

Early Christian cross slabs in Down County Museum

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There are the remains of fourteen high crosses in county Down. Dating from the ninth to the twelfth century they include four particularly fine examples, at Downpatrick, Donaghmore, Drumadonnell (currently in store at Castlewellan¹) and Kilbroney. In addition to these large and often elaborate crosses, some incorporating scenes from the Bible, there are smaller crosses, incised or carved in relief onto stone slabs. This type tends to be earlier, perhaps from the seventh century, but could also overlap in date with the high crosses. They are associated with Early Christian sites such as Nendrum and Saul, from which there are several examples. Written sources indicate that the crosses could be commemorative, or act as boundary or topographical markers, or be used as a focus for services or penance, as well as being a form of witness.²

There are currently five of these Early Christian cross slabs in Down County Museum. Four are on a long-term renewable loan from the Select Vestry of Saul Parish Church and the fifth was given to the museum. The four from Saul were published in the Archaeological Survey of County Down⁴ but at the time one had been misplaced. The slab from Knockavalley, first noted by O'Laverty,⁴ and later recorded by Robert Davidson,⁵ had also been lost for some time. It is therefore good to record that not only are all now safely in the keeping of the museum, but they are also on permanent display. Full details are given below. Negotiations are currently in progress with the Environment and Heritage Service to borrow for display further examples from other sites in County Down, so that they may be more readily seen by those interested.



Stone Slab, catalogue no. 3



Stone Slab, catalogue no. 4

Catalogue

1. Slab inscribed on one side only, with an equal arm cross, the arms expanding and the ends connected by a ring. The cross has been pecked out by hammering and partially smoothed. 417 x 217 x 40 mm.
2. Shafted cross in relief, on one side. At the junction is a shallow circular depression with incised saltires above and below on the head and shaft. Reverse damaged but remains of a similar cross. 985 x 308 x 160 mm.
3. Slab incised with a Maltese cross within three concentric circles. Cross set within central circle and spiral scrolls between each arm. Running scroll between inner and central circles. Part of another cross, within two concentric circles, on the same side. 625 x 635 x 55 mm.
4. Slab inscribed with six crosses on one side and one on the reverse. 380 x 330 x 78 mm. This slab could not be found in 1966, although a drawing, dated 1874, was published in the Archaeological Survey of County Down.
5. Simple cross in relief, hammer-dressed, on one side. 445 x 153 x 105 mm.

Cleaned on acquisition by Malcolm Fry, Environment and Heritage Service. This was associated with a mound at Knockavalley, Killough. When recorded in 1958 it was lying loose on top of the mound, subsequently lost and found again. There are no extant remains of a church or any other buildings, and nothing is known of its history, although O'Laverty recorded that the mound was said to

mark the site of an old cemetery and also said that the church gave its name to the town of Killough.

Items I-4 have been lent by the Select vestry of Saul Parish Church. Item 5 was the gift of Mr P Stewart, Killough.



Stone crosses; from left, catalogue nos. 1, 2, and 5

Lesley Simpson is the museum's Keeper of Collections.

References

- ▶1. Contact the Environment and Heritage Service at 5-33 Hill Street, Belfast.
 - ▶2. Kathleen Hughes and Ann Hamlin, *Celtic Monasticism, The modern traveller to the Early Irish Church* (New York 1981)
 - ▶3. *An Archaeological Survey of County Down* (Belfast, 1966).
 - ▶4. James O'Laverty, *An Historical Account of the Diocese of Down and Connor*, 1, (Dublin 1878), 156.
 - ▶5. Robert C Davidson, 'Some crosses in County Down', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, 21, (1958), 89. It is fitting to record here that the late Robert Davidson did much valuable work by recording archaeological sites and finds in east Down. He bequeathed his collection to Down County Museum.
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