



Left: **The upper part of the Tall Cross, with the Crucifixion at the centre.**

Right: **The Tall Cross from the east, with the North Church to the right and the round tower behind.**

There is some debate about the identification of the scene on the east side of the cross head, which has been variously interpreted as David among the Israelites, the Ascension or the Second Coming of Christ. The Old Testament scenes are largely on the east face and the New Testament scenes on the west face. The surprisingly small base has suffered such serious weathering that little or nothing can be seen on it.

Within the same railed enclosure as the plainer North Cross is an upright stone sundial, a relatively rare survival from early medieval Ireland. Just to the north of the North Church, with a low railing around it, is an early medieval cross-inscribed gravestone with the inscription *OR DO RUARCAN* ('a prayer for Ruarcán'). Also worth looking out for in the west wall of the South Church are four stones with a longitudinal groove in each, which have been reused as quoins at each side. These are from an early stone shrine.

The origins of the iconography of the crosses

The Irish high crosses are almost the only examples of stone sculpture in western Europe in and around the late ninth century AD. Many of the biblical scenes on the crosses can be compared closely with earlier and roughly contemporary paintings in Continental manuscripts, ivory carvings and mural paintings such as those from old St Peter's in Rome, which are no longer extant but are known from seventeenth-century sketches. The immediate inspiration for the high-relief carving style of the Muiredach Master may have been carved wooden panels from church doors, but none of these survive in Ireland. The method of transmission of this iconography from the post-Roman world and the Carolingian empire is uncertain, though it is likely to have been through portable objects such as illuminated manuscripts, metalwork and/or ivory/wooden carvings. Some of the iconography harks back to the symbols of imperial Rome and, just as Carolingian and Frankish dynasties saw themselves as the successors of the Roman emperors, powerful Irish kings would have seen themselves in the same light and used the high crosses to promote their own ambitions. Peter Harbison has drawn convincing parallels between scenes with animals on the bases of Muiredach's and other Irish high crosses and carvings

harking back to Roman and Frankish prototypes. While the general flow of such iconographic influences is clear, the manner in which they travelled and even closer dating of the crosses are still matters that are hotly debated. As a result, we cannot be certain of the date of the crosses at Monasterboice except to say that they are likely to have been carved sometime between 850 and 920.



Above: **Muiredach's Cross: the north side of the base. The upper part depicts a rider on a horse following two centaurs, all hunting(?) a four-legged animal. Above this, at the base of the shaft, are the beard-pullers.**

Among the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century headstones in the graveyard there are some very fine examples of folk art, as well as two headstones with inscriptions partly in Irish.



The conservation of Monasterboice

In 1874, only a year before the National Monuments Service was established as part of the Office of Public Works (OPW), a group of interested people in County Louth collected funds and carried out works at Monasterboice. These works included building a new wall around the graveyard a short distance out from the old wall, thus allowing a path to be laid all around inside the wall; making a new walled access to the graveyard; and inserting timber floors connected by steep stairs within the round tower, and a timber and glass viewing structure within the broken top of the tower. Soon after, the buildings and crosses became a National Monument and were taken in charge by the OPW, who completed conservation works on the tower and later removed the timber structure at the top, while leaving the stairs and floors in place, as they still are.



Above: **Work in progress on the round tower in about 1874, showing the glass and timber construction within the broken top of the tower.**

While the churches and crosses are in state care, the graveyard itself has remained historically the property of the local authority. Local groups maintain the graveyard and provide a visitor service on a voluntary basis. The site is coming under increasing visitor pressure, however, and a conservation study, jointly funded by the National Monuments Service, the OPW and Louth County Council, was produced in 2009. Resulting from this, the condition of the crosses is being monitored on an ongoing basis. Monasterboice, which is on the World Heritage tentative list, needs major investment to provide a permanent solution that will ensure the preservation of the crosses into the future and to improve visitor facilities.

Further reading

- Harbison, P. 2007 Classical animals on Irish high crosses. In R. Moss (ed.), *Making and meaning in Insular art*, 215–27. Dublin. Monasterboice, Co. Louth: Conservation Study. (Most of the historical and archaeological information in this study has been published in the *Journal of the County Louth Archaeological and Historical Society* 27 (2) (2010), 177–215.)
- Roe, H.M. 1981 *Monasterboice and its monuments*. Dundalk.
- Stalley, R. 2007 Artistic identity and the Irish scripture crosses. In R. Moss (ed.), *Making and meaning in Insular art*, 153–66. Dublin.



Location map

Above: **The sundial.**

Cover: **A view of the round tower, the North and Tall crosses and the North Church, from the east** (Con Brogan).

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Monasterboice

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Introduction

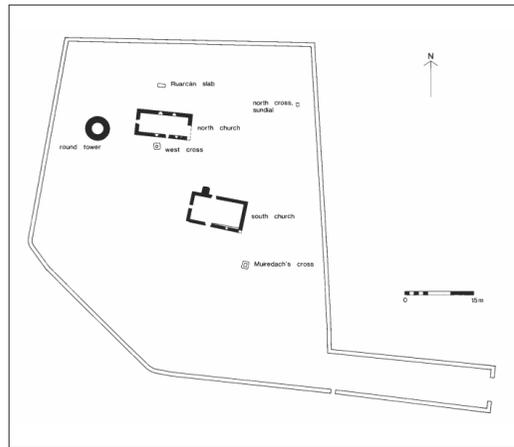
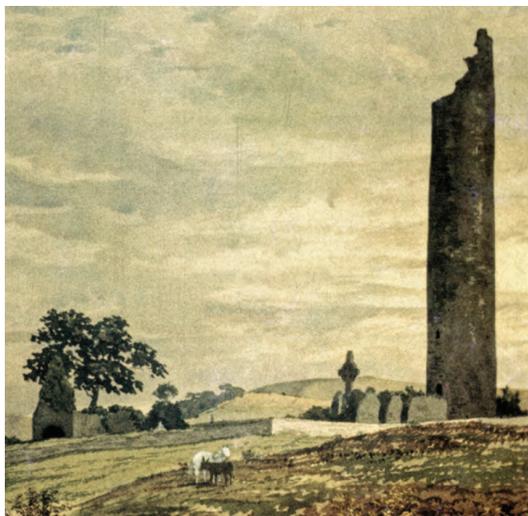
The Irish high crosses have been described by Peter Harbison as ‘the country’s greatest contribution to European sculpture’. Two of the very finest examples, treasures of early Irish art, are the beautifully sculpted Muiredach’s Cross and the Tall Cross, standing in a rural graveyard at Monasterboice, Co. Louth. The graveyard also contains two ruined churches, a round tower and many other features of interest, while the surrounding fields have the potential to tell us much about this major early medieval ecclesiastical settlement.

History

Founded by St Buiithe, who died about AD 520 and who gave his name to the place (*Mainistir Buiithe*, ‘the monastery of Buiithe’), it came to prominence in the Irish annals from the early eighth century and continued to be mentioned frequently until the twelfth century, mainly in relation to the deaths of ecclesiastics associated with it. Strangely, it is one of the very few places in early medieval Ireland with the element *mainistir* in its name, so much so that it was frequently known by this element alone and ecclesiastics from it were referred to with the epithet *mainistreach* (of Monasterboice). Examples are Eoghan Mainistreach, abbot of Armagh and Clonard, who died in 834, and, most famous of all, Flann Mainistreach, a great poet and man of learning, who died in 1056. It had close associations both with the Columban federation of churches and with Armagh. Though it is likely to have been raided by the Vikings, there is no clear individual reference to such a raid.

Above: Aerial view of the site from the south.
Right: A watercolour from about 1857, showing the chancel arch still standing in the South Church.

In the twelfth century it lost out in becoming neither the centre of one of the new territorial dioceses nor the site of a monastery of one of the recently imported Continental orders. Indeed, it quickly became overshadowed by the first Cistercian house to be established in Ireland, Mellifont, which was founded in 1142 less than three miles away to the south-west. As if to rub salt into the wound, Mellifont became known in Irish as *An Mainistir Mór* (‘the great monastery’), while Monasterboice was reduced to the status of a parish church. The settlement appears to have gradually become deserted and a new settlement, called Newtown Monasterboice, was established less than a mile to the south-east.



It remained a place of local pilgrimage and devotion, however, and the head of St Buiithe, presumably encased in a metal shrine, was kept in one of the churches up to the early sixteenth century. By the seventeenth century the churches were in ruins but the graveyard has continued as a place of burial up to the present day.

The ecclesiastical settlement

The present graveyard containing the churches and crosses is but a small part of the large settlement that was here in early medieval times. The extent of this settlement is indicated by records of souterrains in the surrounding fields and by traces of large enclosures visible in aerial photographs. A geophysical survey carried out in 2008 has given us a more accurate picture of the extent and nature of the subsurface archaeological features around the graveyard. Ecclesiastical sites like Monasterboice had a sizeable lay population, involved in farming, craftwork and trade, living within the outer enclosure, and excavations at sites such as Clonmacnoise have confirmed this picture. Ecclesiastical families, who frequently monopolised the offices connected with the church, would have lived in the settlement, while the local dynasty would sometimes have maintained a residence at a very important ecclesiastical site such as Monasterboice.

The churches

The South Church is the larger of the two and was clearly the parish church in later medieval times. The earliest phase was a simple rectangular church with a lintelled west doorway dating from about the eleventh century. In a second phase, probably twelfth-century, the west doorway was blocked, new doorways were opened in the north and south walls and a chancel, no longer extant, was added at the east end. Illustrations from as late as 1866 show the chancel arch still standing. Finally, in about the fifteenth century the south wall, which had started to lean outwards dramatically, was partially and clumsily rebuilt and a new window inserted.

Left: Plan of the graveyard, showing the churches, round tower and crosses.

Below: Image of the geophysical data recorded in the fields around the graveyard. Note in particular the evidence for an inner circular enclosure outside the graveyard wall on the west, north and east sides, and the curving lines of a very large enclosure to the south of the graveyard.

The North Church is a simple rectangular building of about the thirteenth century with doorways facing west and south and a number of windows. It may have replaced an earlier shrine church dedicated to St Buiithe and may have housed the head of the saint, which was stolen in the sixteenth century.

The round tower

This is a fine example of a typically Irish early medieval free-standing bell-tower, probably dating from the eleventh century. As is normally the case, the doorway here is above ground level but the upper floor, where the bell or bells would have hung, is lacking and has been since at least the eighteenth century. These towers had wooden floors connected by ladders, and it appears that books and treasures associated with the church were sometimes stored in them. This was certainly the case here in 1097, when the annals state that this tower, ‘with its books and many treasures’, was burned—whether accidentally or on purpose is not recorded.



The crosses and other carved stones

There are three high crosses at the site: the two highly sculpted crosses—Muiredach’s and the Tall or West Cross—and the plainer North Cross, which has just a Crucifixion on one side and a roundel of abstract ornament on the other.

Muiredach’s Cross, with a height of 5.2m and a width across the arms of 2.14m, is truly monumental, and the sculpted biblical scenes are so finely executed that the art historian Roger Stalley has called the unknown sculptor the ‘Muiredach Master’ and has pointed to other crosses at Kells, Durrow and Clonmacnoise that are likely to have been carved by the same man. An inscription in Irish on the shaft indicates that a certain Muiredach, likely to be the Muiredach who died in 924 as successor of Buiithe and vice-abbot of Armagh, had the cross made. This in itself was no mean task, as the very high-quality sandstone had to be sourced, probably near Nobber, Co. Meath, quarried and transported to the site and then sculpted and erected on its base. The most significant scenes are those at the junction of the arms and shaft and central to the ring at each side: the Crucifixion facing west and the Last Judgement facing east, with the blessed on one arm and the damned on the other. There are Old Testament scenes on the east side of the shaft and New Testament scenes on the west side. All surfaces of the stone are sculpted, as is the base, which has suffered much from weathering. The inscription is carved on

Above from left: Muiredach’s Cross: the lower part of the west side of the shaft, showing Christ mocked by the Roman soldiers above two cats with the inscription fitted around them.

Muiredach’s Cross: the underside of the arm and ring on the north side, with the Hand of God supporting the firmament above three heads with serpents coiled around them.

Muiredach’s Cross: the north side of the upper member of the cross, with a scene depicting a raven bringing bread to SS Paul and Anthony in the desert.

Right: Muiredach’s Cross from the east, showing the Last Judgement on the cross head and Old Testament scenes on the shaft.

the base of the shaft on the west side around and between a high-relief carving of two cats, one licking its kitten while the other is about to eat a small bird. There are similar whimsical carvings in the same position on the other sides: two men pulling each other’s beards, two cats fighting and two cats (?) biting each other’s tails.

The Tall Cross, situated close to the North Church and the round tower, is a staggering 7.1m high and is again sculpted all over with biblical scenes. As with Muiredach’s Cross, the Crucifixion is in the centre of the cross head on the west side.

