

Wearing the Cross:

Displaying religious identity in early medieval Ireland

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Introduction

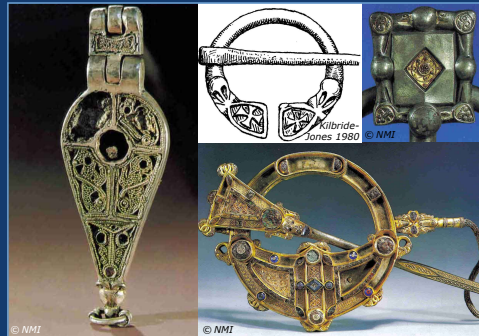
My research project concerns identity in early medieval Ireland (AD 400-1200) and how it was created and expressed through dress and the body. One aspect of this is religious identity, including, but not confined to, a Christian identity. While a range of motifs are associated with that faith, this case study focuses on a key symbol – the cross – which is found across a range of media (stone carving, metalwork, manuscripts) and in a variety of forms, including those shown below. My question in this study is whether the cross motif occurs at a smaller, more personal scale – was it used on the body to express personal religious identity?



Personal ornament

Cross pendants and cross-shaped brooches, used as personal ornaments, are known from across early medieval Europe, particularly from periods of conversion to Christianity. A range of examples can be found across Central Europe, from Anglo-Saxon England, and in Scandinavia (e.g. Bierbrauer 2003, Jessop 1974, Gräslund 2003). But there is no evidence from early medieval Ireland of specifically cross-shaped items being used as dress ornaments or displayed on the body.

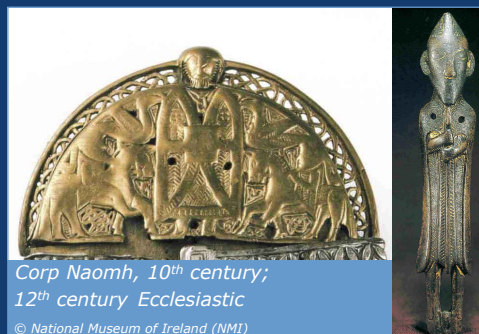
However, this absence does not mean that Christian identity was not displayed on the person in early medieval Ireland – rather, we need to look more closely at the detail.



Cross motifs

Cross motifs occur as part of the decoration on some personal ornaments. Among the earliest are the 'Maltese' crosses on a handful of zoomorphic penannular brooches, which may date to the late 6th/early 7th century AD (Ó Floinn, 1989). Other cross motifs include the 'lozenge' crosses on the pinheads of some 8th and 9th century brooches, and the Latin crosses seen in the design of some 9th /10th century 'kite' brooches. Even more subtle cross motifs may be hidden in the decorative ornament of the Hunterston and Tara brooches (Stevenson 1974).

Christian identity may thus have been displayed in personal ornament. But who wore these brooches? While many of the European crosses were associated with burials, and could thus be linked with gender, age, or status identities, none of the Irish examples comes from a burial, and few have a clear archaeological context. We know that various types of brooches were worn by both men and women in Irish society, yet it is assumed that those with crosses indicate a specific clerical or ecclesiastical identity. Why is this?



Corp Naomh, 10th century;
12th century Ecclesiastic

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Wearing the cross

Two figures on Christian metalwork (below, left), identified by dress and accessories as ecclesiastics, are depicted wearing 'cross-in-circle' motifs on their shoulders. Although no such brooches have been found, these figures support the idea that the wearing of the cross was an ecclesiastical custom. But does this preclude the possibility that lay people might also display a Christian identity in their dress?

A panel on the late 9th/early 10th century Cross of the Scriptures at Clonmacnois (below) appears to show a single, 'cross-in-circle' brooch on the shoulder of a sword-wearing figure.



Harbison (1999: 165) suggested that the Cross of the Scriptures was erected by a king, 'usurping' an ecclesiastical prerogative. Perhaps this figure, who shows no other indication of ecclesiastical identity, also reflects a subversion of the norm by wearing the cross. Or it may simply reflect a situation where lay Christians in early medieval Ireland also wore the cross as a sign of religious identity.

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For further information on my research, see www.ucd.ie/archaeology/research/phd/doylemaureen