

A HISTORY OF IRELAND IN 100 OBJECTS, A SELECTION 5TH & 6TH CLASS LESSON PLAN

Tall cross, Monasterboice late ninth century



High crosses can be found all over the country, as well as in parts of Britain. These crosses are Christian monuments and by the end of the 900s, there were roughly 250 in Ireland.

Crosses differed greatly from region to region but they all had certain features in common. They all had a similar base and a long, rectangular body with a circle close to the top, which we now think was a representation of the cosmos or universe.

High crosses stand in monasteries, and on some you can make out the names of actual people inscribed on the surface. These were probably powerful, local individuals – abbots or kings – who may well have paid for the construction of the cross or provided workers to get the job done. From their point of view, it was a good way of having their names remembered.

Most crosses were quite simple but some had elaborate images carved on their surfaces. One of the most famous high crosses in the country is the cross photographed here at Monasterboice, just outside Drogheda. It is the highest of all the high crosses in the country, hence its name – Tall cross. It is almost completely covered in scenes from The Bible, the sacred book of Christianity – scenes that include the crucifixion and David killing a lion.

These images would have been carved with great care and attention by skilled craftspeople, over a number of months and even years. People would have come from miles around to view the cross and attend prayer services at its base.

But perhaps the most important issue in relation to these wonderful and very complex objects is why they were built at all. Why go to all that bother and expense?

We now think that their main purpose was simply to tell those stories from The Bible and to send out a very clear message that belief in the Christian religion was a hugely important part of life at that time.