HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND | ÀRAINNEACHD EACHDRAIDHEIL ALBA

Property in Care (PIC) ID:	PIC081
Designations:	Scheduled Monument (SM13236)
Taken into State care:	1973 (Guardianship)
Last reviewed:	2017

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

KILDALTON CROSS

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KILDALTON CROSS

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1 Summary

1.1 Introduction

The Kildalton Cross is an 8th-century ringed high cross of a type most strongly identified with the early monastery of Iona. It is situated at the site of a medieval parish church on the isle of Islay. The cross is 2.63m high and stands in its original socket stone which was placed on a stepped plinth built in the 19th century. With its intricate interlace decoration and Biblical imagery carved in striking high relief from unforgiving local granite, it is a masterpiece of the Insular art style. It is one of a handful of extant pierced-ring high crosses from Scotland, and the one which survives in its most pristine state. It is likely to be at or near to its original location, although little is yet known about the origin of the church at Kildalton or the nature of its relationship to Iona.

1.2 Statement of significance

This carved stone monument represents one of the highest achievements of Insular sculpture of a kind being developed in the major monasteries of Argyll and Northumbria in c. AD 600-900. It stands alongside early monuments of similar type on Iona, where the iconic ringed high cross is thought to originate.

Kildalton is probably the first of the ringed high crosses to be erected outside of Iona. Along with the three other early medieval cross-marked stones surviving from the churchyard, it is likely that Kildalton was the site of a major early Columban foundation on Islay.

In this art-historical context, the Kildalton Cross is of international significance for the following reasons:

- One of only a handful of pierced-ring high crosses to survive from Scotland, including two (St Martin's and St John's) from the early monastery of Iona.
- One of the early group (late 8th century) of high crosses, the first free-standing stone crosses in Britain and Ireland.
- The only one of the early ringed high crosses to survive in a mostly pristine state, probably at or near its original location.
- One of the earliest uses of Virgin Mary iconography in Insular art.

In addition, the Cross, along with the wider site and its early church foundation are important in a national and regional context in understanding the development of early Christianity and for its contribution to the history of Islay, particularly:

- the Cross places Islay at the centre of the 'golden age' of the Celtic monastic movement.
- the style and construction of the Cross form a direct link to the monastery of Iona during the period in which it achieved its artistic zenith.
- Kildalton remained an important church for a long sustained period evidenced by its survival as a parish church from at least the 12th century through to the 18th century.
- the churchyard contains at least 17 West Highland Style late medieval grave slabs, showing its high status throughout the medieval period
- the Cross and its surrounding landscape, monuments and place-names including the nearby 'Thief's Cross' are firmly embedded in the Gaelic historical traditions and folklore of Islay

2 Assessment of values

2.1 Background

Our understanding of the site's early history is particularly poor as the earliest documentary reference to Kildalton is 1425. The fabric of the parish church dates to the 12th or 13th century, but the early Christian carved stones in the adjacent churchyard suggest an early medieval origin. The *kil-* place-name was long thought to denote an early medieval dedication but it is clear such names continued to be coined throughout the medieval period in Argyll. The name means 'church of the disciple', and as the dedication is to John the Evangelist, it is likeliest that this is a reference to him as disciple of Christ. Another alternative is from the 8th-century legal text Córus Bésgnai which describes a hierarchy of churches including the *dalta* or 'disciple church', founded from the mother church (*annoit*), which would mean the name could also be interpreted as the 'disciple church', presumably of Iona (Waters 2013: 119-122).

Kildalton is one of three parishes on Islay, a system which dates with little modification to the medieval period (Macniven 2013). The medieval parish of Kildalton was under the direct patronage of the Bishops of the Isles. That Kildalton remained an important church is shown by its survival as a parish church through to the 18th century. The churchyard also contains at least 17 West Highland Style late medieval grave slabs, showing its high status throughout the medieval period. (RCAHMS 1984: 203-15). Despite a proposal in 1651 to transfer public worship to Kilbride, the building apparently remained in use until around 1730, when services were transferred to a more convenient site at Lagavulin.

2.2 Evidential values

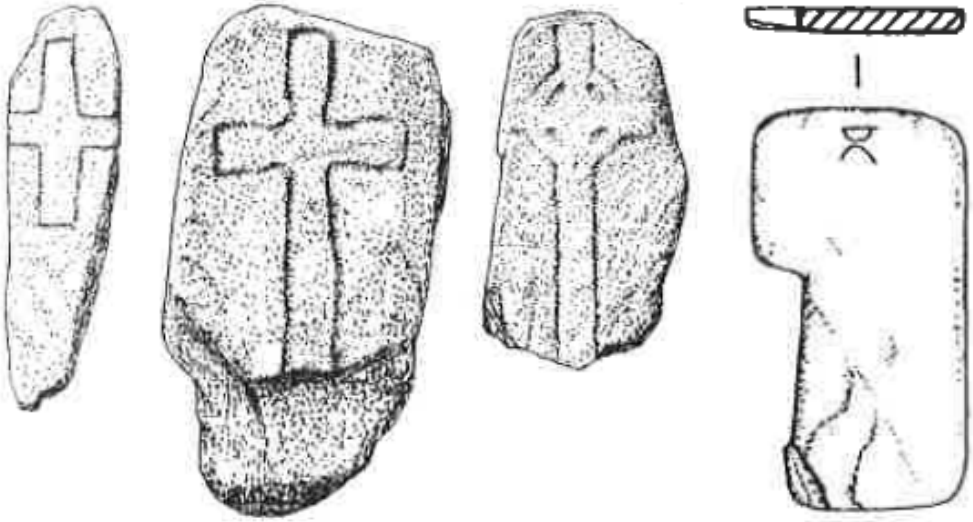

Figure 1: three cross-marked stones and a fragment of socket stone from Kildalton Churchyard.

The site has seen no modern archaeological investigation. Only one excavation took place in 1882 when the cross was lifted from its base and casts of Portland cement made for the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland. Lifting the socketed base slab, which appears to be original, a cross-slab was found face-down wedged under the southwest corner (Figure 1, left). Beneath this a layer of water-worn pebbles was encountered, underneath which were human bones of at least two individuals (Mitchell 1883: 277-79). The damaged socket stone was built into a new stepped plinth. A fragment of a second socket stone is in the churchyard (Figure 1, right), though it is not known whether it was originally part of the Kildalton cross base or for another cross. Although the cross likely remains within its original setting, the resetting in the 19th century means it has lost its original stratigraphic context.

Outside the north door of the church, almost sinking into the turf, is a hollowed stone known locally as a holy water stoup. This is what is known in Ireland as a *bullaun* stone, of a type found in numerous churchyards of ancient origin across the Highlands and islands. They are most likely to be the product of turning stones, such as have been noted to have existed in the past at

Kildalton, and of which there is a good surviving example at Kilchoman (RCAHMS 1984: 200). While such stones may relate to early medieval activity, the use of a late medieval cross socket at Kilchoman shows they can be late or even post-medieval. Regardless, they attest to traditional practices that form part of the wider, unofficial social use of the site.

2.3 Historical values

The Kildalton Cross places Islay at the centre of the 'golden age' of the Celtic monastic movement. As described further below the style and construction of the cross form a direct link to the monastery of Iona during the period in which it achieved its artistic zenith. Yet the exact relationship between Islay and the wider Columban *familia* remains somewhat obscure.

One thing is certain, that as a fulcrum between Dál Riatan Argyll and Ireland, Islay will have commanded the sea routes between Iona and the Irish Sea. The *Life of St Columba* written by Adomnán of Iona in c. 697 only mentions Islay twice, in one case (II: 14) as a stopping place on the journey from Iona to Ireland (Sharpe 1995: 164-5). From the genealogical and annalistic material available for the 7th century, it seems that the main Dál Riatan kindred on Islay, the Cenél nOengusso, had a fractious relationship with the neighbouring Kintyre and Cowal kindreds, and indeed may have had closer links with the Irish Dál Fiatach (Fraser 2009: 159-60).

By the 8th century, however, power had begun to swing toward the rising Pictish kingdom, and in AD 741, the annals record that Dál Riata had been defeated by the Pictish king. Within a century, much of the Hebrides will have passed into Viking hands, and Islay would have been no exception (Macniven 2015). Despite these changes, the links with Iona not only remained but flourished.

A papal bull of 1203 confirmed the ownership of the churches of Islay by Iona, and by the 16th century, the abbey of Iona had considerable other landholdings on Islay. It is not known how far back these arrangements date, but interestingly, the distribution of early Christian sculpture on Islay has been shown to relate largely to land later owned by Iona (Swift 1987: 282-91). This is a good indication that Iona's territorial ambition was not limited to the site of Kildalton in the eighth century. Swift (2003: 112-14) has also shown that the Iona properties on Islay were on good agricultural land on major sea routes, and it is likely that they were an important part of the network of food supply to the monastery of Iona.

2.3 Architectural and artistic values

Figure 2: Comparative drawing of Kildalton cross (left) and St John's Cross (Iona) to scale.

The Kildalton Cross is one of the most significant pieces of early Christian carving in Scotland. It is one of only four pierced-ring high crosses extant from Argyll, the others being at Iona (St John's and St Martin's) and one fragmentary example at A'chill, Canna. In style and form, the Kildalton Cross is akin to the collection of major crosses on Iona (St Oran's, St John's and St

Martin's), and like those probably dates from the second half of the 8th century. Its east face bears similar Virgin Mary iconography and Old Testament figural scenes as those on St Martin's Cross. Its west face shares with St John's Cross the remarkable panels of interlaced snakes spiralling into high relief bosses. Also comparable to St John's are the overall design and proportions of the cross head and ring, although Kildalton is to a smaller scale and with a less ambitious arm span (Figure 2). The ring of Kildalton is also integral to the cross (carved from a single stone) whilst the ring of St John's was added later, perhaps after a catastrophic fall. Its similarity to St John's Cross shows that it was made by the same craftsmen, and indeed it has been argued that the Kildalton Cross may have been the first pierced ring high cross, commissioned as such using lessons learned from the repair of St John's Cross with its added ring (Fisher 2001).

The ring-headed cross stands 2.65m in visible height, the span of the arms is 1.32m while the overall diameter of the ring is 0.99m. The shaft tapers from 0.41m by 0.18m just above the base to 0.37m by 0.17m below the cross-head. The cross is carved from a local grey-green epidiorite, a particularly hard and durable stone sourced from near the shore at Port na Cille, some 1.5km east. This material has ensured its remarkably pristine condition even today.

The west face of the cross-shaft contains geometric decoration. This comprises two roundels composed of snake-and-boss decoration, with five bosses arranged in a cruciform group, referencing the cross as well as the five wounds of Christ. At the centre of the crosshead is a prominent boss set in a ring of smaller bosses and paired snakes. Four lions carved in the round surround the central roundel, all looking inwards but for the top one which looks towards the cross head. Interestingly, the heads of all four lions have been defaced; the cross has suffered no other damage besides general surface erosion so this may have been a deliberate act.

Underneath the lowest panel on the west face, a worn but unmistakable vertical pecked line seems to be an earlier continuation of the frame of the panel above, which may represent a mistake or change of design partway through its carving. Laser scanning or other advanced imaging techniques may reveal whether this blank panel was once carved or inscribed.

The east face of the cross-shaft contains a rich spiral-work including a La Tène influenced triskele motif woven around five open roundels and includes what appear to be peacocks feasting on grapes. These closely parallel similar motifs found in the Book of Kells. The head of the cross-shaft depicts the Virgin and Child, and may be a simplification of the comparable scene on St Oran's Cross. A scene within the left arm may depict Cain slaying Abel, while the right arm contains the Sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham, as found on St Martin's Cross, but here without an angel staying Abraham's hand. Within the top arm, two angels stand above a figure gripping the jaws of a rearing beast. Above is a horned animal, possibly a sheep, which suggests this scene depicts David killing the lion.

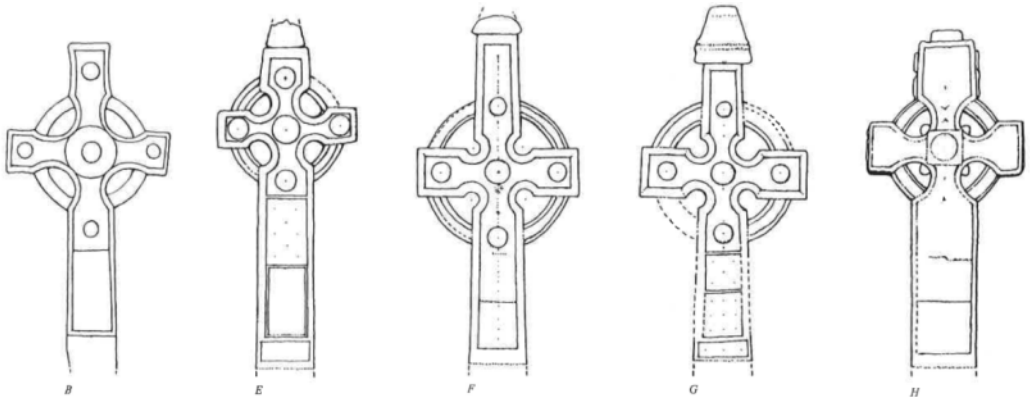

Figure 3: Comparative drawings of Kildalton (B) and Irish ringed high crosses at Clonmacnoise South (E), Ahenny South (F), Ahenny North (G), and Kells Tower (H). All to scale.

While the cross is certainly a product of the burgeoning Iona workshop, which developed the ringed high cross form with monuments like the Kildalton Cross in the late 8th century, the cross also has other parallels worth mentioning. Most important is the unringed high cross at Kilnave, with which it shares certain aspects such as its central roundel and La Tène influenced spiral designs. Like Kildalton, Kilnave was also a dependant of Iona and this cross belongs to the same burst of artistic creativity in stone of the late 8th century. Dorothy Kelly (1996) has further linked Kilnave and Kildalton based on their proportions and geometric design, and made the point that the size of the Kildalton Cross, while more modest than the Iona crosses, is of comparable size to the earliest Irish ringed high crosses (Figure 3). Indeed, whilst the Kells Tower Cross may be up to a century later in date, it shares an almost identical height and even the diameter of its ring (0.99m). Kildalton thus forms a key moment within the Columban school of stone sculpture in which a proportion was found that was seen as an ideal and would go on to be used in later iterations of the high cross elsewhere.

It is worth mentioning as well the plainer cross slabs known from Kildalton churchyard (Figure 1). All three are simple, undecorated outline crosses, and while they do not lend themselves to detailed artistic analysis, they are also very much in the Iona style. These are most likely to be grave markers, and if so, provide further evidence for the existence of a Columban outpost community on Islay.

2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

One of the greatest assets of the Kildalton Cross is its authentic landscape location, standing in what is likely to be at or near its original setting. The churchyard can be seen to have grown up around its base, and its position is visually echoed by the smaller Thief's Cross, a late medieval Highland Style free-standing cross, standing some 50m to the north-east. These two crosses are further framed by the Paps of Jura which dominate the horizon to the north-east. Since worship was moved to Kilbride towards Lagavulin, nearly all trace of settlement has gone from Kildalton, rendering it an atmospheric ruin. It is all too easy to forget that this was for a thousand years the centre of one

of Islay's three parishes, and would have been a central place for much of the island's population.

Its unique topography is also worthy of note. From the main road, the first view of Kildalton is of a church high on a hill, with the cross not easy to discern. Once there, the church is seemingly nestled into a flat nook surrounded by rocky mounds on three sides, forming a sort of natural enclosure. Through a gap in the crags to the north-east is a view down to a marshy field known locally as the Lon an t-Sagairt, or the priest's field, from which rises the whale-back crag of Creagan na Ceardaich Mòr, a hillfort of unknown date. This monument has seen no investigation since it was recorded (RCAHMS 1984: 84), but its location beside a major early church is tantalising. The cross, and any visitor to the site, has an open prospect to the north-east, a view dominated locally by the Thief's Cross, the hillfort and the Paps of Jura beyond. The valley continues to the north-east and ends at the sheltered harbour of Port Mòr which was likely to be the landing place associated with Kildalton. The position of the cross to the north of the church places it directly on the most natural approach to this place from the sea.

The grain of the landscape here thus suggests a very different approach from the modern experience of driving by from the landward side. In a time when it was easier to get around by sea than over land, the visitor from Kintyre or Ireland would have landed at Port Mòr or Port na Cille, and would have been guided up to Kildalton, encountering the cross before entering the church. The prospect out to the north-east and the sacred mountains of Jura linked this site with the sea, Iona and the wider world beyond. In essence, its landscape setting is one of the reasons why this site was chosen for the installation of a monument of this sophistication, and it needs to be enfolded into the story of the cross.

2.6 Natural heritage values

The hard-wearing local epidiorite was not only used for the Kildalton Cross but several of the medieval and post-medieval grave slabs on site. It accounts for much of the decorated stonework in the churchyard today, and its possible source at Port na Cille 1.5km from here would enhance the appreciation of the labour involved in creating these monuments.

2.7 Contemporary/use values

The Kildalton Cross is primarily used as a tourist attraction, well signposted from the nearby distilleries in order to benefit from the much more profitable whisky tourism that characterises the island's main draw today. To a lesser extent, the site is part of the practice of 'faith tourism' in this case strongly linked to pilgrimages to the isle of Iona. The stone itself has become iconic, providing the inspiration for numerous arts and crafts on the island.

As the island's population ages and drifts naturally, fewer will continue to visit relatives or ancestors buried in the churchyard, but traditions remain

embedded in the names that characterise the landscape, from the 'Thief's Cross' to the 'priest's field'. Folk beliefs surround such monuments, large and small, including the idea of the *bullaun* stone as a 'holy water stoup' which is never seen to be dry even when it has not rained (MacEacharna 1996). In an island where Gaelic remains an indigenous language and tradition is highly valued, such stories may well abound and are worth seeking out and preserving for posterity.

3 Major gaps in understanding

- Is the Kildalton Cross in its original location? The record of its lifting in 1882 revealed a cross slab wedged underneath the socket stone, and human bones underneath. What was the relationship between the cross, the cross slab and the burials?
- What was the nature of the site before and during the lifetime of the cross? It is presumed from the style of the cross and existence of three cross slabs that this would have been a Columban monastery. The presence of bones underneath the cross may suggest the burial ground came first. But if there was a monastery here, where is the evidence for a *vallum* enclosure ditch, or the necessary outbuildings, domestic structures and workshops?
- What was the nature of Iona's interest in Kildalton and Islay? Was it primarily as a reliable agricultural provider, or as an important landing place on the sea route between Iona and Ireland?
- What is the relationship between the churchyard and the Thief's Cross? It has been suggested that the cross might mark the boundary of the original sanctuary. Is there any evidence for an earlier boundary or enclosure before the modern 19th century churchyard wall?
- What is the link with the hillfort at Creagan na Ceardaich Mor? The hillfort has not seen any modern investigation and remains undated, yet the striking visual connection with Kildalton is tantalising and worthy of further investigation.

4 Associated properties

Iona Abbey, Kilnave Cross, Kilchoman Church

5 Keywords

High cross, Celtic art, Virgin Mary, St Columba, monastery, Iona, early Christianity

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Appendix 1 – timeline

- **Late 8th century**: cross carved and erected at a site, possibly with an existing Christian function.
- **14/15th century**: Thief's Cross erected outside the churchyard.
- **Early 18th century:** church services moved to Kilbride near Lagavulin; Kildalton abandoned.
- **1882**: through damage to the socket-stone base, the cross develops a severe tilt. The cross is lifted, a concrete cast made for the NMAS, and a new stepped plinth created for the cross, incorporating the repaired socket-stone.
- **1924**: Kildalton High Cross is scheduled as an ancient monument

- **1925**: works carried out on the fabric of the chapel.
- **1955**: although not a Guardianship monument, Ministry of Works staff undertake minor repairs.
- **1969**: further conservation/lichen removal.
- **1972**: High cross becomes Guardianship monument.
- **1982**: RCAHMS survey.
- **2016:** New HES interpretation panels