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IRISH PAGAN and EARLY CHRISTIAN
ART to the PERIOD A.D. 800

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Fine Art Painting

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INTRODUCTION

In the last centuries before Christ the culture of the La Tène Iron Age reached Ireland, so profoundly affecting its artistic tradition that some of the motifs then introduced were to be found in use nearly a thousand years later. It was under the hands of the Christian artists that Irish art was to reach its pinnacle in the La Tène tradition. Although Ireland is an island lying off the extreme west of Europe, the art at no time exhibits the narrow insularity which might be expected to result from such geographical isolation. While developing, in prehistoric and historic times, its own interior lines of evolution, it remained an integral part of the European tradition, although the individual sources from which it drew its inspiration varied from one period to another. Inspiration from abroad, however, rarely entailed merely the adoption of a foreign idiom. The native tradition generally proved vigorous enough to shape and develop the new styles and new ideas into something with a character unmistakably Irish.

I wish to trace, in this text, the development of the pagan La Tène heritage into the early Christian art up to A.D. 800. Taking also into account the effects of the Roman Empire, the Saxon and Germanic invasions and the re-established contact, under the missionaries, with Europe and Britain. I have decided to examine only none figurative art, as the old La Tène tradition in Ireland is almost only concerned with abstract patterns and symbols.

For the prehistoric period, the material has been dealt with, as far as possible, in order of date using known facts and comparisons, but these can be misleading and therefore dating is usually only guess work. Also in the Christian period and especially with stone carving there is very little to compare with on the continent and few people seem to agree to set dates for objects, so most dating again is only an approximation.

PRE-CHRISTIAN ART IN IRELAND

Ireland has a small but striking collection of La Tène art objects and this art style stretches in an almost unbroken tradition, despite obvious modification, through to medieval times with the art of the christian monks. Stones, metalwork and manuscripts are laden with lavish decoration. The monks worked as hard to glorify God as their predecessors did to express their pagan feelings towards their deities of the ancient world. Sometimes pagan elements are incorporated and express pre-christian beliefs. This may indicate a reluctance by the artist to totally shake off the past traditions which had been so important to his fore-fathers.

We do not know for certain at what time the Celts first arrived in Ireland or where they came from or in what numbers. But the La Tène art style was certainly introduced to Ireland from Celtic regions abroad. It is, however, uncertain how it arrived and when. Anne Ross places the first wave of La Tène Celts or immigrants around the second or third centuries B.C. These people moved westwards, maybe coming direct from the continent. The next wave is placed in the second century B.C. and these came as invaders from Britian, settling in Northern Ireland 1. This immigration accounts for the presence in Ireland of two groups of La Tène peoples and would account for the fact that the Táin Bó Cúailnge, the earliest Irish epic tale, is concerned with the traditional rivalry between the inhabitants of Connacht in the west and those of Ulster in the north-east. They accounted as the reason for the sudden blossoming of La Tène art in the North of Ireland. However once established the traditions of La Tène decoration flourished and developed to reach the highest levels of technical and artistic skills. This appearance of La Tène art gave a renewed surge to the artistic development of our country and was to last for nearly a millennium as our dominant artistic expression. The splendid

surviving metalwork tends to obscure the fact that we know little about its production. No metalworking centres have been found yet, nor have we a single metalworking tool of iron age date from this country. All we do have are a few unfinished castings, some scraps of waste material and what few remains of finished pieces there are.

One of the dominant principles ruling the decoration of these objects was based on the compass, which can have a great virtuosity under a skilled hand. This belonged to the first phase of La Tène art ornamentation, although with most forms of decoration from this time it is very difficult to give an exact date or order to their development. Many forms of Irish ornamentation find their origins in Germanic or Briti-Romano styles. After the turn of the millennium this art style, almost totally dependant on compass or curviliniar designs, spread to all areas in the Irish La Tène province. Ornament can be either two dimensional or in the round, but there is always considerable continuity in the treatment of the design, no matter what the medium used. The two most important sites which have produced this particular characteristic material are Lough Crew and Sommerset. The two dimensional element of the style can be fully seen on the bone flakes (Ph.1) found at Lough Crew, Co. Meath. Both of these bone flakes incorporate the feature of rotational symmetry, which is a continuous linking around a single point by rotating the design by 180° to superimpose it on the opposite side. This can be linked to Graeco-Roman influence and owes its spread to the Celts raids on Greek and Etruscan towns and with the presence of the continental Celts south of the river Po. Then arriving in Ireland via trade and travelling smiths or when the Gauls fled the conquests of Rome and Caesar to Ireland via the old trade route between the continent and the tin and gold mines of Cornwall and Ireland. Also produced on the bone flake, to the right, is a yin-yang effect made by the positioning of an 's'

form in the centre of the circle. We can see how these bone flakes were used as complex working drawings to be used later with other variations and methods. A wide variety could be achieved by moving the compass point or varying the length of radius. There can be arcs and circles, in some cases overlapping to provide a mesh design. there are broken backed curves, pointed oval motifs (lobes) and leafy zig-zags. Arcs arranged within a circle could give you a triskele (Ph.2) or even a rosette.

Also the compass could be used directly onto the surface of the object. The use of a compass has left clear marks, though this does not lead to an overall balance, on a bronze mount or 'box' found at Sommerset, Co. Galway. This object also gives an example of its use in the round. The material from the hoard found at Sommerset is stylistically and chronologically compatible with that of Lough Crew. From the centre of the 'box' there have been drawn two concentric circles, one of which forms the parimeter of the object, while the other contains the decorated area. Another centre slightly apart from the previous, which is seen clearly, has been used to draw a series of incomplete circles. These alternatively contain stippling. The space left between the widest of these circles and the parimeter of the decorated area, has been divided into two uneven zones, one in relief, the other covered entirely in stippling. A low relief disc imposed on the engraved circles completes this abstract design which is solely based on drawn arcs (Ph.3).

'The finest of the La Tène scabbards from the British Isles do in fact come from Northern Ireland.....scabbards from Lisnacrogger illustrate this clearly'². Lisnacrogger itself is an extremely interesting site, in County Antrim. It consisted of a Low mount, supposedly a crannóg, in a bog in which a hoard of objects were originally destroyed and robbed by a collected. There were three bronze scabbards found and a further three were found in the river Bann at Toome and Coleraine nearby (Ph.4,5). Also, an

interesting piece from Lisnacrogher is the sword pommel (Ph.6) which is decorated by a pair of small birds (maybe ravens) in the round and with a band of red enamel through it. This site was alleged to have been a votive site and the presence of this object (the ravens having obvious cult implications, as with Mácha a goddess of war that appeared in the guise of a raven), along with its situation in a bog, helps to strengthen that theory. One surviving scabbard from Lisnacrogher (Ph.5) has many affinities with the slightly later British scabbard from Bugthorpe, although the latter had already discarded the marnian (from the river Marne) motifs while they remain in the Lisnacrogher piece. The scabbards from the river Bann (Ph.4) are also closely related, and Dillon is of the opinion that these objects could have been the product of a single workshop 3. Nothing comparable is known from any other part of Ireland and this suggests a link with the continent. Also note the hatching and basketry on most of the scabbards, these provide another link with British and continental scabbards (a scabbard found at Fovant Wiltshire matches exactly). A 'rocked tracer' technique was employed to produce these hatchings which enjoyed a wider useage in the west than on the continent. A fold-over symmetry was also employed on three of the scabbards found (Ph.4 no. 1,2,4) and wave tendrils are used successfully (Ph.4 no. 4,6). These tendrils end in tightly coiled spirals on two of the river Bann scabbards. The scabbard (Ph.5) from Lisnacrogher has its finishing tendrils ending like a dragon or bird head. That is, it contains a tightly coiled spiral as an eye and a lobe for a beak or jaw. These can be traced in the 'Waldalgesheim Style' and again links them with Britian and the continent. But even if they are later than their continental parallels, they still have to be dated to the last and second last centuries before Christ. They allow us a glimpse into a workshop where La Tène art was 'known not as a few patterns, but in its very spirit' 4 as Françoise Henry put it. The pieces were produced very skillfully by work which was more than simple engraving and includes zones with serrated edges and tightly coiled spirals. Other curvilinear

patterns can be seen on the horsetrappings found at Attymon (Ph.7) (Galway) of very simple tracery, and comes much nearer to the true spirit of La Tène art. These feature triskele, palmettes and the employment of fold-over symmetry in a very easy flowing design. According to Henry these are not easy to date but interesting as examples which show a sensitive feeling for line and modelling, characteristic of the Celtic craftsmen in Ireland.

From the early period enamelling was an essential Celtic technique known and practised with great skill. The small object or sword pommel, already mentioned (Ph.6) found at Lisnacrogger shows two birds sitting over a band of red enamel through which run wavy lines of bronze. These zig zags running through a narrow piece of enamel are also found at Autun, on objects dated to the conquest of Caesar and this helps to approximate a date for the Irish objects. Another enamelled object of importance was found in 1959 at Sommerset (Galway). It is a small bronze disc of relief and openwork, and still holds a filling of red opaque glass which shows through the openings of a bronze grille.

The process of its decoration consists in placing in a clay mould, into which it fits exactly, a little boss of openwork bronze. Enamel or molten glass is then introduced in the cavities formed by the cuts in the bronze surface and is often held in place by a small ball of clay. This was probably a way of avoiding the difficulty of enamelling a rounded surface.5

A slightly later stage in the evolution of the Irish La Tène objects is supplied by the cemetery on Lambay Island (Dublin Bay). Tombs were discovered there when in 1927 a landing quay was being rebuilt. The objects did survive but very little record was kept of the find content. What was found, was, that during the first century A.D. there was an influx of Roman and Brito-Roman objects. There was a Roman brooch and the presence

of an exact copy by a local craftsman who cast it in one piece, so the pin holds to the catch and cannot be used. This shows the trend or willingness of the Irish artists to copy or incorporate outside influences into their own work and how these objects helped the development of La Tène art, by importation into Ireland. Techniques were also introduced. One of the most obvious and striking is the manufacture of sticks of millefiori glass whose segments were combined with champlevé in Gallo-Roman enamelling. These reappear, used in a similar way, in Irish metalwork.

La Tène patterns can be at their most beautiful when they exist in three-dimensional form, achieved most frequently by use of the repoussé technique. One of the most splendid objects decorated in this manner is the Broighter collar (Ph.8). The collar bears a beautiful curvilinear design in high relief, executed in the repoussé technique. The motifs employed are trumpet patterns, lobe or lentoid bosses and 'snail shell coils' of the 'Plastic Style'. The relief surfaces were highly finished while the background was inscribed with a mesh of compass drawn arcs to allow a greater play between the two surfaces. This piece owes much to the influence of the continental Celts in its motifs and techniques, especially the style named after the grave at Waldalgesheim. This style includes both the 'Sword' and 'Plastic' styles. Another object decorated with a repoussé pattern is the bronze horn discovered at Loughnashade, Co. Antrim. The wide flange bears a fold-over symmetry design with palmettes and tightly spiraling tendrils (Ph.9).

An early appearance of this La Tène art is on a massive monument at Turoe Co. Galway. It is a large stone with a rounded top, the whole surface of the upper section is covered with an overall curvilinear pattern of scrolls, triskele, trumpet voids and lobes, flawlessly contoured to the curvature of the surface. A similar monument, but smaller, appears at Castlestrange, Co. Roscommon.

There is an apparent lack of stone sculpture in pagan Ireland and Anne Ross has suggested one reason for this;

that a great deal more must have fallen under the the evangelising blows of the Christian Fathers, who, like St. Patrick, when he smashed up Cromm Cruaich, the stone idol, "Plied upon Cromm a sledge from top to toe". 6

I do feel though, that metalwork gives enough basis of 'Pagan Art' in Ireland to realise what was to become the backbone of all the art of the Christian artists.

THE ARRIVAL OF CHRISTIANITY

As we have seen, Ireland, during the first four centuries of our era, was a country living outside the grip of the Roman Empire, but in her seclusion was still indirectly affected by it through trade and travel. This left her free to develop her long age old traditions, without the violent clashes of culture that resulted elsewhere under the power of the Romans. Ireland also effectively escaped the ravages of the 'Germanic Invasions' and the Anglo Saxon conquests of England, while still left to adopt many of their techniques, styles and motifs. All this had the effect of isolating Ireland and other western countries (Scotland and Wales) from the upheavals abroad, leaving it to foster and develop new Germanic and Romano-Brito styles and motifs. It was during a century and a half of this, that she was to lend herself to the new religion of Christianity.

Before the arrival of the monasteries, the chieftain was the most important client and patron of the arts. With the growing authority of the monasteries this changed and they became the centres for all cultural, artistic and intellectual life in Ireland. At first these monasteries, scattered over the whole of Ireland, were very humble dwellings. They consisted of a collection of cells centred around a small chapel. These were built of wood or dry stone, some of which were built on the side of mountains, cliffs, and rocky islets. All artistic endeavour was for the glorification and decoration of religious objects. As time past, more and more pilgrims sought these sanctuaries and the number of monks increased, so the monastery soon took on a more substantial role as a school or ancient university. Pupils came from reconverted England and the continent, where Irish missionaries were situated.

But to see how the church became established so relatively quickly and without any violent disturbance, we must go back to St. Patrick. As a missionary he was well equipt, having lived in Ireland as a captive, he knew its language and customs.

There are legends of contests with the druids and the aforementioned smashing of Cromm Cruaich, the stone idol, but for such a relatively quick acceptance of Christianity there were no martyrs and no persecutions. Patrick and his followers were not intolerant and he accepted and adopted whatever he could keep of the old beliefs and secular customs. As Henry states;

His policy seems to have been the same as that which Pope Gregory the Great outlined two centuries later to Mellitus when sending him to preach to the Saxons; keep the old temples and after destroying the idols they contain, turn them into churches. Keep the old festivals and allow the people to kill oxen as usual but dedicate the feast to the holy Martyrs whose relics are in the church. 7

This resulted in a compromise between the old Celtic traditions and the new faith.

As a result of the closer contacts made with Europe, through the 'agency of the Irish missionary monks of the sixth and seventh centuries', 8 scribe and craftsman became acquainted with new artistic styles and motifs, which they adopted, developed and made their own, blending them with the surviving Iron Age artistic traditions to produce an art which, in all its essential features, continued to be characteristic of the country until the twelfth century. It remains to us in a few manuscripts and a very considerable amount of stone sculpture and metalwork. While the art abounds with animal forms, portrayals of naturalistic animals are comparatively rare, apart from birds, which generally maintain a resemblance to reality, the majority of animal forms consist of imaginary creatures. Representations from the vegetal world are few and it seems the real preoccupation of the artists of the Early Christian period is the vast repertoire of abstract patterns, which they exploited to the utmost.

These patterns may be divided into two main groups, one derived from Iron Age motifs, the other from mixed Mediterranean and North European ancestry. The first group was

that these influences, whether their origins were Germanic, Graeco-Roman or 'Coptic' 9, found their way into the art of the Irish artists. From the middle of the seventh century onwards, this art, before slightly hesitant and slow to develop, makes astonishing progress. Perhaps the easier flow of travellers and missionaries, and so outside influences, helped this transformation. England, restored to Christianity partly by Irish monks and partly by those sent from Rome, was no longer a barrier to the outside world. Irish monks could travel more freely and bring back new ideas and also gained a confidence in their work. With the arrival of a steady throng of pupils, 'monastic cities' developed which provided a better sounding than the previous hermitages. Here, to examine more fully the effect this new freedom of movement, both of ideas and people, had on Irish art, we must divide into each discipline and since much of carving and illumination emanates from the early metalwork of the La Tène Celts, we will begin the next chapter on metalwork.

METALWORK

There are only very few fragments of eight-century metalwork found intact in Ireland. But from what is available we are able to guess at a very vibrant, colourful and awe-inspiring art. To think of these sumptuous metal pieces adorning eight-century churches is nearly unbelievable and must have contributed greatly to enhance church interiors. There are chalices, croziers, book-covers and shrines covered with brilliant crisp filigree, gilding and studs. Priests and the laity may have pinned the resplendant penennular brooches to their vestments. This must have been an awesome display of the work of the goldsmith and bronzer at his most technical and artistic virtuosity.

Before proceeding to describe some of the principle items of ornamental metalwork of the period, it would be best to summarise the information available about the techniques used at this time. Bronze, cast or sheet, continued to be widely used. It was enriched by gilding, as was silver, to a lesser extent, due to its expense. Gold was also used sparingly, except in the use of gilding and filigree. The metal was drawn into wire and used decoratively, on the foot of the Ardagh Chalice, silver and copper wires were woven into the flat rectangular panels. The most common use of wire was in the filigree patterns which adorn many of the metalwork objects. Different effects were produced by using wires of different types, singly or in combination. The wire could be used plain and round in section, in single strands or as a number of strands twisted together. It also took the form of flat ribbons placed on edge. For an added richness the wires were often beaded. Having finished working the wires into a desired pattern these were then soldered onto a background sheet of gold. Also associated with filigree is the use of granulation whereby globules or dots of metal were arranged in lines or nests on the surface to be decorated. Preference was mainly given to the use of casting or filigree work, but repoussé effects were occasionally used (Ph. 17).

As I have already stated, under the influence of Eastern Christian and Germanic art, Irish art forms began to change from around the mid-seventh century. Animals, interlaced bands and spirals, taken over from earlier centuries, now all appeared together. Also in stone decoration and that of the manuscripts, the time had passed when a few well chosen ornaments would have sufficed. The rule with everything now seems to be richness and luxuiance. Closely packed ornament, covers the whole surface, whereas a more restrained decoration befitted the earlier communities. Negative space seemed to demand as much respect as the motifs in the positive spaces. The general impression one gets firstly from most objects of this age is of their close appearance or kinship in manufacture and general effect with Continental and Anglo-Saxon jewellery. While on the other hand there is the very original way in which these borrowings are treated. Chip carving and the love of interlace and Multiple facets are typical of Anglo-Saxon jewellery of the seventh and eight centuries. The Irish version is more subtle. On English belt buckles this chip carving is mostly obtained by casting or even by cutting away the metal skin. In Ireland casting can be considered the rule and this is often by the 'lost wax' method.

Even the colours used in enamel work, mainly red and blue, are all too similar to the colours of Germanic jewellery not to have been inspired by them. The influence of Saxon objects in Irish works can easily be explained by the contacts which existed between Ireland and England. Some Saxon objects would have reached Ireland by trade or travellers while England was still pagan. Later the Irish missions founded in England would be an obvious means of transmission of patterns and objects. There are several penannular brooches ending in little birds heads found in Northern Ireland, which may be local imitations of Saxon brooches or simply local adaptations to a native form of a motif frequent in Saxon jewellery. There is no doubt that the type of animal head found on one of them, which comes from Co. Antrim (Greenwell Collection), is of Germanic inspiration (Ph.18). The knowledge of English and possibly Continental metalwork is so evident in Irish

jewellery that it becomes clear that these objects are only a few survivals of much more numerous importations. It must remain said that while there is obvious imitation there is never direct copying. 'We are faced with constant adaptations, where different techniques are used to give a similar effect and a few motifs are chosen carefully and completely incorporated into the currant of Irish repertory'. 10

The most splendid of all the surviving Irish brooches from around the period seventh to early eight century is the Tara Brooch. Its structure comes from the same direct outlook as that of the Ardagh Chalice, which comes as a contrast to the elaboration of the details. The back of the brooch is decorated by panels of gilt chip-carvings in the very style which we find on many other brooches of that time. But on closer examination it reveals a more elaborate execution. In three places there are sheets of metal with thread like sunken spirals (Ph.19). These spirals contain elongated trumpet motifs, being direct descendants from the La Tène Iron Age, which give various forms of triskeles within. To the spirals and animal interlacings of Germanic origin, which form the main decorative motifs, are added borders of fat birds biting each others legs, these show a direct connection with illumination, through their use on many of our manuscripts, but is very rare in metalwork. Still the treatment of the animal's bodies, with heavy hatchings, is very close to that of the monster on the Ekerö crozier (Ph.20). However this side was not usually seen, the front being exposed only when it is fastened to the garment (Ph.21) and the goldsmith has done his best work with it. It must be remembered that the Tara Brooch is one of the smallest ornamented brooches. The work is therefore of an unusually delicate quality. Beasts are designed by an amazingly fine and intricate network of gold wires. These wires are twisted, knotted and coiled. Contrasting with this, fierce looking reptiles surround the jewels and are wild interruptions in the piece. Here, as on the Ardagh Chalice, the treatment of filigree is of extreme versatility going from threads which seem embroidered onto the gold foil, to the strong effects of light and shade produced by the gold ribbons soldered upright and the modelling

of the animals whose bodies are composed of hatching and bosses produced with different types of wire. The representation of man does not occupy an important place in this or many other metal objects. Here it only exists in the transparencies of two little human heads of moulded dark glass. Thus it becomes absorbed in a network of ornaments.

The Irish metalworker has always kept an open mind as to where he will seek his inspiration. His repertoire of motifs are drawn directly from his ancestors (spirals originating at Newgrange), from the influence of Rome on England and Gaul, from the spread of the Germanic invasions to England, from his own travels abroad as a wandering craftsman or through missionaries and indirectly from the Celtic attacks on Greek and Etruscan towns. His source of material is wide and varied and these he adapts so well into his own repertory that they become distinctly Irish in treatment and taste. The metalwork of the Early Christian period grew from an already established artistic tradition and gave it a renewed lease of energy by exposing it to new artistic styles and motifs from abroad. From these missionaries and their contacts abroad came the new artistic medium of book illumination written down and painted by their scribes.

ILLUMINATED MANUSCRIPTS

Manuscripts were written on vellum prepared from calfskin. The earliest is a copy of the psalter. This probably dates to the second half of the sixth century and is mentioned on several occasions in the Irish annals, since it was a custom for the O'Donnells of Co. Donegal to have it carried around their army proceeding battles. From this it was called the 'Cathach'. It contains fifty eight pages in the Irish 'semi-uncial' script and decoration is restricted to sixty four initial letters. The colours employed are red and brown, dots of the former colour being used to outline the letters. Spirals and trumpet patterns appear among the motifs, these having their obvious origins in the previous La Tène culture. This book started the tradition by which all others were to follow.

Stimulated by foreign examples or derivatives of them, reaching the country through the medium of contacts established in Britian and continental Europe by the Irish missionary monks in the sixth and seventh centuries, the monastic scriptoria began to produce large and sumptuously decorated texts. The earliest in existance is the Book of Durrow, which is dated to the second half of the seventh century, although this date is only an approximation. Each gospel is begun with the symbol of its author and a full page of ornament and the opening words of the text itself are enlarged and decorated. There are four other illuminated pages contained in it. The colours used are red, green, yellow and brown. Three categories of motifs make up the ornament : spirals, trumpet-patterns, triskeles and pointed ovals from the La Tene heritage, ribbon interlace from the mediterranean area and animal interlace from Northern Europe.

The first page of the Book of Durrow is typical of many of the full-page illuminations in the manuscripts of its family. They present one unbroken sheet of ornament arranged in a symmetrical design and they are generally termed carpet pages.

The cruciform pattern which occupies a central position on another page is also typical, found also in the Book of Kells (Ph.22). A third Durrow carpet page bears a symmetrical design of interconnected circles of ribbon interlace, surrounding a central roundel containing an equal armed cross with expanded ends (Ph.23). A new element is introduced on the fifth carpet page where, except for the central roundel, the decoration is entirely zoomorphic (Ph.15). These fantastic animals with sinuous bodies, plaited and interwoven together seize everything with their soft worm like jaws and heads. Every page, practically, has a border of interlacings and these also frame the symbols which float, isolated, in the middle of the vellum (Ph.24). The man, the eagle, the calf and the lion stand out from the blank vellum that surrounds them, covered with spots of yellow, red and green. All this decoration is ruled both by a value for reserved or negative space and a love for the intricacies of closely woven patterns. It achieves effects by a simplicity and directness of means and the limited use of a few sharp colours, the large scale ornament and the balance between a motif and a plain surface. This sense of balance is an inherent quality of both the La Tène heritage and the early Christian period and helps to confirm the continuity of artistic expression between them both.

To return to the element which has already been mentioned, this is the page containing the supernatural beasts arranged around the central roundel. It has been repeatedly suggested that these compare so closely with those found on Saxon objects that it gives substantiation to the belief that the Book of Durrow was not written in Ireland but actually in Northumbria 11. But these people do not seem to take account of how easily Saxon objects flooded into Ireland in the seventh century and how freely the Irish artists adopted its styles and motifs. Following very closely to the style of the Book of Durrow, is a fragmentary gospel book, of the same period, preserved in the Cathedral library in Durham, called manuscript A.II.10. This text, of Irish tradition, could have been written in Ireland or Northumbria and since both this book

and the Durrow book belonged to the libraries of the Columbian monasteries, Durrow and Lindisfarne. Lindisfarne having been founded by the Irish missionaries.

Another manuscript also uses, like Durrow, symbols instead of evangelists portraits at the beginning of the gospels, and is also linked in its treatment of these symbols. This is the great Echternach Gospel-Book. It is written in mixed Irish text, nearly entirely in large minuscule with only occasional use of majuscule. The decoration of the Echternach Gospels has a geometrical quality about it and animal ornament is totally absent from it. It contains the most abstract decoration yet. The initials are covered with a network of interwoven threads and ends with incredibly fine spirals. Even the symbols are partly drawn by geometric devices. This is especially striking in the case of the eagle, the head and the whole body being drawn entirely by compass drawn arcs (Ph.25). The use of colours is more delicate than that of the Durrow book, each tone, red, yellow and purple, exists in a darker and lighter shade. The symbols have a certain freedom in the space around them but, unlike those of the Durrow book, are linked more to the frame by a grid of coloured lines which they enroach over slightly.

These two manuscripts offer a very small portion or glimpse at the variety of work that was to continue for some years. Though many are lost, stolen, burned or have just disappeared since. These manuscripts are the reason for much of the mediterranean and even Oriental influences that reached Ireland. It was those monks that went abroad with their manuscripts, founded monasteries and incorporated local motifs, carefully chosen, into their scriptoria. Then, either returning themselves or sending pupils, introduced these new motifs and styles. These could then be adopted both by metalwork and carving and so broadening again the repertoire of Irish Insular decoration.

STONE CARVING

Except for the small amount that is of pre Iron Age and Iron Age date, Irish sculpture is found almost exclusively in religious contexts. One monument of pagan origin, has been Christianised by the positioning of a Greek cross at the top, while written along the sides, prior to the inclusion of the cross, is the name of the person in Ogham script. The rudimentary beginnings of stone sculpture in Early Christian times can be found in the primitive establishments or hermitages in the form of a pillar marked with a cross or a slab bearing a few symbolic ornaments to mark the tomb of a few ascetics. These crosses are divided into either Latin or Greek crosses. Monastic cities were to give rise to the larger monuments with the more sumptuous decoration.

It was towards the end of the seventh century that this change towards a more monumental appearance began. They ceased to be just rough blocks of stone and began to be cut to a more regular design, growing to reach six feet or more in height. On the stone slabs the cross is invariably a prime element in the design, whether equal armed or of the Latin type, free on the stone or centred in a circle. It's arms can be ending in triangular, square, semicircular or circular expansions and these can be plain or filled with interlace or fret-patterns (Ph.26b). The design on these slabs are all purely abstract, with the exception of two or three and what is so remarkable about this is that the animal interlace, so common on other objects of the period, is virtually none existant on these stones. A progression can be found from these stone slabs through to the large free standing crosses; the stone slab with a cross in relief at Fahan Mura, Co. Donegal (Ph.26a), where the slab itself has started to assume a slight approximation towards the form of a cross, with broad ribbon interlacing. The Carndonagh cross, which stands a few miles further north from Fahan Mura, gives the first attempt to free the cross from the slab (Ph.27). Its contours are slightly irregular, sculpted by someone who was maybe not used to straight lines and stands over 10 feet tall. One side is completely covered, like that of Fahan, with a close weaving of broad ribbons,

On the other side, patterns and figures form a sharply engraved continuous ornament. The whole composition is organised around the dominating central figure of Christ, who is surrounded by four figures who are without arms. Above is a large cross with ribbons and below three figures in profile. The cross is accompanied by two pillars carved in the same style and probably by the same hand. One has a panel of spirals and palmettes, while on the other side there are two men, one with an enormous round eye, clutching a small round shield and sword, the other holds a barrel shaped harp to his chest. It is acknowledged that these symbolise David, as a harper and warrior. On the other pillar, a large head in profile, emerges from the mouth of a fish and this is easily recognisable as Jonah. Whatever their meaning is, what is evident is their adaptation from earlier pre-Christian representations.

The slab which stands in the graveyard at Carndonagh is of much cruder execution and shows clearly the strong foreign influences that were at work around this time (Ph.28). The marigold-flabellum and the large quadrilobe interlace which it bears both belong to the repertory of Merovingian decoration.

It is more than likely that the high cross carved in relief was the result of these researches on slabs. Although slabs, pillars and crosses probably went on existing together side by side for some time. To group them into a different set of series excluding one from another chronologically, would be a wrong approach to the subject. The characteristics of this period seem more along the lines of an art form groping hesitating and lingering with traditional approaches and it is only towards the middle of this century that high crosses become the standard.

For a point of clarification and to put the Irish high crosses in a broader picture, it is necessary to state where other high crosses of this period are found in Western Europe. They occur in all parts of England, Wales, the Isle of Man and Ireland. In Scotland one important large carved slab has a low relief cross on one side, and a few stone crosses are

found in the east, while in the west there is an important group that is connected with the Irish High crosses 12. These crosses cover a long period and were carved between the eighth and twelfth century. The question of inter-relations between the various countries, England, Scotland and Ireland, has been raised and it is very complex. In Irish Art in the Early Christian Period, Henry points out 'that its solution is not necessarily to be found in the influence of one group on the other, but rather in a parallel evolution proceeding from similar impulses'. 13

Some of the best preserved crosses, those of Kilispeen (Ahenny) (Ph.29), Kilkieran (Ph.30), are scattered about South West Ossory by Slievenamon. We can connect in style the two ruined crosses of Lorrha, near the Shannon, and the South cross of Clonmacnois (Ph.31). They nearly all have the same elaborate structure, consisting of a series of well organised planes. The sides are marked by deeply cut vertical grooves in relief. All seems to owe much to metalwork, the bosses play closely the part which glass and enamel had on metal. As with much of metalwork at the time, hardly a square inch of surface has not been decorated. They can be confined to separate panels, as with the decoration on metal objects, or the various patterns merge into each other (Ph.29), the spirals becoming an interlacing, the interlacing transforming into an animals head. There are simple weavings of ribbons, spirals with foliage motifs and triskele, almost identical with those of the Tara brooch (Ph.19,20) and Lagore belt buckle (Ph.10). Also contained on some crosses are the step patterns and key-patterns. Though there are heads of monsters, animal interlacings, scarce on crosses compared with those on metal objects and manuscripts, are found only on the one cross at Kilkieran (Ph.30) in the guise of a cruciform arrangement formed by animals. This links these crosses in some ways to the Moylough belt (Ph.12) where animal interlacings are absent and possibly also, though not through any other way, the Echternach Gospels, devoid of zoomorphic forms. On the South cross at Clonmacnois there is a panel of foliage inhabited by birds and animals.

On some of these crosses, at Ahenny, Kilkieran and probably

Lorrha, the cross itself is covered with decorative patterns, spirals, triskeles, ribbon interlacings, foliage motifs and bosses. It is only at their bases that figured scenes occur and these take on an importance at the base of the North cross at Ahenny which is covered in processions and cavalcades. The South cross at Clonmacnois has a crucifixion on one side of the shaft (Ph.31). All these scenes are carved in low relief on two planes. These crosses can be distinguished from English crosses by several features. Firstly, by the type of ornament, where spirals, interlacings and angular patterns are the chief motifs in Ireland, the vegetal scroll with or without animals is one of the favoured English motifs. Then there is the general shape of the monument. The English crosses never have a circle while it seems the rule for most Irish crosses.

Figured decoration on monuments fall into two distinct groups, one is easily identified with Christian iconography and the other deals with war and hunting scenes. My main area of concern is, however, with purely decorative motifs rather than picture parables, so I will not venture any further on this subject. Stone sculpture, from the arrival of Christianity is almost entirely found in religious contexts and this was to continue right up to the magnificent High crosses of the twelfth century. It borrowed heavily from the old La Tène heritage and from the newly arriving motifs of the continent, having much more in common with metalwork than book illumination.

CONCLUSION

I have tried to follow, in its main episodes of purely decorative ornamentation, the complex evolution of an art which is so foreign to the dominating Western European conception of art. One has always to keep in mind the fact that it still embodies, right into the Early Middle Ages, a persistent prehistoric tradition. It is a Christian art with a strong pre-Christian background, in which the points of view of the Iron Age are still familiar. It enriched its own initial repertory with various borrowings from Oriental and Germanic patterns while still using the same principles of composition and methods of drawing that went back to its early past. The blending and adaptation of Irelands pagan decoration took place with great ease due to the absence of violent conflict at the time when Christianity was introduced. The pagan Irish had their own sculpture and ornament which they retained and their own repertoire of curvilinear decoration, much in the same way as their stories of Cuchulainn and Finn.

The result of the blending is strange and to a certain extent Early Irish Christian art lived under false pretences. It was a pagan decoration masquerading under the guise of a Christian art. The ornaments which were used to decorate croziers, shrines, which covered cruciformed slabs, or were intertwined around initial letters in the Gospels were none other than the old La Tène spiral and Germanic animals and half-disguised representations of Celtic gods. In a much more subtle way, Irish Christian art belongs to a very ancient past and long age old tradition. This tradition, in its seclusion, becomes codified into a system of rules which every borrowed element had to bend and adhere to.

There can be little doubt that spirals, interlacings, step patterns and stylized foliage are more than mere ornaments. All of them, for centuries, had been carefully spread over objects, maybe for their protective virtues and hidden symbols. The interlacing being a stylized version of running water.

Water often carrying with it the idea of fertility or purification. There have been several suggestions for the spiral and I would be inclined towards its solar origin but often there is a good argument for its close association with vegetal patterns. Ornamentation in this way can be seen as a sort of sacred riddle and it went from a pagan one to merge into a Christian one. This was to be one of the most successful ever abstract arts with its purely non-representational motifs containing latent sacred meanings.

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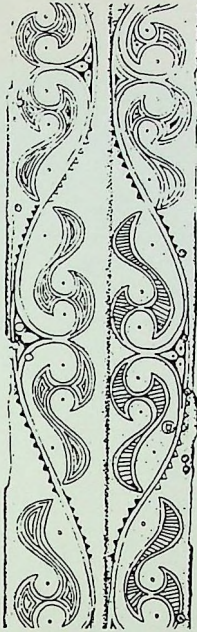
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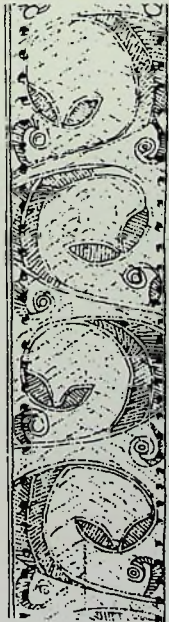
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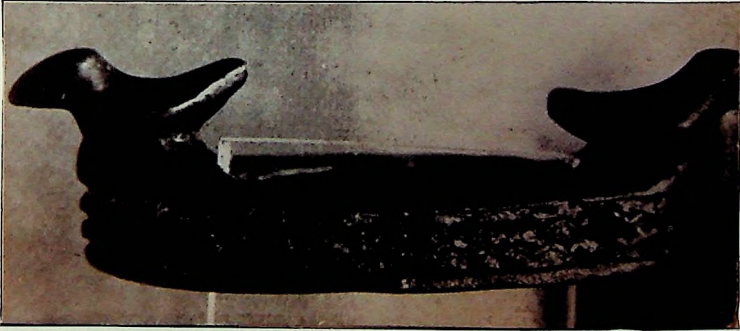
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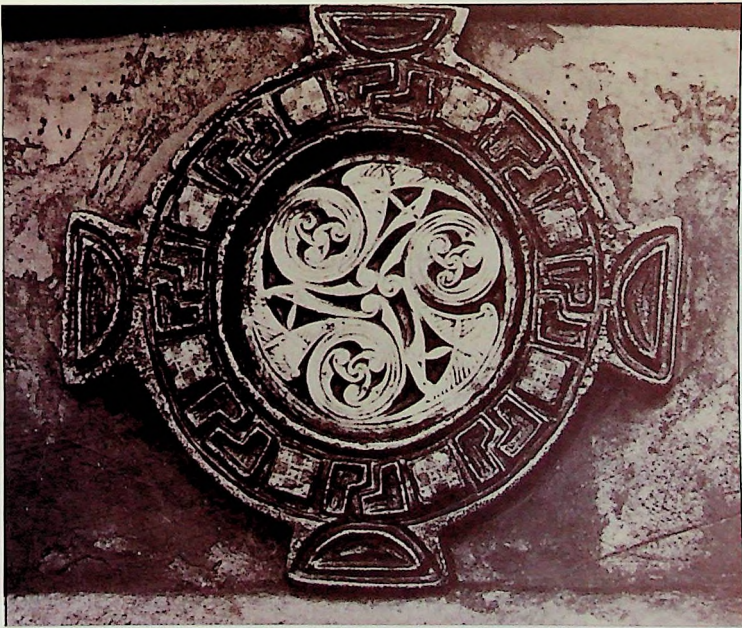
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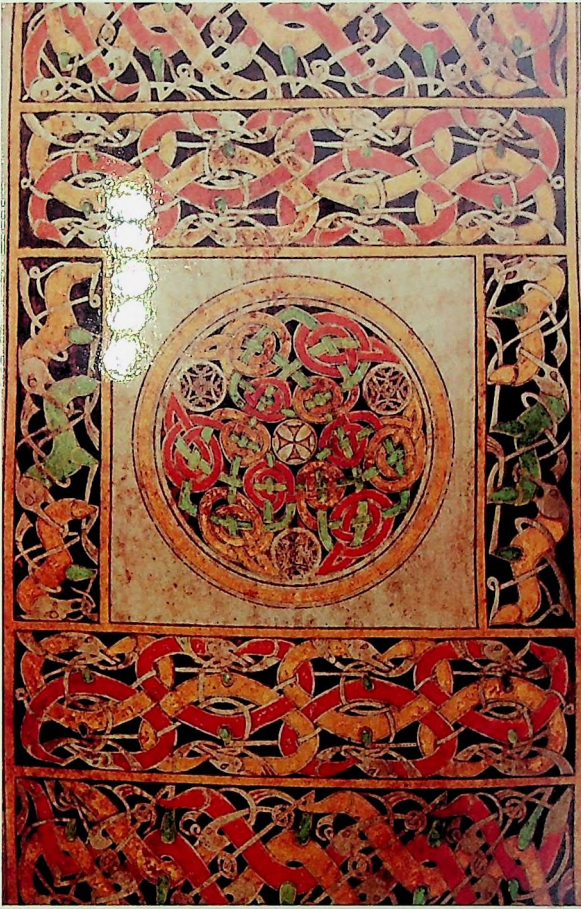
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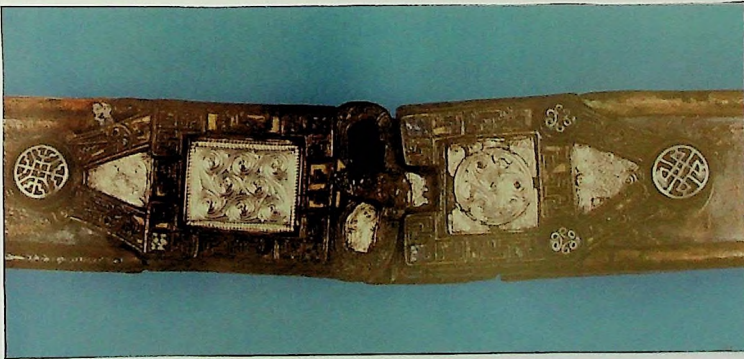


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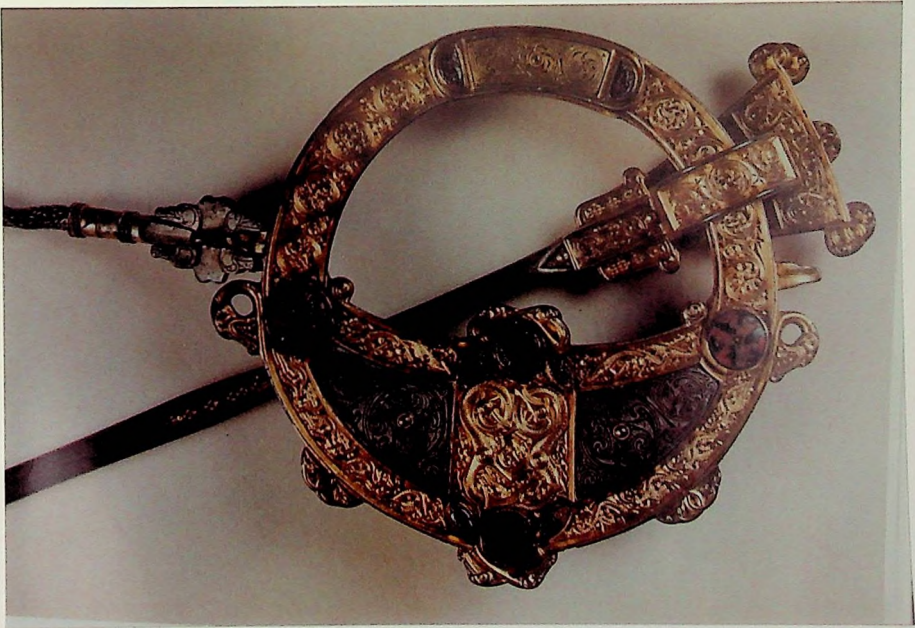
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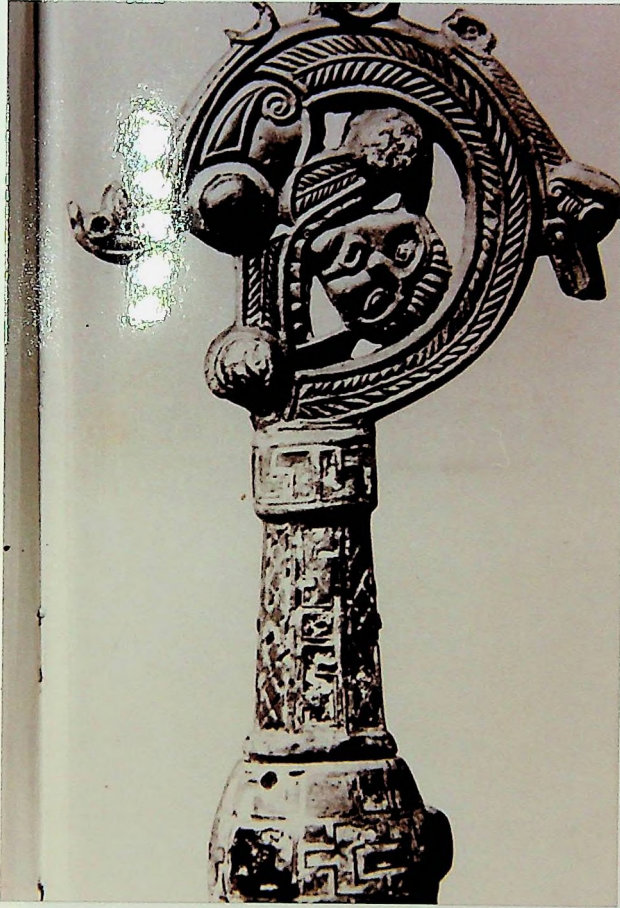
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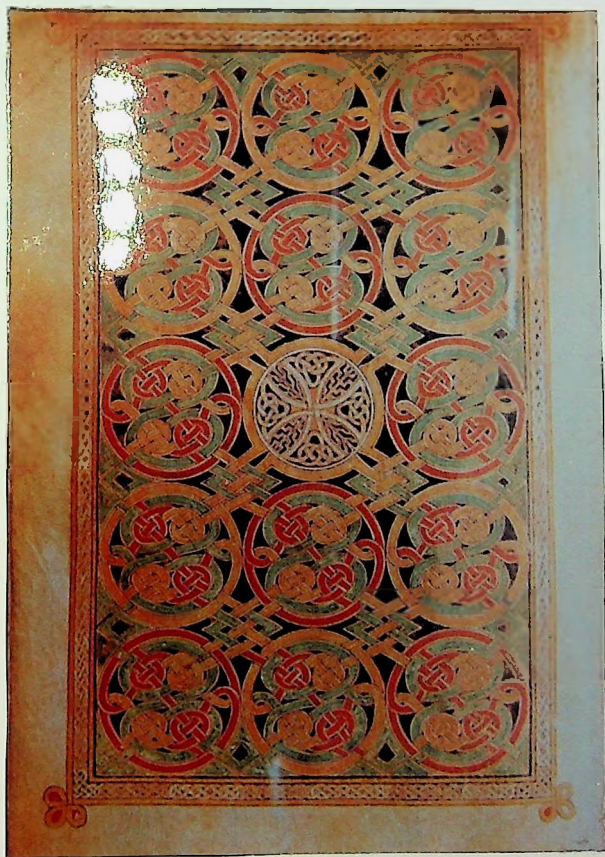


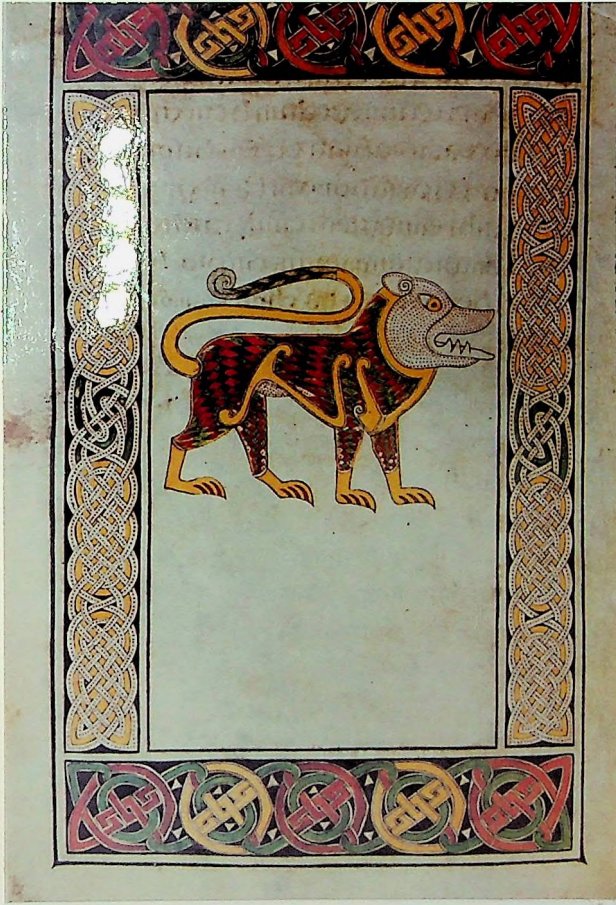


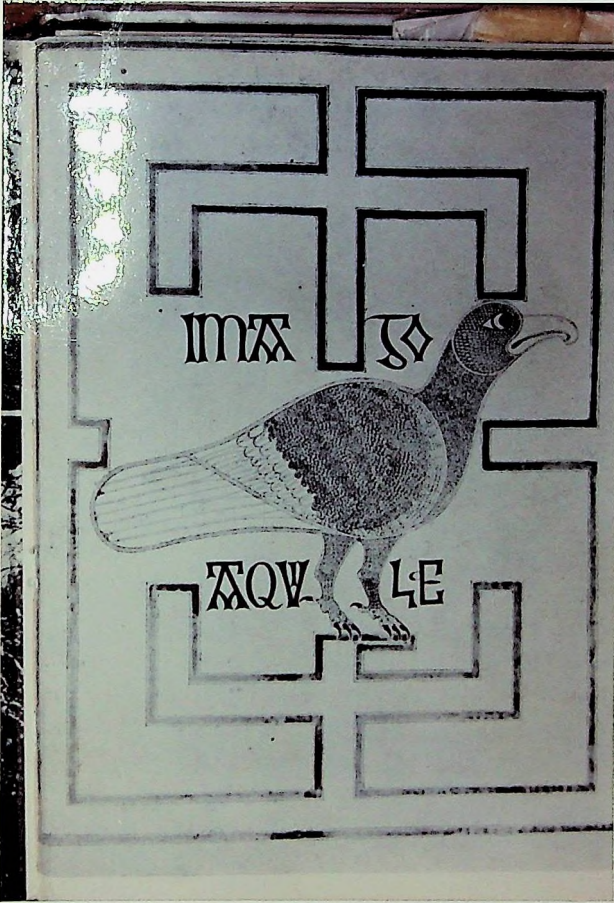
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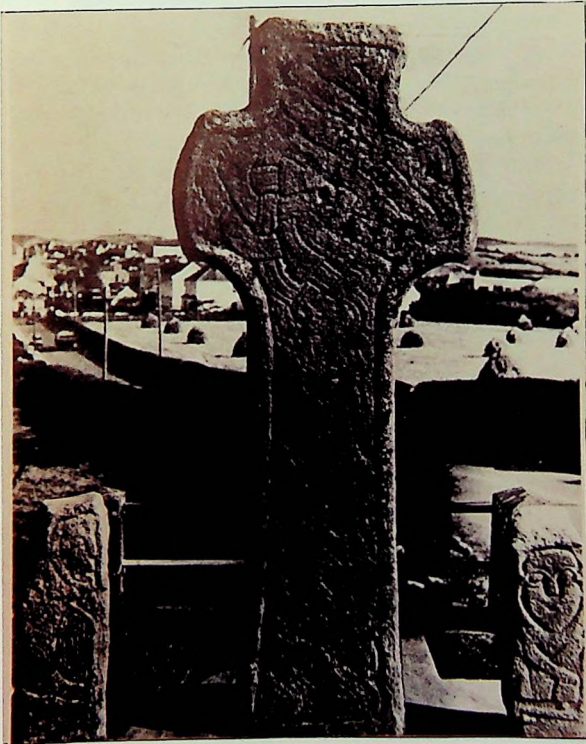






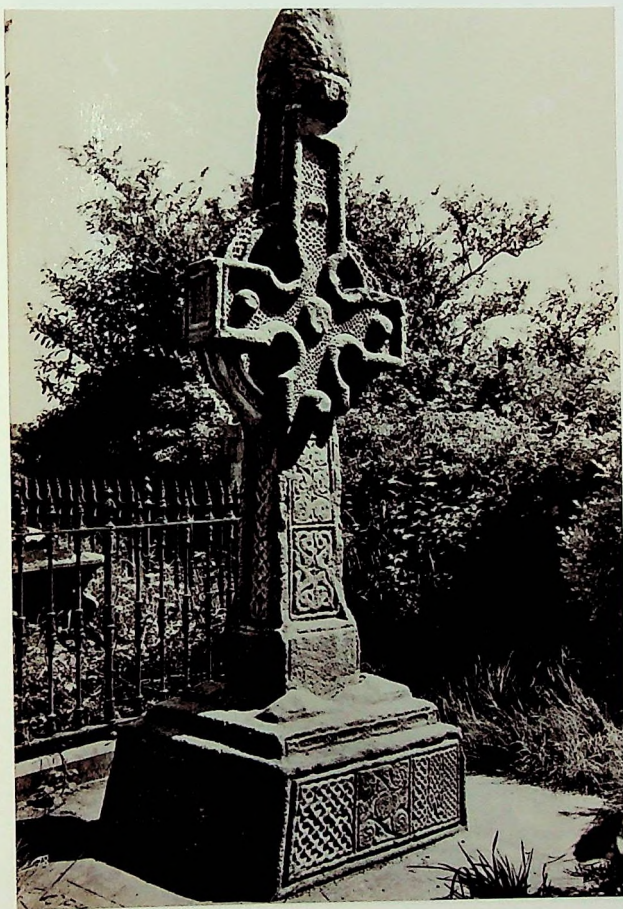


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