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DISCOVERIES

Cross of St. Oran Reassembled for 1450th Anniversary

Historic Scotland is reassembling the Cross of St. Oran, one of the first Celtic High Cross ever made, so that it may be raised on the island of Iona in time for the 1450th anniversary of St.



Columba's arrival on the island and his founding of the monastery in 563 A.D. Created in the mid-8th century, the massive cross has been in five pieces for centuries.

Before January 2012 when the project began, the pieces were on display on the floor, resting on their back at the Iona Abbey museum.



The broken pieces of St. Oran's Cross were sent to Selkirk, Scotland, to the workshop of museum mount maker Richard West, who is fabricating a steel structure to keep the cross pieces together upright so visitors can see the one-ton, 14 ft. 4 in.-tall sculpture, as pilgrims to Iona saw it for hundreds of years.

Artists chiseled the cross from three large blocks of schist stones and erected it at Reilig Òdhraim (Sr. Oran's graveyard), the cemetery that would serve as the burial ground of at least seven early Scottish kings, kings of Ireland and Man, and the chieftains of important Scottish clans in the later Middle Ages. The carved decorations fuse pre-Christian Celtic and early Christian symbols. The spirals and vines have been interpreted as Celtic symbols of the intertwining of heaven and earth and as the snakes, whose shedding skin symbolized Christ's resurrection. The bosses, which recall metalwork, are grouped into patterns of fives (the number of wounds Christ suffered) and arranged into cross shapes.



These designs dovetail into Christian iconography on the cross arms, including Daniel in the Lion's Den. In the center underneath the cross arm is the Virgin Mary holding the infant Christ flanked by angels on either side – a very early example of this iconography.

It was a challenge creating the steel structure that



would support the cross in its original posture, but moving it back to Iona is going to be an even greater challenge. The cradle and cross are huge and heavy. It will take two ferry trips and a walk across a field to get it to the museum, and then it will have to be squeezed into the building. Once they manage to get it in the door, the final stages of cleaning, conservation and stabilization will take place at the museum.

Rewritten from <http://www.thehistoryblog.com/archives/23957>