Manx Crosses & Carved Stones

Statement of Significance
The Manx crosses comprise two hundred objects of extraordinary diversity and international cultural interest. They range from simple grave-markers to intricately decorated memorials and fragments of church architecture. Concentrated at the centre of the British Islands, their cultural and historical affinities are shared with both these islands and Scandinavia. They were carved during a pivotal period stretching from the Island’s conversion to Christianity 1500 years ago to the reorganisation of the Church along European lines in the 12th and 13th centuries.
The Manx crosses and carved stones* are protected Ancient Monuments, responsibility for which lies with Manx National Heritage under the terms of the Manx Museum and National Trust Act. Many of the crosses are on display around the Island at parish churches and at other locations. Manx National Heritage has embarked on a review of the care and presentation of the crosses in order to develop and enhance public access and understanding of them.

The significance of the Manx crosses can be articulated as the sum of their heritage values, using widely accepted, standardised criteria.**

These criteria have been ordered to acknowledge the value of the crosses from a variety of perspectives ranging from the general public to individual specialists and academics.

They can be considered under four broad headings:

- **Evidential Values:** the potential of the crosses to yield primary evidence about past human activity.

- **Historical Values:** the means by which past people, events, life and belief can, through the crosses, be connected to the present, by illustrating aspects of religious belief, language, social history, trade, artistic creativity and craftsmanship.

- **Aesthetic Values:** the ways in which people derive sensory, spiritual and intellectual stimulation from the crosses.

- **Communal Values:** the meanings that the crosses hold for the people who relate to them, or for whom they contribute to their collective experience, memory and understanding, particularly but not exclusively in the context of the Isle of Man.

Various more general contemporary values and potentials, for example social, economic and educational, flow from these core criteria and will also be considered.

The Manx crosses vary considerably in character, complexity, size, content, skill, date, fragility, and thus, significance: our reactions to particular crosses as a result vary also, and are further tempered by the level of understanding that we, as individuals or communities, may bring to each of them.

This is the first time that the crosses have been the subject of this kind of exercise, resulting in a statement of their importance from a number of perspectives rather than simply their historical interest. This statement also marks a point in time in terms of what we know, and value, about the crosses, and acknowledges that there is still more to do to realise their potential.

* A very small minority of the carved stones included within this corpus display no overt sign of religious allegiance, and may relate to pre- or very early Christian times.

Nevertheless, over a century of scholarship has regarded them as part of the group, and referred to, and numbered, them as ‘Manx Crosses’. This Statement perpetuates the shorthand ‘Manx crosses’, rather than ‘and carved stones’.

Evidential Value

The potential of the crosses to yield primary evidence about past human activity.

The Manx crosses are a primary evidentiary source for the medieval period on the Isle of Man. Spanning the period from the 6th to the 13th centuries, they constitute physical evidence for both the indigenous population and the Norse immigration and cultural influences that spread around the North Atlantic from the end of the 8th Century onwards.

The considerable size of the corpus of carved stones - around 200 - and their unusual concentration within such a small area as the Isle of Man (although subject to external religious, cultural and artistic influences from far afield) imbues them with remarkable value as an evidential asset.

The crosses also fall into a partial evidential vacuum, because while the Island is strong in evidence for parts of this period, in terms of both artefacts and sites, in others it is notably weak. Thus, settlement archaeology is non-existent; church archaeology (after much, and still ongoing, reassessment) almost as poor. There is good evidence for early pagan Viking burial practices, and growing evidence for early Christian cemetery practices; the crosses offer an exceptional opportunity for studying changes to burial rites and monumentalism resulting from the coming-together of these two spiritual cultures.

Those crosses which display intricate sculptured designs are an exceptional resource to art historians specialising in the early medieval period and in Scandinavian and Insular art in particular. The large scale and public location of these stones historically will have made them highly influential to contemporary craftsmen working in other media, to which these designs will have been transferred and miniaturised.

Those crosses which carry inscriptions - in a range of languages and scripts - are primary records about a period for which other documentary media are largely silent, rendering them of exceptional value to linguists, archaeologists and social historians.

The crosses have suffered damage in the intervening period at least until the 18th Century when they began to attract antiquarian interest. In this respect their evidential value for the medieval period is diminished, but their biographical significance – through the period during which they were mistreated and up until the present day – is augmented. Their ability to reflect changing attitudes towards them through time is unparalleled though little exploited at present.

It will be clear that the Manx crosses are of exceptional evidential significance.
Historical Value

The means by which past people, events, life and belief can, through the crosses, be connected to the present, by illustrating aspects of religious belief, language, social history, trade, artistic creativity and craftsmanship.

The crosses are intimately associated with the development of early medieval cemeteries and field churches - keells - that lie throughout the Island, and with the early monasteries at Maughold and Peel. This is a much-researched, but still poorly-understood, aspect of local archaeology and history which commands great local and international interest, and whilst only one cross can lay claim to surviving in its original location, their past and continuing contribution to the study of this period is considerable.

Despite several centuries of maltreatment, re-use and weathering, the crosses retain much of their authenticity and have the potential to provide a great deal of historical information. Their current distribution may be misleading - the parishes in which they are now grouped did not exist - and should not be a barrier to new ideas for their protection, presentation and interpretation.

Their capacity to inform us of pagan and Christian belief is considerable, but is as yet largely untapped. Over thirty crosses depict Old and New Testament scenes and images from Scandinavian mythology - Norse gods, heroes and mythological animals and monsters. The presence of the latter on Christian monuments is unexpected, and attracts significant international academic interest.

The content of Christian imagery on the Manx crosses is unusual, sophisticated, and incompletely understood. As a result, it is attracting growing international academic interest.

About forty of these stones are carved with letters of the Ogham, Latin and Runic alphabets, written in Latin or the Old Irish and Old Norse languages. Their study has long attracted scholars on an international scale, whilst the personal and place names contained within the inscriptions hold great local and historical interest.

The more complex ‘Viking’ crosses (around a third of the total) in particular parallel sculpture, metalwork, and carved organic materials such as bone, ivory, wood and leather in medieval contexts throughout the British islands and further afield into north-western Europe and Scandinavia, and attract wide-ranging academic interest. The dating of the art styles on the crosses is, in the view of some specialists, long overdue reassessment.

The crosses reflect important historical issues to do with popular medieval belief, literacy, social status, cultural integration, and cultural aspiration, none of which have received much detailed attention through academic research. The Manx crosses as a whole possess considerable historical significance; in some respects this significance has not been fully realised and some individual crosses could be considered to have exceptional potential.
Aesthetic Value

The ways in which people derive sensory, spiritual and intellectual stimulation from the crosses.

The aesthetic value of the crosses is reflected in the variety, scope, and where relevant, the meaning, of the decoration on them. Most reactions are visual, but there are also religious and moralistic perceptions to be made from their study. This was true of the time when they were made, but their religious content and artistry is also appreciated at many different levels today by a public which very often does not know whether they are ‘Celtic’ or ‘Viking’ - and may to some degree not care.

Most, indeed almost all, of the crosses are fragmentary and worn. This patina of agedness creates a strong sense of their sometimes turbulent existence, and hints at times in the past when they were not so well regarded as today.

Despite the wear and tear they have suffered through time, the carved designs upon the crosses are easily - and freely - interpreted today, which has meant that the crosses continue to be relevant and are prized rather than forgotten by the public.

Whilst this may in turn result in a variety of public reactions to their aesthetic appeal, and a focus on the more pleasing or attractive stones, in actuality it adds to, rather than detracts from the value of the corpus as a whole because of the implications for the differing circumstances in which individual stones were originally carved.

The more highly decorated crosses have been, and continue to be, a rich source of inspiration to a diverse range of artists - some of whom, such as Archibald Knox, have developed international reputations - working in a variety of 2- and 3-dimensional media.

In particular, individuals, groups, private companies and government bodies keen to emphasise their Manx credentials, incorporate interlace patterns and knots into a variety of branding emblems. They are also a constant presence on Manx coinage and banknotes, handled everyday by the wider population and available overseas amongst collectors; the same is broadly true of historical examples of Manx stamps, which are often highly prized amongst philatelists.

The crosses display a range of quality in design, literacy and workmanship, and in these respects are similar to most large collections of such material; on artistic merit the best of the Manx crosses stand comparison with the best stone sculpture of the same period in Britain and Scandinavia. In both local and international milieux, the crosses as a group are of considerable aesthetic significance; individual crosses may be of exceptional value.
Communal value

The meanings that the crosses hold for the people who relate to them, or for whom they contribute to their collective experience, memory and understanding, particularly but not exclusively in the context of the Isle of Man.

Some two-thirds of the Manx crosses are displayed in groups collected at parish churches around the Island, the impetus for gathering them in this way having existed for around a century. Their localised distribution during this time has imbued them with an exceptional contemporary communal value and means that they are physically accessible to the public.

A significant number of the crosses are displayed in controlled conditions at the Manx Museum owing to their fragility or preserved at the Manx National Heritage storage facility at Balthane. Most of these stones - around 60 in number - have been recovered since the parochial cross displays were created, reflecting the difficulty of updating displays to reflect new discoveries. Increased public access to the Balthane store through guided tours provides the opportunity however to make these items more widely accessible.

A very much smaller number of stones remain at various locations in the landscape, which, while often surrounded by a sense of local community ownership, tends to highlight their vulnerability and the need for better protection.

At a local and personal level, most Manx people will have visited, touched, or even taken rubbings or photographs of the crosses, if only as part of a school visit, or while visiting the churches for other reasons. The crosses also have a wider communal value which is reflected in the exceptional significance they hold for the national and international academic community and results in a constant stream of visits by specialists from all over the world to the places where they are displayed.

The obviously Christian design of the crosses creates considerable additional spiritual meanings both at a personal level and by association with the places where they are displayed. They have a significant role to play in the growth of interest in faith tourism, and whilst their precise date and cultural origins are not always fully comprehended by the public they are an exceptional and potent source of pride in Manx, Celtic and Viking heritage and identity. This derives both from the crosses themselves and from artistic representations and reinterpretation of their design.

The crosses have exceptional communal value and influence, though this is frequently intangible and is not always readily understood or appreciated.
So are they Significant?

This document has used standardised criteria against which to measure the significance of the Manx crosses as a group of monuments. It summarises their historical, cultural and communal importance based on what is already known of them, whilst recognising that such knowledge is incomplete.

The significance of the crosses is most easily understood in crosses with intricate carving, detailed iconography, memorial inscriptions, and fine workmanship. It is least obvious, and less well understood, in terms of the spiritual meanings and links which different communities historically and contemporarily associate with the crosses.

For a majority of people, the crosses - individually and as a group - are both physically and intellectually inaccessible. Their educational value is undoubtedly under-developed and from this there flows a significant potential to inform and attract a larger knowledge-hungry public.

Taken as a group, the Manx crosses are deemed to be of considerable significance nationally and internationally. Individually, however, some crosses are of exceptional interest, importance and value to a variety of communities and for different reasons. Often, this value may be tangible or intangible, depending on the concern or interest of the community involved.

Their Future

In many ways the core value of the Manx crosses stems from their being a focus of Manx identity at national and local levels. How this is developed and enhanced is a challenge for now and the future, but must as a priority take into account the sensitivity and vulnerability of the crosses themselves as fragile pieces of medieval sculpture.

Existing locations and means of display are in some cases unacceptable in terms of security and environmental control, and interpretation is inadequate. Against this must be measured the fact that any conventional redisplay will only be up to date until the discovery of a new cross.

The location of nearly one third of the crosses in the care of Manx National Heritage rather than in the parochial collections is largely a reflection of the frequency with which new crosses are still found - more than 20 crosses have been found in the last 30 years alone.

The Manx crosses highlight an unique set of challenges. This statement of significance has been prepared by Manx National Heritage to highlight their importance and to focus wider attention and support for developing policy for their care and interpretation.
Want to know more about Manx Crosses & Carved Stones?

Manx National Heritage,
Kingswood Grove,
Douglas, Isle of Man IM1 3LY
01624 648000
enquiries@mnh.gov.im
manxnationalheritage.im