



HISTORIC  
ENVIRONMENT  
SCOTLAND

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EACHDRAIDHEIL  
ALBA

Property in Care (PIC) ID:

PIC082

Designations:

Conservation Area (CA471)

Taken into State care:

1933 (Guardianship)

Last Reviewed:

2004 (2025 update to include Empire connection)

# STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

## KILMARTIN CROSSES



We continually revise our Statements of Significance, so they may vary in length, format and level of detail. While every effort is made to keep them up to date, they should not be considered a definitive or final assessment of our properties.



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Cover images from left to right: The Kilmartin Cross with interlace and key pattern (RCAHMS Cross 4); Fragment of a small carved stone cross, depicting the Crucifixion (RCAHMS Cross 87) and Fragment of a larger carved stone cross depicting the Crucifixion (RCAHMS Cross 89). All three images © Crown Copyright HES.

# HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

## KILMARTIN CROSSES

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## BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The churchyard of Kilmartin contains a fine collection of early Christian, medieval and post-Reformation carved stones. Three groups of the most important carvings are held in Guardianship, although the RCAHMS survey of Kilmartin Churchyard recorded at least 113 carved stones.

One of these groups comprises three crosses: an early medieval cross (known as the 'Kilmartin Cross') (RCAHMS Cross 4); a fragment of a small cross of 14th-15th century date (RCAHMS Cross 87); and parts of a larger cross (RCAHMS Cross 89), possibly 12th-13th century in date. All three are (as of 2023) on display in Kilmartin Museum.

## CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

### Historical overview

**1927:** Sir Iain Malcolm of Poltalloch invites Office of Works to consider taking churchyard monuments into Guardianship. Kilmartin Cross and large medieval cross given Guardianship.

**1933:** Cross slabs, 3 fragments which are now in Kilmartin Museum, came into guardianship from Argyll County Council.

**1973:** part of the large medieval cross (RCAHMS 89) recovered from a culvert about 400m from the church.

**1977:** Kilmartin Crosses moved from churchyard into the adjacent church.

**2022:** Kilmartin Cross (RCAHMS 4) moved from the church into Kilmartin Museum

**2023:** The remaining two crosses (RCAHMS 87 and 89) are moved into Kilmartin Museum.

Recent research into the relationships between the Properties in Care of Scottish Ministers and the British Empire<sup>1</sup> has highlighted that Kilmartin Crosses have 'property' empire connection<sup>2</sup> as they were owned by the Malcolms of Poltalloch. The Malcolms of Poltalloch acquired significant slavery-derived wealth during the colonial era in Jamaica. This included acting as merchants, holding shares in companies trading in the region, and owning enslaved people. Considerable monies came through compensation

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<sup>1</sup> Full report can be downloaded from HES website: [Surveying and Analysing Connections between Properties in Care and the British Empire, c. 1600-1997 \(historicenvironment.scot\)](https://www.hes.scot.nhs.uk/research/surveying-and-analysing-connections-between-properties-in-care-and-the-british-empire-c-1600-1997)

<sup>2</sup> 'Property' connection describes land or buildings owned by either an established propertied family which participated in the Empire, or a recently enriched family which, through involvement in colonial activities, acquired the means to secure property. See Mullen *et al* 2024, 30-31 for a full definition of typology.

given when slavery was abolished in Britain. Neil Malcolm collected almost £40,000 compensation in 1835. The family used this wealth to become major landowners in Scotland, with the acquired estates containing many sites that would become Properties in Care. The estates were cleared to create aesthetically pleasing landscapes, with funds also being directed to the excavation of some of the archaeological sites.<sup>3</sup>

## Archaeological overview

Kilmartin has a long history as an ecclesiastical centre, the earliest documentary evidence being a note of the vicar's name in 1304. The present church building is known to occupy the site of at least two predecessors, the earliest dating to 1601, which in turn may have incorporated a medieval building into its structure.

However, the presence of several early Christian monuments, as well as the sub-circular form of the churchyard, suggests a much longer history for religious activity at the site, possibly as early as the 9th or 10th century, and it is possible that this early foundation could have had connections with the early medieval power centre at Dunadd. The site is a prominent one within a landscape of prehistoric ritual monuments, and it is possible that an early church was deliberately attempting to associate itself with this special area.

The discovery of a second fragment of the large medieval cross (RCAHMS 89) in 1973 is significant and it is possible that other pieces of carved stone will be found in the vicinity.

## Artistic/Architectural overview

Early Christian monuments displayed at Kilmartin include a number of cross-marked slabs, each featuring the incised outline of a Latin cross, and the Kilmartin Cross, a small free-standing cross thought to date from the 9th or 10th century.

The three crosses (RCAHMS 4, 87 and 89) that are held in Guardianship as the Kilmartin Crosses are currently on display in Kilmartin Museum.

The early Christian cross (RCAHMS 4), known as the 'Kilmartin Cross', is a small free-standing cross about 1.5m in height.

The smaller medieval cross (RCAHMS 87) comprises the head and upper part of a small free-standing cross missing its top arm showing a worn figure of Christ-crucified. Based on the style of carving, RCAHMS considered it to be of the Loch Awe tradition and in form it is similar to the

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<sup>3</sup> Mullen *et al* 2024, 50-55.

Kilmichael Glassary cross and was probably a simplified version of the cross that stood at Kilfinan.

The larger medieval cross (RCAHMS 89) comprises fragments of a free-standing ring-headed cross,<sup>4</sup> including the shaft, the top arm (found in 1973) and part of the head, which shows Christ crucified on one face and Christ in majesty on the other. The left arm of the cross contains a winged creature, possibly a lion (the symbol of the evangelist Mark), while the top arm contains a winged angel, perhaps representing St Matthew. From the style of carving, it was originally thought that this cross was carved in the first half of the 16th century, probably drawing inspiration from metalwork such as the Guthrie bell-case and perhaps early Christian monuments such as the cross at Kilfinan. Although the figure of Christ in majesty is a common feature in Medieval sculpture, it is unknown in the West Highland tradition.

However, a more recent appraisal has indicated that this larger cross more likely dates to the 12th-13th centuries.

## **Social overview**

Although not formally assessed, there is some evidence to suggest that local residents hold mixed feelings about the archaeology of the Kilmartin area. On the one hand, the monuments have increased tourism revenues in the area, but at a cost to the local environment.

## **Spiritual overview**

Although there is no evidence to gauge the current spiritual significance of any of these monuments, they lie within the grounds of the church which is still in use, and the churchyard is used as a place of commemoration.

The commissioning of religious sculpture, such as the crosses, would have been an act of devotion by the patron in the belief that their soul would benefit. The graveslabs are part of the process of commemoration, marking the graves of the deceased as well as the family burial plot.

## **Aesthetic overview**

The churchyard occupies a spur from the east side of the valley and offers a fine view along the valley and the linear cemetery. The church dominates the village of Kilmartin and is visible for some considerable distance.

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<sup>4</sup> See drawing in RCAHMS 1992, 138.

The monuments themselves are a remarkable collection of early Christian and late medieval art, with over 80 carved stones visible throughout the churchyard.

### What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Our understanding and appreciation of the carved stones are marred by the absence of an archaeological context: we do not fully understand the development of the church at Kilmartin and how the crosses fit into this scheme.
- The crosses have been moved from their original sites resulting in the loss of relationship between cross and the original church serving the community.
- There is a lack of high-quality modern drawings of the collection, with reliance being placed on antiquarian or photographic records.

## ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

### Key points

- Early medieval carvings may indicate the site has a long history as a place of Christian worship/commemoration.
- The development of a highly distinctive West Highland style of art is one of the most remarkable aspects of life in late medieval Scotland. Apart from a few rare artefacts, such as the Queen Mary harp and the Guthrie bell-shrine, this rich tradition is represented by monumental sculpture as found at Kilmartin churchyard.
- The larger of the two medieval crosses is significant as it indicates the carver was familiar with a wide range of stylistic influences, from pieces of metalwork such as the Guthrie bell-shrine to the early Christian cross that stood at Kilfinan. The scene of Christ in majesty is unique to the Western Highlands.

## ASSOCIATED PROPERTIES

Significant collections of early medieval carvings exist at Iona Abbey; Eilean Mor, St Cormac's Chapel; Keills Chapel

Collections of late medieval West Highland carvings are displayed at Iona Abbey and Nunnery; Oransay Priory; Kilmodan churchyard; Kilberry Castle

The carved stone collection within Kilmartin Churchyard is a constituent of the rich archaeological landscape of the wider Kilmartin area and is therefore associated with the adjacent monuments with which it may be seen as a continuation of commemorative practice.

## KEYWORDS

‘Loch Awe school’, West Highland graveslab; chest-tomb; lapidarium; ring-headed cross.

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