the Holy Sepulchre and the celestial city of Revelation. They were miniature Jerusalems in stone—eschatological markers that transformed Irish landscapes into pilgrimage surrogates. In an age when few could travel to Rome or Jerusalem, these monuments condensed pilgrimage, relic, and salvation into a single monumental form. Together, these two forms represent complementary models of sanctity. The house-shaped cap evoked the authority of the holy dead and relic cults; the beehive-shaped cap evoked the eschatological hope of the holy city. Rather than competing, they reflect the pluralism of Irish Christianity, where multiple theologies of holiness coexisted and found expression in the same monumental tradition. A single cross could at once recall relics, invoke Jerusalem, proclaim dynastic legitimacy, and—at its summit—display the Ascension, visually completing the journey from earth to heaven.

At the summit of the cross, Ascension imagery gave visual form to salvation itself. Christ rising in glory, sometimes rendered in the ‘disappearing feet’ motif, staged the climactic transition from earth to heaven. For Irish audiences shaped by visions of the afterlife as an ascent through heavens or purgatorial stages, these capstones offered both map and promise. Just as Christ rose to heaven, so too might the faithful, guided by intercession and bound to the community of saints. From David at the base, through Peter and the high king in the middle, to Christ ascending at the summit, the high cross staged a vertical programme of kingship, intercession, and salvation. The capstone was the eschatological climax of this ascent, marking not only the top of the cross but the hope of eternal grace. Capstone crosses were also spatial instruments. Strategically

sited at boundaries, river crossings, and monastic thresholds, they inscribed sanctity into the landscape. At Clonmacnoise, crosses were placed not in the inner sanctissimus but in the outer sanctus, accessible even to sinners. In doing so, they democratized intercession, offering access to divine favour in public space. Their scale, elevation, and viewsheds ensured maximum visibility. Processions, penitential circuits, and everyday passage brought audiences into contact with them, making the capstone a hinge between liturgy and landscape. Kings, monks, pilgrims, and lay penitents could each encounter these monuments at different levels of meaning, reinforcing their multivalence.

## 5.2 Contribution and Future Discussions

This thesis has offered the first sustained and systematic treatment of capstones as intentional, multilayered components of the high cross programme. While earlier scholars have laid essential groundwork—Roger Stalley’s influential studies highlighted inscriptions as instruments of royal and ecclesiastical commemoration, Jennifer O’Reilly illuminated biblical iconography and exegetical traditions, and Katherine Forsyth and Stephen Driscoll examined monumental sculpture as technologies of visibility and control—none has considered the capstone as the point where these different strands converge. This study argues that the capstone is not a mere flourish at the summit of the cross but the theological and rhetorical climax of the monument, where inscription, iconography, and architectural form cohere into a single, unified programme.

The originality of this study lies in three interrelated claims: firstly, it identifies for the first time a coherent ‘capstone group’: a cluster of monuments at Uí Néill and allied centres—including Durrow, Kells, Clonmacnoise, and Monasterboice—where capstones, inscriptions, and iconography operate together

in ways that are too consistent to be accidental. These monuments reveal a deliberate political-theological programme in which dynastic patrons inscribed themselves into the same monumental logic that celebrated saints, apostles, and Christ himself. In this light, the capstone is not a decorative oddity but an integral part of how the Uí Néill materialised their authority in sacred and public space.

The thesis also reframes the capstone as a reliquary-analogue and eschatological marker. Previous scholarship often treated capstones as ornamental closures, but here they are shown to be visible reliquaries in stone—monuments that, like shrines, mediated access to the holy. Their forms recall reliquaries, oratories, and the rotunda of the Holy Sepulchre; their elevated placement crowned the cross as a miniature Jerusalem and visualised the hope of salvation. Capstones, therefore, were not static architectural devices but dynamic signs of intercession, functioning simultaneously as relic surrogates, pilgrimage substitutes, and eschatological thresholds for a wide range of audiences.

Finally, the study demonstrates that the capstone integrates form, inscription, and image into a unified grammar of sovereignty, sanctity, and salvation. At the base of the cross, David as psalmist established kingship under divine law. In the shaft and arms, the *Traditio Clavium* proclaimed apostolic succession and alignment with Rome. Inscriptions named dynastic patrons, embedding their memory and legitimacy in sacred stone. At the summit, the Ascension proclaimed salvation itself. Crowned by the capstone, these elements together created a monumental rhetoric in which intercession, kingship, and eschatology were staged as a single coherent programme.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that the capstone cross was not an assemblage of disparate parts but a carefully orchestrated monument. Its power

lay in the way multiple registers of meaning—biblical, liturgical, political, architectural—were layered into a single form. The capstone marked the theological summit of this rhetoric: the point where the viewer's gaze and the monument's message converged, lifting attention and devotion from earth to heaven.

This thesis has laid the foundations for a new understanding of Irish high crosses and their capstones, but it also opens fertile paths for further exploration. Comparative Insular studies could situate Irish capstone crosses within a wider network of Insular and Continental monuments. Did Wales, Scotland, or Northumbria develop analogous forms of architectural crowns, reliquary analogues, or Jerusalem surrogates? Or is the Irish corpus uniquely invested in capstone theology? Extending the framework across the Insular world could reveal whether the Irish crosses were exceptional innovations or part of broader Christian strategies of monumentalisation. In addition, material and technical analysis of capstones themselves—examining carving techniques, stone selection, tool marks, weathering, and structural integration—could clarify whether they were conceived as integral to the cross from the outset or added as later enhancements. Were they carved by the same hands as the cross shafts and panels, or by different workshops? Such analysis could illuminate artisanal networks and the material choices underpinning theological form. Similarly, digital reconstructions and modelling offer another promising avenue. Several major monuments, including those at Kells, survive without their original capstones. Using 3D modelling, photogrammetry, and augmented reality, scholars could reconstruct missing elements, test hypotheses about their iconographic relationships with the body of the cross and assess how their elevated presence shaped visual and devotional experience. These reconstructions could also be used to simulate processional and

pilgrimage encounters, bringing audiences into contact with monuments as they once stood.

Audience and access remain a critical field of inquiry. This study has argued that capstone crosses operated at multiple registers for kings, monks, pilgrims, and laity, but more work is needed to explore how these monuments were experienced across lines of gender, class, and ecclesiastical status. How did women, penitents, or marginalised groups engage with these monuments? What kinds of intercession or spiritual benefits were imagined for different audiences, and how might spatial access have shaped those encounters? Finally, landscape theology offers a way to extend the analysis outward from the monuments themselves into the terrain they transformed. GIS mapping, landscape archaeology, and historical geography could trace how capstone crosses were positioned at borders, thresholds, pilgrimage routes, and burial grounds. Such work could illuminate how these monuments sacralised landscapes, making rivers, roads, and boundaries into visible Jerusalem's in stone.

Together, these directions underline a central point: capstones are not the conclusion of a monument but the beginning of a larger framework for understanding how theology, politics, and community were materialised in stone. Far from being decorative afterthoughts, capstones open the door to new comparative, technical, and landscape-based studies of early medieval sacred culture.

## Final Thoughts

The capstone, perched silently at the summit of Ireland's most enduring monuments, is more than an architectural flourish. It is a visual theology—a relic

without contents, a reliquary of stone, a signpost of divine intercession and cosmic aspiration. It anchors sanctity in the landscape while guiding the eye, and the soul, upward. Its power lies in ambiguity: it contains nothing, yet points to everything. As the faithful approached these crosses—whether kings, monks, or penitents—they encountered not just images, but a spiritual ascent carved in stone. The capstone crowned that journey, marking not only the top of the cross but the threshold of heaven itself. In their stillness, these stones speak: of relics unseen, of saints remembered, of rulers remembered, of a sacred world made visible—just for a moment—between earth and sky.

Ultimately, the capstone stands as more than a block of stone—it is the theological summit of the high cross, a beacon of intercession, a signpost of salvation, and a testament to the layered visual culture of early medieval Ireland. It invites the faithful not only to look upward, but to journey upward: from the visible to the invisible, from the temporal to the eternal. It is both relic and reliquary, both absence and presence, both architecture and icon. And in this ambiguity, it finds its greatest power—standing quietly, at the top of the world, reaching between heaven and earth.

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