

# **“Best Types of American Memorial Art”**

## **III. The Celtic Up-Right Cross Slab”**

By Ernest Stevens Leland

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The article begins:

“In studying the art of the Celt, we may broadly divide it in two periods, the Pagan and Christian. With the exception of a few scattered examples, the art of stone carving was not practiced by the Pagan Celt. Skilled as he was in metal work, wood carving and pottery, it was not until the Christian era that he developed sculpture to that degree of distinction which characterizes his work in other fields. Celtic Art of the Christian period is usually from the year A.D. 450....”

The article includes a section on “American Examples of the Cross-Slab.”

This article, which begins on the next page,  
is presented on the Stone Quarries and Beyond web site.

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# Best Types of American Memorial Art

By ERNEST STEVENS LELAND

## III—The Celtic Up-Right Cross Slab



IN STUDYING the art of the Celt, we may broadly divide it in two periods, the Pagan and Christian. With the exception of a few scattered examples, the art of stone carving was not practiced by the Pagan Celt. Skilled as he was in metal work, wood carving and pottery, it was not until the Christian era that he developed sculpture to that degree of distinction which characterizes his work in other fields. Celtic Art of the Christian period is usually dated from the year A. D. 450. The student who would acquire more specific and definite information concerning the historic and archaeological facts, so closely allied with our subject, is referred to the works listed at the close of this article.

Commencing then with the Christian era and terminating with the Norman period, we have in the art of Britain the highly developed Celtic style so interesting to us. Because so many of the finest and best known examples of pre-Norman Christian art are found in Ireland, we are accustomed to hear it styled as "Irish," "Hiberno-Saxon," and the like; but since so many examples of the same style of decoration are found in Scotland, Wales, Cornwall and the Isle of Man, and whereas the line of demarcation between the art of the Celtic and the Anglo-Saxon Christian monument is so imperceptible, it is a decided convenience, if nothing else, to apply the generic title "Celtic"; especially since the Celtic element so completely dominates.

It is impractical, in so brief an article, to attempt more than a very brief survey of the decorative features peculiar to Celtic monuments, and the various theories as to the origin of the component elements can but lightly be touched upon. In his monumental work, "The Cross in Tradition, History and Art," Seymour begins his discussion of the ornaments peculiar to the cross with quotations from I Kings 4 and II Chronicles 3, in which the "cherubim, bosses, net work and chain-work" used in decorating Solomon's Temple are discussed. "From Judea,"

he writes, "whether accidentally or providentially, we cannot say, these ornamentations were transported to Italy and thence to Western Churches." Whatever importance we may attach to so broad a statement, careful study of the subject will find us interested in the Lombardo-Byzantine theory as to the source of much of the interlaced work and ornamentation common to the Celtic Cross in its various forms. Several illustrations, borrowed from J. Romilly Allen's "Celtic Art in Christian and Pagan Times," are introduced to suggest the possible relationship of Italian and Celtic art. Speaking of the Z-like lines placed at regular intervals, a motive quite common in Celtic art, Owen Jones has interestingly invited attention to a very ancient Chinese pattern similar in effect.

Just as some writers have been overzealous in claiming a native origin for all that is best in the art of the Celt, so have others gone to extremes in suggesting foreign influences. It may interest the reader to know that Allen "is unquestionably the greatest living authority on Celtic Archaeology."

The evolution of the familiar Celtic Cross from the rude "pillar-stone" stage, is a very interesting hypothesis, and while it is not claimed by authorities that the changes took place in chronological order, it may be helpful to briefly consider it. The so-called pillar-stone was not given any regular architectural shape, the earlier examples being crudely decorated with a simple incised cross on both the front



CELTIC HEADSTONES IN SCOTLAND AND WALES.



Vine Scrolls, S. Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna.



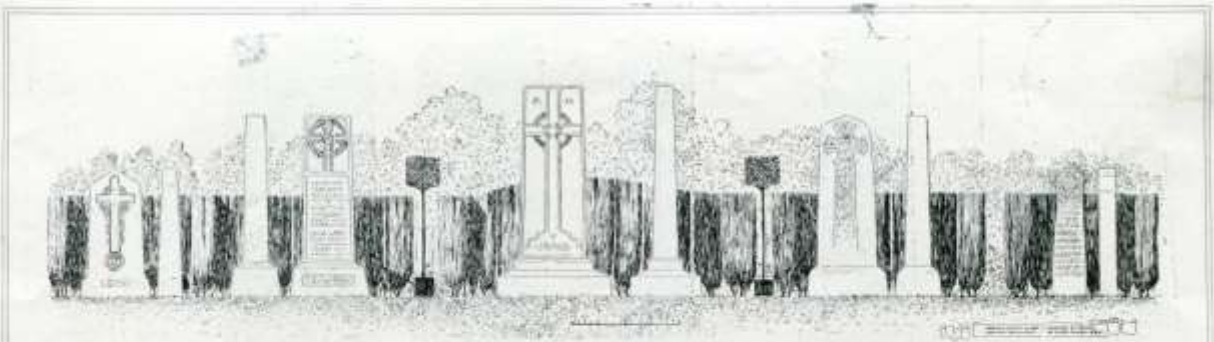
Key Pattern, Ravenna.

DID THE CELT BORROW HIS INTERLACED ORNAMENT FROM SUCH EXAMPLES IN ITALY?

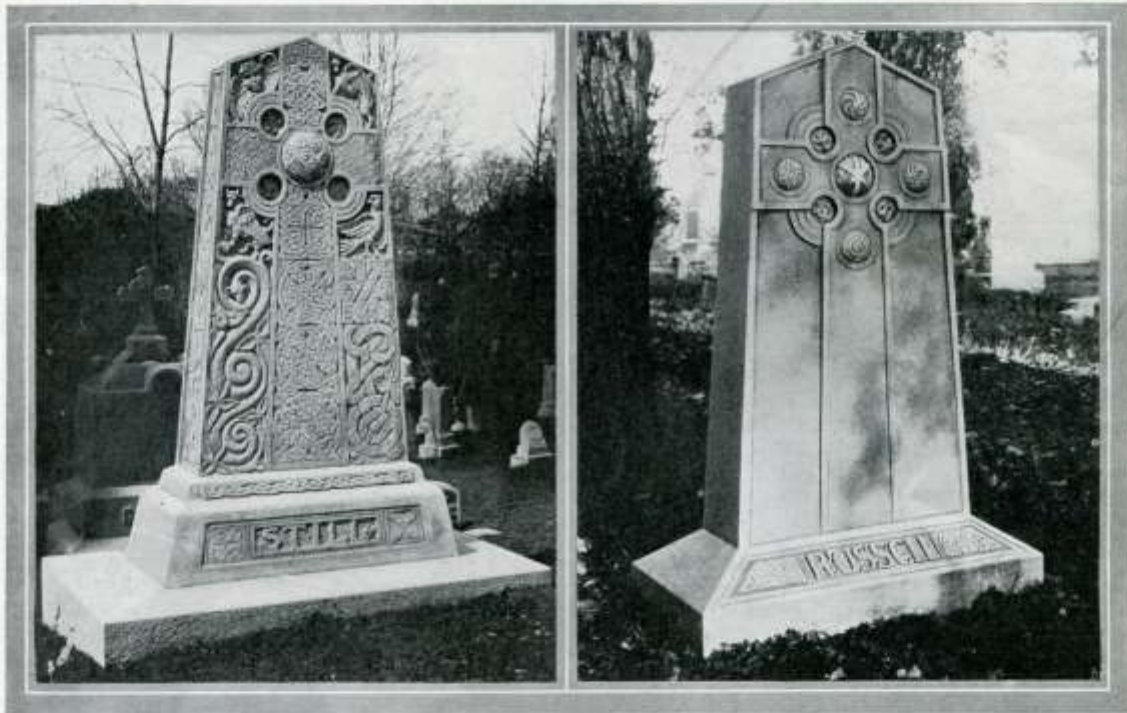
and back. In place of the cross, the Sacred Monogram (XP) is often used. The familiar cross and circle or nimbus was later adopted together with some elaboration, from which stage we gradually find the slab commencing to take definite form. This, the erect and recumbent cross slab, was later developed into the "wheel-cross" by cutting away the stone around the nimbus or circle, which at that time completely enclosed the arms of the cross. The evolution of the free standing cross from the latter stage is obvious, as the "cutting-away" process was simply applied to the whole slab, leaving the cross and circle alone. A pen and ink sketch is introduced to perhaps better illustrate this theorem, the examples used being largely borrowed from the celebrated "Brindley and Weatherley's Ancient Sepulchral Monuments."

In the following discussion of the Erect Cross Slab, no attempt is made to consider the various knots, plaits, key-patterns, zoomorphs and other characteristic ornamentation, as our limited space will not permit an adequate consideration of either the principles involved in "laying out" the various patterns, or the symbolical significance ascribed to some of them. In an early issue of the MONUMENTAL NEWS, Prof. Allen's comprehensive work is to be reviewed and the reader may there gather some idea of this complex but fascinating art. We shall, then, confine ourselves to the various general types of cross-slab, and if possible illustrate means by which this perfect type of Christian monument may be brought within reach of the average purchaser.

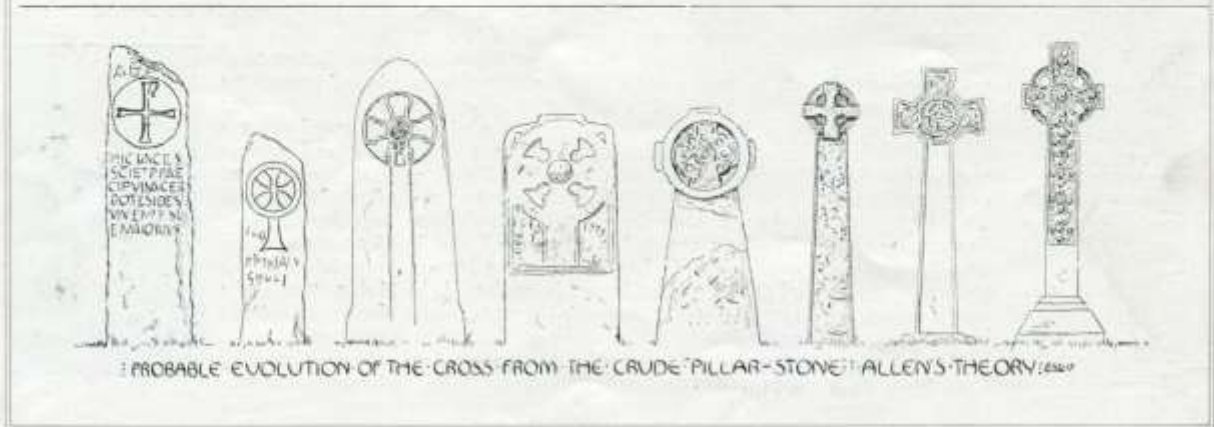




VARIOUS MODERN FORMS OF THE ERECT CROSS SLAB.



HIGHLY ENRICHED CROSS-SLAB AND A MODIFIED VARIANT



(captions) (top) "Various modern forms of the erect cross slab." (middle) "Highly enriched cross-slab and a modified variant." (bottom) "Probable evolution of the cross from the crude 'Pillar-Stone.' Allen's Theory." (pp. 275)





HEADSTONE CROSS AT MARGAM, WALES.

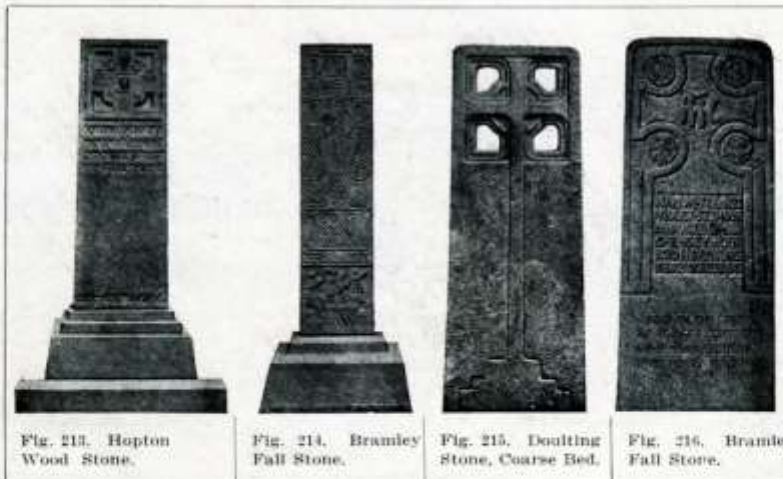


Fig. 213. Hopton Wood Stone.

Fig. 214. Bramley Fall Stone.

Fig. 215. Doulling Stone, Coarse Bed.

Fig. 216. Bramley Fall Stone.

MODERN ENGLISH CROSS TABLETS. FROM WEAVER'S "MEMORIALS AND MONUMENTS."



UPRIGHT CROSS SLAB AT COSSINS FORFARSHIRE, SCOTLAND.

The best examples of the erect cross-slab date from about the Ninth Century. With a few unimportant exceptions, they are peculiar to Scotland, while the recumbent slab is more common to Ireland, there being as many as two hundred in Clonmacnois alone. Usually executed in materials found near the site, a preference for freestone is apparent, attributable, doubtless, to its easy working qualities. Allen points out that the majority of the crosses were carved in fine grained sandstone, though in Cornwall granite was largely used. At Carew, Pembrokeshire and Moel Siarman, Brecknockshire there are crosses of trap-rock, while in the Isle of Man most of the crosses were done in slate. The extensive use of limestone in this country for Celtic crosses and slabs would seem to have ample precedent among ancient examples and the reasons which prompted the use of easy working stone in those days apply in our modern reproductions. There is, however, one other important reason for the use of lime-



HEADSTONE CROSS AT MERTNYR, WALES.

stone in recent Celtic monuments, and that is, the interesting discoloration which takes place, giving an air of antiquity to the work which is hard to attain in the granite. It is futile to suggest, as some do, that the sole reason for using limestone is economy. Some of our leading sculptors, architects and fellow craftsmen have employed that material in countless instances where cost was

absolutely no object. However, in cases where the common objections to limestone are advanced, the use of our American red granites affords a splendid compromise, as they give, when properly treated with a chiseled or sketchy finish, the desirable "atmosphere" so difficult to attain in our fine, light stones.

The writer has introduced several sketches illustrating some ancient cross-slabs, together with a photograph of the familiar stone in Aberlemno churchyard, Forfarshire. Said to have been erected in commemoration of a victory over the Danes in the latter part of the Tenth Century, it is perhaps the most widely known example of the Celtic erect cross-slab. As is true of most slabs of this period, the ornamentation is largely borrowed from the Celtic illuminated MSS. Indeed, in many instances, as in the stone at St. Madoes, Perthshire, the ornamental pages are transferred to the stone "with hardly any modification whatever to suit the requirements of the new material." The Aberlemno slab is four feet wide at the ground line and tapers to two feet eleven inches at the top. It stands seven feet high and the cross proper measures one foot six at the ground, tapering to a width of ten inches where it meets the gable. It will be found that frequently the true circle is not used for the nimbus on these slabs, the wheel being formed by striking arcs from the point of intersection of the cross arms and shaft. Many free standing crosses are similarly treated, and with a pleasing result, as the effect is not so severe and mechanical as the perfect circle. The little pen and ink sketch of a slab at Cossins, Forfarshire, may recall some of the Roman headstones in outline. It is two feet seven inches wide and stands seven feet six inches above ground. Many of these tall, narrow slabs measure but four or five inches in thickness.

The little pen and ink sketch of Celtic headstones in Scotland and Wales recalls

some facts concerning the desecration and rude disposition of much that is finest in Celtic art. The two headstones, in the upper right and lower left hand corners, respectively, of the sketch, are very similar to a stone, in memory of one "Gurmac," now in St. David's Cathedral. This stone was until recently used as a gate post. There are two other stones now beside it in Bishop Vaughn's chapel, one of which was found built into a hedge, the third being used as a prop to a gate. The Normans, who seem to have cultivated a profound contempt for anything Saxon or Celtic, smashed up "the most beautiful crosses erected by their predecessors" and used "the fragments for stone walls." The foundation course of the west wall of St. Andrew's cathedral (Twelfth Century) is almost entirely composed of cross-slabs taken from the old Culdee burial ground near by. Fortunately, these vandals did not see fit to destroy the sculptures on these stones and so many of them are preserved unto this day. Not until quite recently, however, has the Englishman come to appreciate the real merit in these ancient sculptured stones. One writer has perhaps said all that can be said regarding this indifference, in these words, "If the crosses had the good fortune to be buried beneath the sands of Egypt or concealed in the depths of the tropical forests of Central America, we should have long ago sent out expeditions to bring them over here (England) and set them in the chief place of honor in our museums." The reproduction of a



ERECT CROSS SLAB IN ABERLEMNO CHURCHYARD.

(captions) (top, left) "Headstone Cross at Margam, Wales." (top, right) "Upright Cross Slab at Cossins Forfarshire, Scotland." (top, center) "Modern English cross tablets. From Weaver's 'Memorials and Monuments.'" "Fig. 213. Hopton Wood Stone." "Fig. 214. Bramley Fall Stone." "Fig. 215. Doulling Stone, Coarse Bed." "Fig. 216. Bramley Fall Stone." (bottom, left) "Headstone cross at Mertnyr, Wales." (bottom, right) "Erect cross slab in Aberlemno churchyard." (pp. 276)



page from Lawrence Weaver's "Memorials and Monuments" (hereinafter mentioned) illustrates some modern English adaptations of Celtic examples. The last two are especially noteworthy because of their extreme simplicity. The four piercings, done to emphasize the cross, in number 215, are quite a striking effect, while the four roundels of floral decoration in the arms of the cross in number 216 are the only decorative features in what is otherwise scarcely more than effectively managed V-groove work.

### *American Examples of the Cross-Slab*

The STILL cross: Surrounded, since the photograph was taken, by a mass of carefully planned shrubbery, this remarkable adaptation of the Aberlemno cross tablet stands in the Forestdale Cemetery at Holyoke, Mass. As will be noticed in comparing the Still with the Aberlemno slab, the serpentine-like creature, forming the spirals in the left panel, is shown without legs in the Still, a spray of foliage replacing this feature of the original. Moreover, had a Celtic stone-carver developed this example, we should certainly have the snake biting his own body—a favorite device. In place of the zoomorphs or animal-like figures about the cross arms, we find in the Still, the symbols of the Four Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. As it is the purpose of these articles to enlarge upon the moderate priced adaptation of the best types, we will not attempt an essay on the significance of this richly carved tablet, nor an analysis of the elements which have produced such a powerful composition. Let us however note

the introduction of bases and how well they have been made to blend with the slab proper. The name panel is a nice piece of designing. Carved in Indiana Limestone the tablet stands on a coarsely pointed pink Westerly granite base. The back is plain. The general dimensions are 7-3x3-9x9-5. The Still was designed by the Leland Company and executed in their New York Studio.

The RUSSELL: In St. Stephen's Cemetery at Milburn, New Jersey, stands this modified form of the Celtic cross tablet. We may well use the word "modified" advisedly, as there are many examples of the ancient cross-slab in which ornament was sparingly used, if at all. In outline, both the tablet and the cross faithfully follow their ancient prototype and the composition can properly be called Celtic, even if the more or less expensive interlaced ornament has been omitted. There is perhaps no better medium for employing the cross than in such a tablet as this; where it is desired to enlarge on that feature at small outlay. A number of beautiful slabs of this type have been developed by using the simple incised line where a raised margined cross is employed in the Russell. Less severe than the Calvary or Latin cross, the Celtic form with its hollows and the circle is far more effective from the standpoint of design and when carefully worked out on a slab, is not only less expensive than a free-standing cross, but where economy must be practiced the slab form offers far more opportunity for telling effects. It will be noticed that emphasis has been given to the hollows in the cross arms of the Russell by giving the enclosed surface a

"picked" or rock finish. The five bosses or raised discs are considered to be representations of the Five Wounds of Our Lord. The center boss bears a slightly raised XP or St. Constantine cross. In the name, we have a splendid variant of the Lombardic letter enclosed in an interesting panel. Like the Still this work is carved in limestone and the general dimensions are as follows: 4-5x2-2x7-0. The tablet was carved by the sculptor Nicola Antonucci in the studio of the Leland Company.

The initial letter of this article will serve to illustrate the character of illuminated initials common to the Celtic manuscripts, which were ever a source of inspiration to the stone-workers of that period.

The following books are recommended for further study of this subject:

Owen Jones' Grammar of Ornament. Sir Walter Armstrong's "Art in Great Britain and Ireland" (Charles Scribner's Sons). James Fergusson's "Rude Stone Monuments of All Countries." Margaret Stokes' "Early Christian Art in Ireland." William Wood Seymour's "The Cross in Tradition, History and Art" (G. P. Putnam's Sons). J. Romilly Allen's "Celtic Art in Christian and Pagan Times." Lawrence Weaver's "Memorials and Monuments" (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915). Brindley and Weatherley's "Ancient Sepulchral Monuments" (Woodford, Fawcett & Co., London).

Some further examples of inexpensive modern forms of cross slabs will be shown in the next installment of this series.

*(To be continued.)*