



HISTORIC  
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## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

# KINNEIL OLD CHURCH CROSS



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# HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

## KINNEIL OLD CHURCH CROSS

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## 1 Summary

**NOTE: this document should be read in conjunction with the HES Statement of Significance for Kinneil House. The Statement for Kinneil House contains background and contextual information relevant to the Cross, including other carved stones in State care.**

### 1.1 Introduction

The Kinneil Cross or Kinneil Rood is a large sculptured stone bearing a representation of Christ on the cross, but heavily defaced. It is currently on display at Kinneil House but was found in a secondary context in the foundations of Kinneil Old Parish Church during excavations in 1951. It belongs to a rare class of sculpture known as rood crosses, and is the only known example from Scotland. In Britain these are generally understood as part of the Late Saxon ecclesiastical sculptural tradition but dates range widely so that these are perhaps best understood as representing the transition between the early and high medieval period of ecclesiastical art and architecture. The survival of this cross at Kinneil is an important addition to the national corpus and helps us visualise the earliest stone-built parish churches in Scotland.

### 1.2 Statement of Significance:

The Kinneil Rood deserves to be better known; it is a unique and important artefact in a Scottish context. The following bullet points summarise its significance:

- Kinneil Cross is the only known example from Scotland of a rood cross
- While the cross cannot be definitively dated at this point, the possibility that it is associated with the 12th century church would make it one of the only surviving architectural fragments from a church of this period in Scotland
- It is extremely rare to find early medieval crucifixions in stone in Scotland such as depicted on the Kinneil Cross
- The discovery of traces of walling and flooring that pre-date the 12th century church could place it among a number of medieval churches which are along the former line of the Antonine Wall.
- The cross and its imagery are highly significant as part of Kinneil's story of transformation from a community on the frontiers of the Roman Empire to a medieval village.

The emergence of the medieval village in Scotland is something which is still under-researched, but at Kinneil there is the opportunity to trace the transformation of a community from a fortlet on the frontiers of the Roman Empire, to a medieval village straddling the former wall, its church containing a confident and ambitious crucifixion

scene of an extremely rare type, the only Scottish example surviving today. If the dating of the cross is 11<sup>th</sup> century, it would be doubly significant as one of the only surviving architectural fragments from a church of the period in Scotland. Combined with the context of the newly recorded medieval and post-medieval grave slabs of Kinneil Kirk, there is also an opportunity here to tell the story of the Reformation and its aftermath through a single object.

## 2. Assessment of values

### 2.1 Background

The sculpture consists of a single massive block of sandstone 1.75m tall with a maximum width of 1.07m and depth of 0.46m. It has suffered considerable damage, including a defacing of the Christ figure leaving only its outline and the sides of the deeply-cut ribs above the waist, and the remains of the legs and feet, indicating he was depicted wearing a long kilt. A rectangular section has also been cut back from the bottom left corner, likely attesting to at least one stage of reuse as architectural masonry. The reverse of the sculpture has been left rough, but the ends of the cross arms and top of the cross heads bear crosses of arcs, showing that the sculpture was intended to be placed against a wall but stand proud of it.

The upper part of the body and cross is carved onto a raised disc linking the ends of the cross arms, acting as a large nimbus. Above the head of the corpus there are the remains of a *Manus Dei* (hand of God) symbol, and beneath the feet there are heavily worn figural carvings which have been interpreted as an animal, perhaps an evangelist's symbol, or skull and bones representing the hill of Golgotha.

The crosses carved into the ends of the cross transom and head are placed within large rectangular frames which appear when viewed from the front as barred terminals to the cross. On the front face of the left barred terminal there are traces remaining of a defaced figural carving showing that these surfaces may also have borne imagery related to the passion of the Christ. The three crosses are of a single form: a ringed equal-armed cross of slightly arciform triangular arms with central disc or boss.

### 2.2 Evidential values

The cross was discovered during excavations by Doreen Hunter in 1951. It was under the foundations of a loft added to the south of the chancel, interpreted as a post-medieval addition to the medieval church. The paved floor incorporates reused late medieval grave markers, some face-down, indicating a post-Reformation date for the layer beneath which the rood cross was found.

The church itself is 12<sup>th</sup> century in construction judging from the excavated foundations and standing west gable (Fawcett *et al.* 2008), although traces of earlier walling and an earlier level of flooring from the current paved surface indicate that there may be an earlier predecessor (Hunter 1967: 193-97). Another indication that this may have been an early foundation is the circular enclosure ditch apparent from aerial photographs which extends beyond the modern enclosure (Falkirk Community Trust 2014). Such enclosures are indications of an early medieval foundation in Scotland (Thomas 1971).

The possibility of an early, pre-12<sup>th</sup> century foundation at Kinneil is significant as the date of the cross is still under debate. It is also significant that the church is just north of the medieval village of Kinneil which straddles the former line of the Antonine Wall. If it does have an early medieval predecessor, it would join a number of medieval churches along the line of the former Roman frontier which may also predate the 12<sup>th</sup> century, including nearby Carriden which contains early cross slabs (Bailey 2003; Maldonado 2015). Sculpture in a late Saxon or early Romanesque style is exceedingly rare in the Central Belt, with a conspicuous example in an 11/12<sup>th</sup>-century dragonesque carved head further west along the Antonine Wall area at the Auld Isle Kirk, Oxgangs, Kirkintilloch (Fletcher 1952).

### 2.3 Historical values

Kinneil has the added distinction of being one of the earliest attested place-names in Central Scotland. Bede's Ecclesiastical History (c. AD 731) records a settlement at the eastern terminus of the Antonine Wall as *Peanfahel* in the local Pictish language and *Penneltun* in Old English, which are demonstrably predecessors of the later Gaelic form Kinneil which survives today (Dumville 1994; Fraser 2008).

However, while this establishes Kinneil as an early settlement predating the 8<sup>th</sup> century, Bede does not specifically mention a church. The church of Kinneil is only documented from the 12<sup>th</sup> century, in a charter granting it to Holyrood Abbey by Herbert, chamberlain to Malcolm IV in 1161x62 (Cowan 1967:114). It is also named in the 12<sup>th</sup>-century *Life of St Serf* in such a way as to indicate an early link to the cult of the Pictish saint which grew up on the other side of the Forth (Fraser 2009: 255).

The parish of Kinneil was united with Bo'Ness in the 1640s, resulting in the abandonment of the church. From the late 16<sup>th</sup> century onward it will have been adapted for reformed use, which likely resulting in the defacing of the Rood. It is worth noting that the Christ figure on the Rood was found to have been cut back and plastered over from the ribs up (Hunter 1967), consistent with the iconoclasm of sacred images which followed the Reformation; the plastering would indicate that it was still visible at least for a time. It is not known when it was finally taken down and buried south of the chancel as the dating of the loft sealing it is unclear.

### 2.4 Architectural and artistic values

The Rood represents an important milestone in the history of Scottish ecclesiastical sculpture and architecture. Outside of major ecclesiastical centres like Iona and Forteviot, stone-built churches generally begin to appear in Scotland from about the tenth century onwards (Foster 2015). As described above (section 1.3), excavations at Kinneil confirmed a 12<sup>th</sup>-century foundation but also revealed tentative hints of a previous structure. As such, the Rood most likely belongs to the 12<sup>th</sup> century church attested architecturally, but there is a possibility that it may have been commissioned for an earlier structure. The argument largely hinges upon the disputed date of the Rood, which is often recursively linked to the date of the structure. As such, it is important to go into detail on the art historical dating of the sculpture on its own merits.

Here is a breakdown of the wide range of dating options from the few discussions that have appeared in print or in online databases:

- Hunter 1967: 194-96: favours an 11<sup>th</sup>-century date on parallel with Late Saxon art, but admits it may be as late as the second quarter of 12<sup>th</sup> century, the date of the church, while noting possibility of an earlier foundation.
- Fawcett 2002: 293-94: late 12<sup>th</sup> or early 13<sup>th</sup> century.
- Fawcett *et al.* 2008: Second quarter of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the date of the church.
- Fraser *et al.* 2011: 9: 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century, compared to Goodlyburn Cross, Perthshire.
- Cameron and King 2011: 12<sup>th</sup> century, based on prominent ribs of the corpus, and the form of the crosses at the ends of the arms.
- Falkirk Community Trust 2014: 3: mid-11<sup>th</sup> century.

The type of sculpture in question, the architectural rood cross, is generally taken to be a Late Saxon or pre-Conquest form (c. 11<sup>th</sup> century) where they occur in England (Clapham 1951); however, as this is the unique Scottish example, there is little to compare it to. Early medieval crucifixions in stone are exceedingly rare in Scotland; a fragment of a similar standing corpus survives at Goodlyburn near Perth, although this appears to be a free-standing cross and not architectural (Fraser *et al.* 2011). The depiction of Christ appears to be of an early Romanesque style, which in Scotland almost invariably means a 12<sup>th</sup>-century date (Fernie 1986). The outline of the corpus (body of Christ) shows the head leant slightly to its right and the knees are slightly bent, with legs parallel. In this it parallels most closely the corpus on the Kilmichael Glassary bell-shrine which shares this posture as well as the Manus Dei motif, and has most recently been dated to the first half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Caldwell *et al.* 2012: 225). The suffering Christ image in which the feet are nailed together only becomes common from c. 1200 onward. The Manus Dei symbol is common in late Saxon art from the 9<sup>th</sup> century onward (Coatsworth 2000: 174).

The issue between these date ranges is that the comparanda in stone are primarily from southern England, and are not a close match in terms of architectural function: examples like Breamore, Hampshire were set into the wall above the chancel nave of the church, that is, over the rood screen separating nave and chancel. At Kinneil, it has been argued that the bulk of the stone, and its decoration in the round, make it unlikely that it was placed high up on a wall; its architectural function thus remains unclear (Fawcett 2002: 293-94; Fawcett *et al.* 2008; King and Cameron 2011). Given these issues of interpretation, it is safest to say the cross is of 11<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century date rather than trying to pin it down any further.

One potential indication of date is the form of the crosses on the three outer ends of the cross. These are reminiscent of the late Saxon wheel-headed crosses which become common across the Irish Sea coast from the 10<sup>th</sup> century onward from Cornwall to the Mersey (Bailey 2010; Preston-Jones and Okasha 2013). The central 'disc' from which the cross-arms emerge are paralleled closer to home by the fragment of 11/12<sup>th</sup>-century stone cross found at Glasgow Cathedral (Driscoll 2002: 86-87), but this lacks the outer ring. Further study of the spread of this motif in northern Britain may help narrow down the date in future.

## 2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

Even though the cross is heavily defaced today, the damage it bears speaks to multiple phases in the cultural biography of this monument (cf. Fraser *et al.* 2011). The chunk cut out of the bottom left corner appears to be from a phase of architectural re-use rather than accidental damage, hinting at a move from its original setting at least once while it was still in use. The defacing of the Christ figure and its plastering over tell an evocative story of the Reformation and its aftermath in this region. It was eventually taken down and either buried south of the chancel, or used as foundation material for a post-Reformation loft. Either way it is interesting that the stone was not broken up further but buried intact, preserving it to the extent that it survives today. This shows a somewhat respectful treatment of this formerly sacred sculpture that would no longer have been appropriate to the Reformed use of the church building, but still constituted the deep heritage of the church community here. Its recognition and lifting during excavations in 1951 gave rise to its current afterlife at Kinneil House, where its existence provides a tangible link to the sophisticated and ambitious decoration of the medieval church which once stood here. The recent excavation and conservation of the church in 2014 also recorded the remaining medieval and post-medieval grave slabs reused as paving slabs, another way in which decommissioned medieval sculpture was kept in circulation in more recent centuries (Bailey 2014). As part of the Inner Forth Landscape Initiative, this is a key case study in the way in which little-known and underappreciated medieval fragments like these can help bring the community together and promote learning and wellbeing.

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