

Musical Monuments from Medieval Meath

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Bái Dáuid 'sa druim fri fraig
fecht fiad ind rig 'sin rigthaig
fo cháinbuidé na ndröng ndal
i n-oensuidi is Ionathán.

Luam laidi fo chaini cruth
gen gaili oc airfítuid
dond rig dont sluag cen teidm tind
ic seinm a thimpáin téidbind.

David was, with his back to the wall,
once in the presence of the king in the royal household
with the pleasant gratitude' of the crowded assembly
sharing a seat with Jonathan.

The sound of lays in fair form,
making music without deceit,
for the king, the host, without sore sickness,
playing his sweet-stringed *timpan*.¹

From *Saltair na Rann* (Stokes 1883, 89, ll 6053-6060)

The most common figure representing musical performance in medieval religious iconography is King David, Old Testament prophet, musician, and author of the Psalms. His appearance in Insular art emerged in the eighth century as the scope of the iconographic programme was beginning to widen. At this time Eastern Christian influences were strongest, as witness, for example, the Book of Kells (8th/9th century, which may have been produced on Iona), and Mercian stone sculpture (see Henderson 1986: 101).

David is depicted prominently in all of the surviving early Insular psalters where (with the exception of the Southampton Psalter) he is included in his role of Psalmist. In these and in figural sculpture he is shown typically with a stringed instrument, occasionally in the company of a wind instrument player, but rarely with his full

complement of four assistants, Asaph, Eman, Ethan and Idithun – a point of difference with many continental manuscript illustrations.²

Biblical scenes became increasingly important in Irish stone carving in the course of the ninth century, culminating in the late ninth or tenth century with some very elaborate examples, the most complex of which is undoubtedly the Cross of Muiredach at Monasterboice. It is most likely that the Carolingian *renovatio* would have influenced Irish artistic creativity (not least considering the many and active links between monastic centres in Ireland, Britain and continental Europe), but it is equally probable that established native art would have contributed significantly to the content of these visual representations. By its very nature, stone, unlike organic materials such as wood, has tended to survive the ravages of time and weather, but it is very possible that (as with buildings) carvings on wood will have also existed, even predating some of the earliest crosses (Stalley 1990, *passim*). To that extent, therefore, some aspects of these images may represent much older artistic ideas than surviving evidence suggests.

Carvings of musicians are found on some of the most important of the early Irish 'scriptural' crosses, most of which were situated on monastic lands within what was once the medieval kingdom of Meath – at Kells (Co. Meath), Clonmacnois and Durrow (Co. Offaly) – as well as Monasterboice (Co. Louth), just over the boundary to the north-east. These monuments are so described because they are decorated with panels representing scenes from Scripture, including both Old and New Testaments.

Of those discussed here, the Cross of Saints Patrick and Columba at Kells is probably the oldest, being thought to date from the early decades of the ninth century, around the time of the foundation of this Columban monastery (in 804) by monks fleeing the Viking attacks on Iona. (The reliquaries of St Columba were transferred to Kells in 877). The Kells West Cross is of the late ninth century, with Monasterboice, Clonmacnois and Durrow dating to the ninth or tenth (scholarly opinion varies).

The richness of their iconography suggests that they may have served a didactic purpose. Objects of devotion and meditation, loci of pilgrimage, of preaching, confession and penitence, it is thought that crosses may also have played a part in the liturgy and perhaps functioned as stations for processions, and as a place where Mass was celebrated. For example, Éamonn O Carragáin has suggested that

iconographic allusions to the Eucharist on the South Cross at Kells (also known as the 'Cross of Patrick and Columba') may indicate that Mass was celebrated in front of its west face (1988: 16ff).³

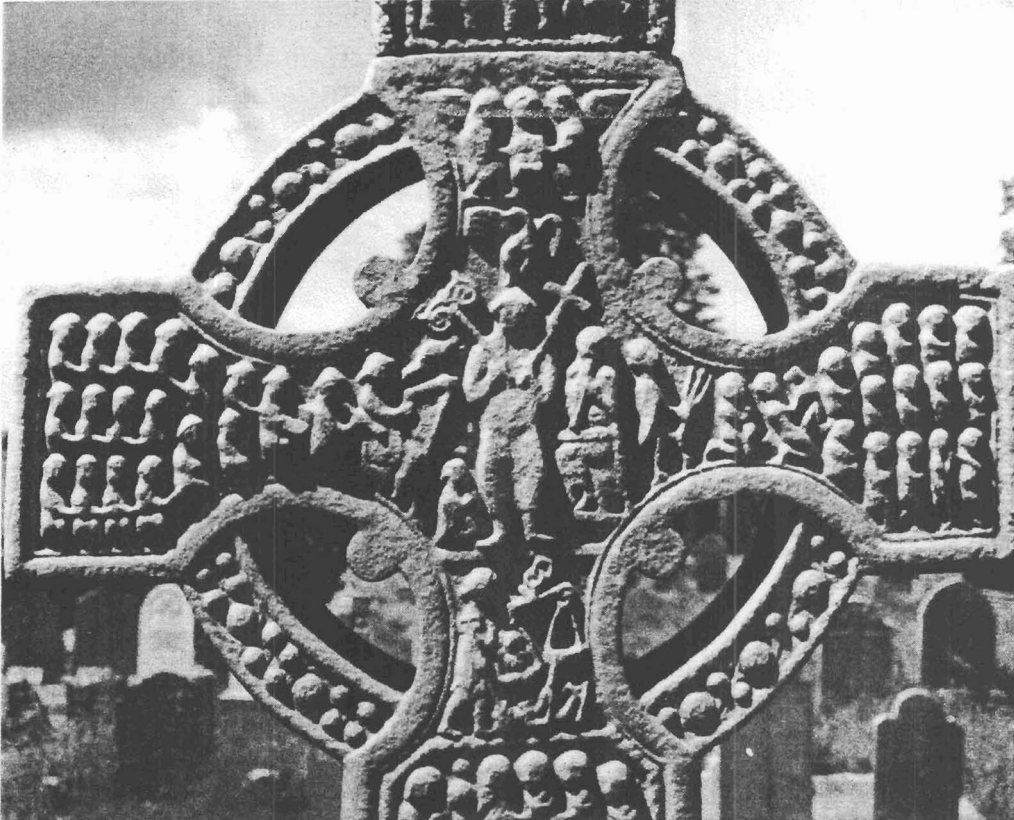


Fig. 1. Cross of Muiredach, Monasterboice, east face (9th or 10th century): Last Judgement with players of asymmetrical lyre and horn (north arm), and triple pipes (south arm). Photo: Commissioners of Public Works, Ireland.

Cross of Muiredach, Monasterboice (Fig. 1)

A detailed representation of the Last Judgement is found on the head of the east face. At the centre is Christ bearing a sceptre on his right shoulder, and a cross staff on his left. Above Him hovers a bird, representing the Holy Spirit; by His right foot an angel kneels in adoration. An image of St Michael weighing the souls of the dead on the scales of Judgement, or psychostasis, is seen below

The main scene is taken up with a crowd to either side. The Just are seated on Christ's right, led by two musicians, the first playing an asymmetrical lyre on top of which a bird is perched, presumably representing divine inspiration, heavenly music, and the sweetness of the sound of the strings – this last being a common allusion in

medieval Irish literature and poetry; The lyre has one arm longer than the other, thus the stringholder (to which the arms are attached) is pointed upwards towards the side away from the player. The strings are in fan formation and are stretched over a bridge, which is still visible, towards the lower end of the instrument. The player appears to be holding the frame of the instrument rather than plucking the strings. Behind the lyre-player another figure plays a long horn, while a third holds a book.⁴ Some have interpreted this wind instrument as a flute but it has a bell terminal, and is thus presumably intended to represent a horn. These three musicians, together with sixteen figures arranged in rows behind them, are evidently monks, their tonsures clearly visible.

Immediately to Christ's left is another seated musician playing a set of triple pipes. Since he faces Christ he is presumably one of the Just and a member of the musical ensemble. His instrument has three tubes of different lengths, the longest with a clearly defined bell. The piper's

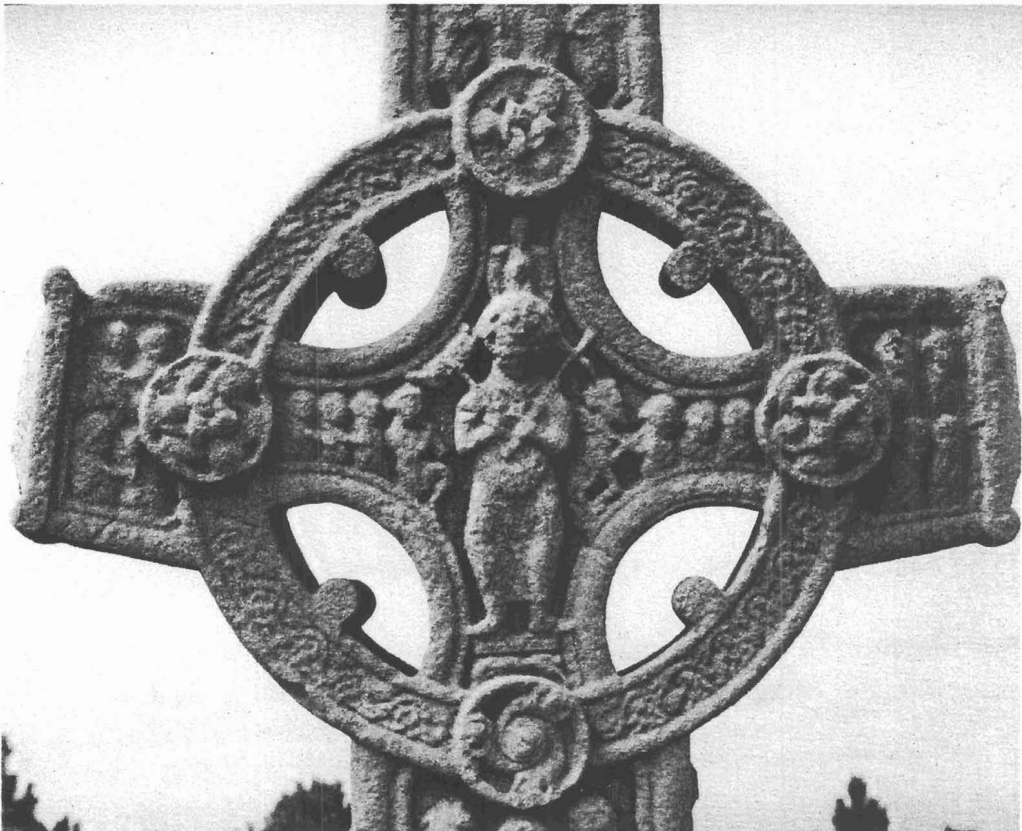


Fig. 2. Cross of the Scriptures, Clonmacnois, east face, north arm (9th or 10th century): Last Judgement with horn-player. Photo: Commissioners of Public Works, Ireland.

cheeks are puffed out realistically, and every detail of the representation looks highly credible.

Behind him a devil with a trident, his back to the central scene, herds the Damned (also a group of sixteen, though this time naked) off to Hell. The first of these looks like a couple engaged in fornication;⁵ next to them another holds aloft a rectangular object the identity of which Harbison describes as a book (1992:1, 142).⁶

Cross of the Scriptures, Clonmacnois (Figs. 2-4)

Another, though less detailed, representation of the Last Judgement occurs on the east face head of this monument. The Christ figure is similarly represented, with the Holy Spirit above, the Just to His right, facing Him, this time led by a single musician playing a long horn (again with the bell clearly delineated); the Damned to His left, being herded off to Hell by a cloaked and tonsured figure, with his back to Christ.

Two more musicians are seen separately on the sides of the cross shaft. As the designer had a larger amount of space than did the



Fig. 3. Cross of the Scriptures, Clonmacnois, north shaft, centre panel: player of triple pipes. Photo: Commissioners of Public Works, Ireland.



Fig. 4. Cross of the Scriptures, Clonmacnois, south shaft, centre panel: player of a round-topped lyre. Photo: Commissioners of Public Works, Ireland.

executor of the Monasterboice cross, the instrument, and the player, are portrayed here in great detail.

On the central panel, north side, a figure is seen playing a set of triple pipes, and on the opposite side another holds a lyre. The latter is seated with his knees bent upwards, next to a lion-like animal; the musician has long flowing hair, with his face looking outwards and his body in profile. He holds the frame of the instrument with his right hand. While the stonework is too weathered to see detail, the string band is clearly splayed, meeting at the tailpiece over the soundbox in the lower half of the instrument. What can only be interpreted as a bridge appears to run across the width of the soundbox.

The lyre player is perhaps intended to be seated on a throne with animal carvings; or the animal may represent the lion being overcome by David. There is a similar scene in the tenth-century Irish psalter known as the 'Cotton' Psalter.⁷

The piper also has flowing hair and both his body and face are directed outwards from the frame; his moustache is still visible. The instrument is clearly delineated, as are the puffed-out cheeks and the disposition of the player's fingers. He is in a seated position, wearing a tunic down to his ankles, and with bare feet; there is no sign of a throne. At his feet are two animals, perhaps lions, back to back, giving the appearance of a footrest. Harbison (1992:1, 53) suggests that the musician may be St Anthony playing a lament for St Paul in the desert, and that the animals represent the lions which helped him to dig the grave of his fellow-hermit. In the top left-hand corner of the panel Harbison identifies a cat-like figure which seems to lick or examine the underside of its body:

The presence of three musicians on this cross, albeit not in the same scene, might nonetheless suggest that they are in some way connected and that they may have been intended to convey some symbolic message of Good and Evil.

Durrow Cross (Fig. 5)

A third instance of musicians present at the Last Judgement occurs on the cross at the site of the Columban monastery of Durrow, again on the head, east face. A horn-player, immediately on Christ's right, looks like an angel with a feathered wing – perhaps a representation of St Michael the Archangel blowing his trumpet. But it is also possible that what looks like a wing was intended as a cloak (compare, for example, the cloaks worn by the two ecclesiastics on the Shrine of



Fig. 5. Durrow Cross, east face, south arm (9th or 10th century): Last Judgement with players of lyre and horn. Photo: Commissioners of Public Works, Ireland.

the Stowe Missal (Fig. 10), and of the harper on Breac *Maedóic* (see Buckley 2005, pl. 125). A second angel, on Christ's left, arms folded, looks upwards in adoration.

Behind the horn-player is a musician with a lyre, again possibly representing David who, on the opposite arm, is shown fighting the Lion. The lyre-player is seated, with a stringed instrument held between the knees, the left forward of the right. The hand does not come in contact with the strings but is placed on the frame of the instrument which is slightly oblique in contour, with one straight and one curved arm, and points upwards where the yoke meets the straight arm. The strings, six in number, are arranged in fan formation as at Monasterboice, stretched over a bridge, meeting in the lower half of the instrument where they would have been attached at the base. Not only is the bridge clearly visible here, but the soundbox also is well defined, leaving no doubt as to its identity as a type of lyre. The horn-player is shown in a crouched position, somewhat exaggerated, no doubt in order that it could be accommodated within the double curve of the cross arm.

Cross of Saints Patrick and Columba, Kells (Fig. 6)

The east face head and capstone of the Cross of Saints Patrick and Columba at Kells are replete with Eucharistic symbols. On the head is a circle of six bosses with a seventh at their centre, probably representing loaves of bread. Above them two fish in the shape of an 'X' form a 'Chi' (Greek 'X'), representing the name of Christ. At the



Fig. 6. South Cross or Cross of Patrick and Columba, Kells, west face, head (early 9th century): Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes, featuring an asymmetrical lyre. Photo: Commissioners of Public Works, Ireland.

base of the capstone are two seated figures, one on the right representing Christ performing the miracle of multiplication, and on the left a figure plays a lyre. Between them are several round objects – probably intended as loaves of bread – and above can be seen the heads of the crowd being fed.

There is some difference of opinion about this scene. Peter Harbison (1992:1, 109-10) is sceptical of the interpretation of the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes precisely because of the presence of a musician.⁸ (Clearly the Old Testament King David was not present on the occasion of Christ's miracle.) He therefore suggests that the two facing figures are David and Saul. And presumably as a consequence, he further states that he can find no connection with the fish below

Whether one interprets the musician as a David figure is doubtful (except in a generic sense). Rather is it more likely to be an Irish interpretation of a great feast which would be unthinkable without the presence of music to adorn the occasion.⁹ In this case, as with the Last Judgement scenes above, it is probable that it was intended to convey the performance of sacred music, perhaps hymns of joy and praise.

West or Broken Cross, Kells (Fig. 7)

On the third panel up is seen the most opaque representation from a contextual viewpoint, the complexity of which is discussed in some detail by Harbison (1992:1, 101-2). In the centre is a seated figure, with two to the left and two to the right. Harbison suggests that the two to the right represent i) Jesus delivering the adultress; ii) Jesus with the woman of Samaria at the Well; or iii) the adultress being delivered to Christ (this time the central figure) by one of the scribes or Pharisees.¹⁰

But it is the figures on the left which are of interest here. One holds aloft a rectangular object; beneath him is another, horizontal, figure. Harbison's interpretation proposes Christ raising a rectangular object with an arched top as possibly a tomb, with Lazarus inside – identified as the nearly prone figure below. Alternatively, he suggested that the figure below might represent one of the three Maries, usually shown prostrate at the feet of Christ in Lazarus scenes; or a personification of Death in Hades; or indeed, he suggests, the tableau could represent Christ healing the lame man at the pool of Bethesda; or even that this is not Christ but a representation of the lame man taking up his bed and, below him, a figure of the angel who came to trouble the waters

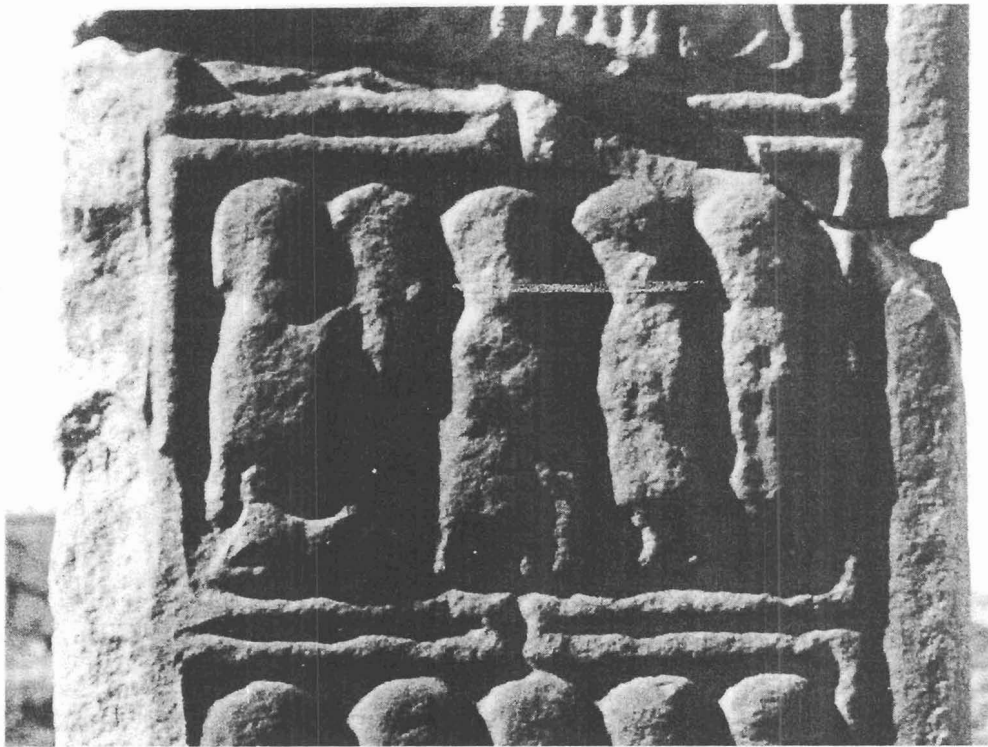


Fig. 7. West Cross, Kells, east shaft, third panel up (late 9th century): round-topped lyre; Photo: Commissioners of Public Works, Ireland.



Fig. 8. Kinnitty Cross, east shaft, centre panel (mid-9th century): round-topped lyre. Photo: Commissioners of Public Works, Ireland.



Fig. 9. Slab in Tower of Lethendy (10th century): a harper and triple piper. Photo: The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland.

of the pool.

Any or all of such conjecture would be plausible were it not for the distinct resemblance of the rectangular object to a round-topped lyre. Comparing it to similar instruments (for example, the round-topped lyre at Clonmacnois), it becomes difficult to interpret this object as anything else. But the closest similarity is with another Offaly cross at Castlebernard, known as the Kinnitty Cross as it is believed to have come from the graveyard at Kinnitty (Fig. 8).

The musician at Kells faces outwards. It is unclear whether he is seated or standing since the lower part of his body has been cut away, as it were, to make room for the horizontal figure below. He holds the instrument aloft with both hands. The string band, though rather weathered, is identifiable, as are the bridge and tailpiece for securing the strings at the end of the instrument.

If this is another David figure, then the object below, which looks like a four-legged animal with a long snout and a short tail, could be either a poorly-represented lion, or a dog. Perhaps the dog suggests David's pastoral activities. This animal is not unknown in insular

representations of music-making. A more obviously dog-like creature is depicted on the tenth-century slab in the Tower of Lethendy, Perthshire, in which two musicians face each other, one playing a triangular harp the other a set of triple pipes (Fig. 9).

The musical instruments

Lyre and harps

A lyre is a quadrilateral instrument with strings parallel to the soundbox, i.e. running over it and usually supported by a bridge. In other words, the soundbox (or resonator) of a lyre is underneath the lower half of the string band. At the top, the strings are attached to a string holder (or yoke) by tuning keys which are adjusted to the required pitch. The upper part of a lyre is open so that the player's hand can reach through to stop the strings in order to change the pitch. Some lyres have a fingerboard, i.e., the strings are stopped by being pressed down against it (as in the case of the Welsh *crwth*); others are free, which means that only sideways pressure can be applied.

A harp is trilateral with strings perpendicular to the soundbox, i.e., they run between soundbox and neck, to which they are attached with tuning pins. The third side is the arm which can be either straight or curved. The late medieval Irish harp had a particularly thick soundbox made from a single piece of wood, with a deeply curved arm and neck. Other medieval harps had smaller frames, although their basic characteristics would have been the same.

Sometimes in visual media it can be difficult to ascertain whether an image was intended to represent a harp or a lyre, particularly because of weathering, and not least also because the people who designed and executed them may not always have been informed about such technical matters. Nonetheless, it must be said that the monuments under discussion here show remarkable attention to detail and appear to be largely realistic. This suggests that the craftsmen were modelling their images on living practice, or copying from models so informed.

Three types of plucked lyre are depicted on the scriptural crosses: round-topped on Clonmacnois and the West Cross at Kells; with one curved and one straight arm on Durrow (as also on the Shrine of the Stowe Missal, Fig. 10); and asymmetrical or oblique on Monasterboice and the Kells Cross of Patrick and Columba.

In the case of carvings of oblique instruments, in particular, there

can be doubt as to whether a harp or lyre was intended, as for example, in the scene on the head of the Kells Cross of Patrick and Columba which Harbison evidently viewed as a three-sided instrument and so classified as a harp. However, even if the base is not clear to see here, the string band runs over the soundbox, and both arms are of equal thickness. A bridge is clearly visible on Monasterboice but is, admittedly, badly weathered on Kells.



Fig. 10. Shrine of the Stowe Missal (mid-11th century): a figure with asymmetrical three-stringed lyre seated between two clerics, with bell and crozier, respectively, and the Holy Spirit above. Photo: National Museum of Ireland.



Fig. 11. Stone carving at Kirk Michael (10th century): Anointment of David; oblique lyre. Photo: R. Trench-Jellicoe.

The most distinct example occurs on the tenth-century stone carving at Kirk Michael, Isle of Man (Fig. 11), which helps clarify the question beyond doubt. It is an exceptionally large illustration of an oblique lyre with four or five strings in fan formation, narrowing towards the lower part of the instrument where they are stretched over a bridge situated on a clearly defined soundbox. The scene represents the Anointment of David by Samuel who holds a curved (animal-) horn (containing the sacred oil) above the musician's head.¹¹

Straight Horns

The straight horns of Monasterboice, Clonmacnois and Durrow require little explication. Another Last Judgement scene, depicted in the St Gall Gospels, (St Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, MS 51, p. 267) – an Irish manuscript from the second half of the eighth century) shows Christ in Glory with a trumpeting angel on either side (see Buckley

1995a, fig. 39). The metal bands of their instruments are clearly seen, and the slight flare of the bell is realistic. They are pointing downwards, with the mouthpiece held up to the mouth by the player's left hand and the right hand supporting the instrument at a mid-way point. An instrument of this type, now in the Ulster Museum, was recovered from Lough Erne, Co. Fermanagh. It is made of two pieces of hollowed-out yew secured with bronze mounts, and is dated to the eighth or ninth century (Buckley 2005, pl. 140b). The decoration on the metal fittings of the Lough Erne horn is similar to that found on bells and liturgical buckets of the period, underlining the possibility of a sacred Christian association,¹² or perhaps even liturgical use of such instruments (discussed further in Buckley 1990b, 177ff; and eadem 2005, 753, 763, 775, 805-6). Another, similar, example from Co. Mayo, now in the National Museum of Ireland, is dated to the ninth century.

Triple Pipes

The details of the sets of triple pipes on both the Monasterboice and Clonmacnois monuments are still very clearly visible. They have tubes of different lengths, the longest with a clearly-defined flare at the terminus. Instruments of this type are found also on some Scottish monuments, such as St Martin's Cross, Iona (Fig. 12), and in the tower at Lethendy (Fig. 9)

On Lethendy the right-hand fingers can be clearly seen to curve around the two shorter pipes which appear to be almost of equal length. The left hand, placed higher than the right, holds the longer pipe slightly apart from the others; it appears to have a slightly bulbous form at the distal end, perhaps a bell or a flare. Both musicians wear tunics to mid-calf, tied at the waist. Lethendy is the only representation of triple pipes in the Pictish part of Scotland.

Today the only surviving instrument of this type in Europe is the Sardinian *launeddas*, a double reed instrument (e.g., as is the oboe), and thus producing a strident tone. It requires considerable strength to play, and sound is produced by the method known as 'circular breathing' – i.e., the musician inhales through the nose and exhales through the mouth which is kept constantly full of air, thus acting as a reservoir in the same way as the bag functions in the case of bagpipes. The puffed-out cheeks on the monuments are further testimony to the realism of this interpretation.



Fig. 12. St Martin's Cross, Iona, west face (late 8th century) third scene up: players of lyre and triple pipes. Photo: The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland.

The absence of any written insular record of such an instrument leaves open the question as to its actual existence in Ireland (or Scotland), and therefore whether it was copied from life (which is far from unlikely) or from an image imported from continental Europe.

Disposition of the Musicians and their Instruments

The combination of triple pipes with insular types of lyre nonetheless does suggest observation of local practice as seen on the crosses at Monasterboice, Clonmacnois, St Martin's Cross, Iona, slabs at Ardchattan and the Tower at Lethendy. Such an ensemble is not depicted anywhere else in Britain, or indeed in Europe as a whole, making it likely that it may have had distinct regional associations.

Noteworthy also is the representation of some musicians not on thrones (as in English and continental representation of David) but



Fig. 13. Book of Kells (8th/9th century), fol. 292r: In *Principio*, with seated figure (letter ‘i’) playing a lyre in the shape of the letter ‘c’. Photo: Photographic Archives, Department of Archaeology, University College Dublin.

seated on the ground, or in a crouched position as found on Kells Broken Cross, the Shrine of the Stowe Missal, the north pillar now situated by the high cross at Carndonagh, Co. Donegal, and the Kirk Michael carving on the Isle of Man.

This feature is comparable also to a very stylised representation in the Book of Kells (Fig. 13), a late-eighth-/early-ninth-century Gospel Book (Trinity College Dublin MS A.I.6, fol. 292r). On the opening page of St John's Gospel, with the words In *Principio*, the letter ‘c’ is,

as it were, held by the tiny figure of a man formed from the letter “i”. He is seated on the ground – this time in left profile – with his knee bent upwards, and his left hand reaching out to pluck a chordophone with a zoomorphic terminal.

A much later instance occurs in an illustration of entertainment at an Irish feast in John Derricke's *Image of Irelande* (1581/1985). There the harper (*cruitire*) is seated on the ground on a cushion of straw; the reciter (reacaire) stands, arms outstretched, performing to the harper's accompaniment. The topic is likely that of praise for the chieftain's "noble conquests done, / And eke in Rimes shewes forth at large / their glorie thereby wonne", as Derricke reports (Derricke 1985, 55-6, pl. 3).¹³

We are more accustomed to seeing musicians in English and continental illustrations seated upon thrones, stools, or chairs. While these often represent an idealised view of King David, they probably reflected the custom in their local courts too. However, while some Irish images of David also show him sitting on a chair, not all do. It may be that it was more usual here, in a secular context at least, for musicians to be seated on the ground, particularly when they gathered at the open-air *aonach* which was held once a year by every Irish *ríg*.

Conclusion

There is remarkable consistency in the images of musical instruments, and the contexts of their representation, on these scriptural crosses. The similarities extend to Scotland (Argyll, i.e., Western Scotland, in particular) and the Isle of Man. The Irish Sea area is seen once again to reflect a single cultural region, in this instance reflecting patterns of monastic settlement to which the old Kingdom of Midhe has made a signal contribution.

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Translation courtesy of Prof Pádraig Ó Riain.

These may be represented as four musicians, or as some combination of musicians and scribes. For the iconography of David and his musicians, see Seebass 1973b: 96-9 and *passim*.

- 3 For more detailed exploration of the liturgical implications of these carvings, see Henry 1967:140-159; O Carragáin 1987; 1988.
- 4 This is one of only two representations of a book on these monuments, the other being found on a stone pillar at Carndonagh, Co. Donegal, now situated beside the high cross.
- 5 Harbison describes it as "a curious kneeling figure with legs splayed sideways" (1992:1, 142)
- 6 If it is intended as a book, perhaps it represents secularism or profane writing, in contrast with the sacred context of the book on the opposite side. Or perhaps the fact that the latter is open and the former closed may be intended to show the Blessed as readers of Scripture or singers of the Psalms and the Damned as those who reject such pursuits.
British Library MS Cotton Vitellius F.XI, fol. 2r. See Henry 1960, 32, and pls IV and VI; also Buckley 1990a, fig. 34. Cf. also Henry 1967, 157 and pl. 41 for another parallel between this manuscript and David iconography on the Cross of Muireadach, Monasterboice, in that instance the Fight of David and Goliath.
- 8 Harbison describes this instrument as a harp – despite its resemblance to the Monasterboice lyre, which he classifies correctly.
- 9 A comparable instance occurs on a tympanon at St Declan's Cathedral, Lismore where a carving of the Judgement of Solomon includes a seated harper, a figure who would have been *de rigeur* in the court of a contemporary Irish lord. See Buckley 2005, 771-2, and pl. 133.
- 10 See *ibid.*, III, fig. 848.
- 11 The stone carving at Kirk Michael forms part of another David Musician programme with links to both Irish and English carvings of later date (Trench-Jellicoe 1991: 75). This is one instance of a theme found also on both Irish and English carvings.

If this is the case, then it is another of the many instances of the Christianisation of pre-Christian practices. There is significant evidence in medieval Irish literature of the high status of horn-players in the noble retinue. Gerald of Wales mentions St Patrick's horn which was regarded in his time as a sacred relic. For further discussion see Buckley 1995b, 40, 44-5; *eadem* 2005, 753, and 763.
See discussion in Buckley 2005, 772 and pl. 135.