

# Early Christian Ireland - Stonework | Sample

answer

## Mock 2011 Higher Level Question 3

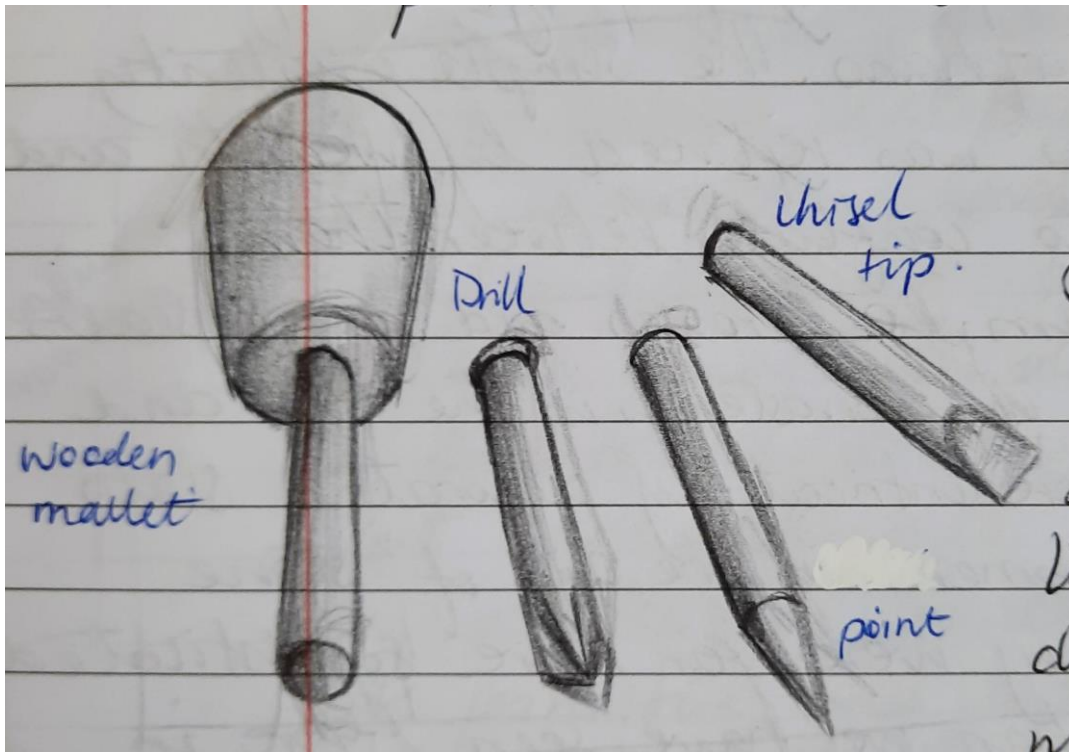
***Describe and discuss the development of stone crosses in Ireland, giving specific examples and referring to form, imagery and decoration. AND Briefly describe the function of these crosses. Illustrate your answer.***

Christianity continued to develop in Ireland, converting the mostly pagan community into firm Christians. Monasteries became more important in Ireland. They had become centres of learning and places of refuge for pilgrims, the sick, widows and orphans. The simple austerity of the early monasteries was replaced by wealth and power, which even led to conflict between them. Cross-decorated slabs, simple crosses and grave slabs became more common in the 7th and 8th centuries. These more intricately decorated slabs mark a further development in the art of stone carving in Ireland. They were far more sophisticated pieces of craftsmanship than we have seen before in stone. The accuracy of the design and the refinement of the low relief carving mark an important development in the evolution of Irish stone carving.

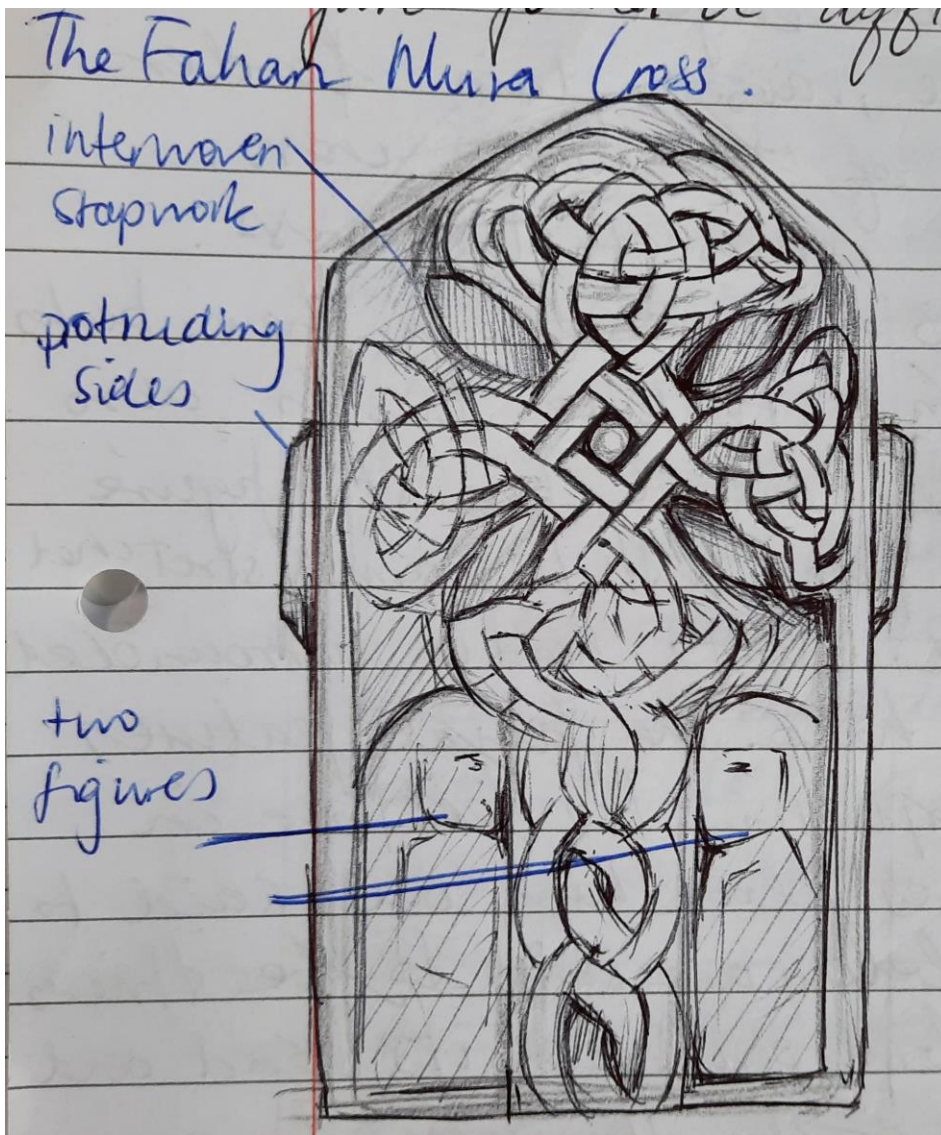
Slabs and pillars are no longer untrimmed blocks of stone, but monuments that have a definite form. They were incised in low relief, rather than sculpted. The other form of the stone was being carved into a cross shape; the previous pagan belief of stone spirits was diminishing: a new structure is apparent. They were beginning to resemble Manuscript pages translated onto stone carvings. The first arms on the crosses only appear as a slight protuberance from the sides.

### **The Fahan Mura Cross**

The Fahan Mura Cross is a fine example of the development of art. It dates back to around 600-800 AD and is located in Buncrana, Co. Donegal. The stone is believed to be the first Cross to be cut into a cruciform shape. Both abstract and figurative art is used in its decoration and is carved in high relief with sophisticated interwoven strapwork. The stone's original state is altered. On top, the stone is carved to form a rounded dome. The cross is approx. 2.1m tall and completely out of sandstone. Incisions were made using a metal tool-driven into the stone with a wooden mallet.



The stone contains beautiful, complicated and powerful decorations. Dominating the area is the Greek cross with a shaft made up of interwoven strapwork, similar to the reeds that make up Saint Brigid's Cross. The four broad ribbons plaited together to form a cruciform shape. The edges are bordered by a double line around the whole perimeter of the cross, revealing the talented craftsmanship of the creator. Two simple figures stand on either side of the shaft of the cross. They are left in profile with hair, eyes, nose, mouth, shoes but no arms. There are unidentified markings on the figures' cloaks. Some speculate that the reason the figures were not as well described as the rest, was because of a religious taboo, where it was unacceptable to try to accurately represent humans in art since Christ himself was a human, therefore it would be dishonouring his form. Or perhaps the Christians just found it difficult to capture anatomy during that time.



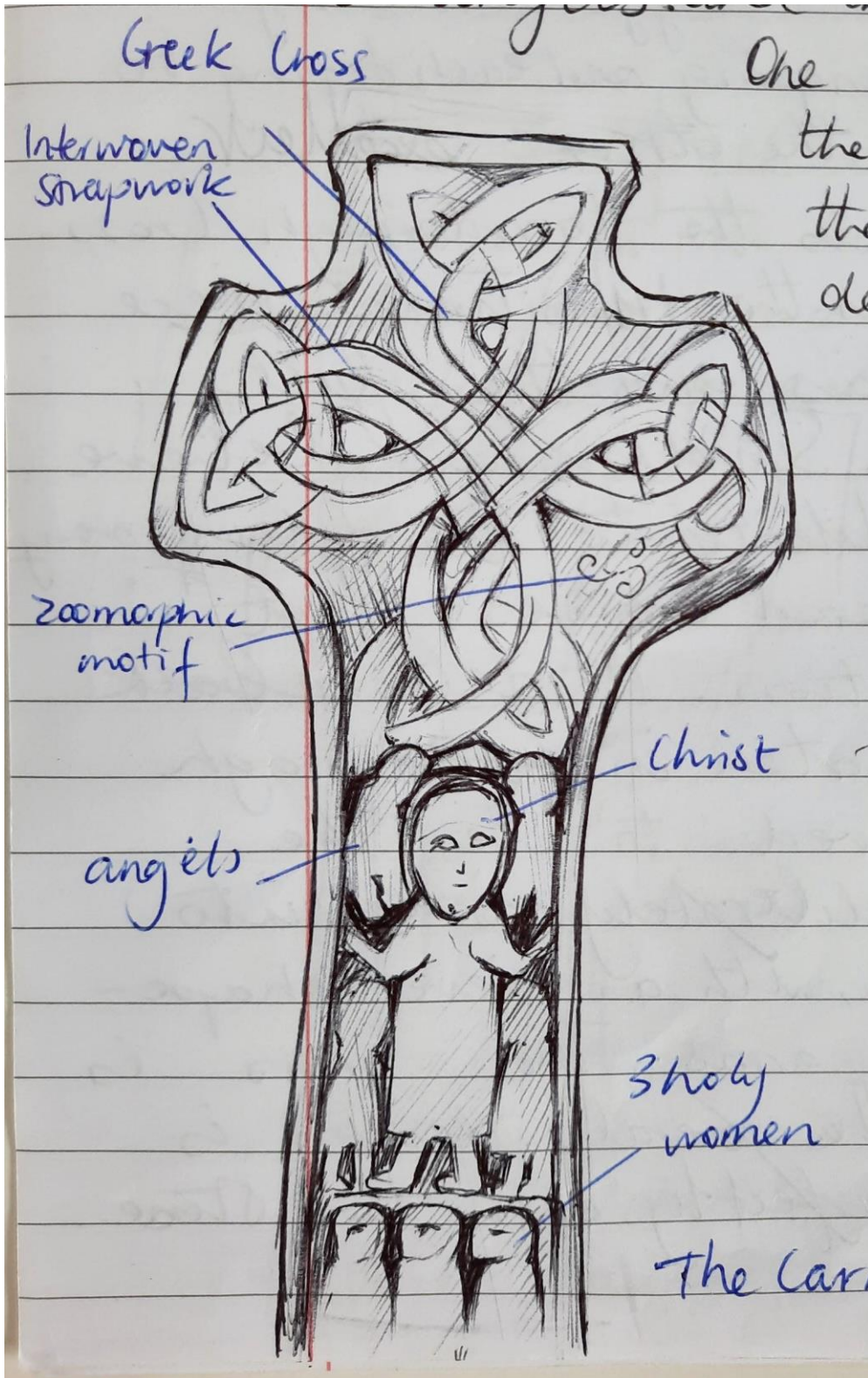
The function of the cross was to spread the word of God. It also marks the site of the monastery founded by Saint Colmcille also known as Columba who was a disciple of Mura, who played a prominent role in converting Ireland to Christianity. The intricate weaving also would have helped as a type of visual aid for meditation and to prepare for prayer. Some suggest that the strapwork could also represent the struggle between good and evil, entangling and trying to overcome the other.

## The Carndonagh Cross

Another impressive stone carving is The Carndonagh Cross. It was previously regarded as the transitional piece between stone slabs and pillars and the fully formed Celtic high cross. Scholars now believe that this cross is more likely to be contemporary with the early wheel-head crosses, but in a different style. It dates back to 600-800D and is located in Carndonagh Co. Donegal. It is believed to be the first stone that was deliberately carved into the shape of the cross, with an

uneven shape- long shaft and short arms. The cross is approx. 2.5m tall. The overall design is well planned and fits perfectly into the available space. The large cross has complicated interwoven strapwork but it is not double-edged like the Fahan Mura Cross. A wide, raised plain border surrounds the perimeter of the whole cross. In the spaces between the cross lies zoomorphic motifs of three birds. The beaks are curved and touching, to form a triskele motif. This is also a Celtic trinity symbol. The Central Christ figure is depicted in the crucifixion pose, with his arms outstretched. Christ's head is surrounded by a line, possibly indicating a halo. The facial features are primitive and very simplistic. His feet are in profile and the two figures above him are said to be angels and the two below are said to be the thieves that were crucified alongside him. The three holy women that came to visit Christ's tomb are depicted in profile on the panel below. There is a lack of realism and the simplistic figures lie amongst the complex strapwork which is related to the Book of Durrow Manuscript.





The main function of this cross was to spread the word of God by illustrating that Christ had played an important role in the lives of these people.

