The concrete replica arrives at Iona, on top of the island’s annual delivery of coal. The replica is enjoyed by visitors year-round.

Dr Sally Foster and Professor Siân Jones introduce pioneering research focusing on the rich social lives of replicas, through a study of the 8th-century St John’s Cross, Iona, and its copies.

‘heaven in ordinie’ [...] It’s a base material, it’s a beautiful object. On one level it’s a replica, and on another level it’s totally the real deal. On one level it speaks less powerfully because it’s not the original stone, hand carved with mediaeval tools, but on another level, it’s an expression of another kind of workmanship, and of a transmutation of that eternal truth, from the ninth century through to the twentieth century (Gertrude, a recent Iona resident).

In 1970 a concrete replica of the St John’s Cross arrived in Iona sitting incongruously on the deck of a puffer delivering the island’s annual supply of coal. Within a week it had been erected at the Abbey, where the original cross had stood. The untold story of this intriguing replica lies at the heart of our new book. Drawing on extensive primary research, including previously unpublished antiquarian sources and oral history, we explore the cultural biography of the Cross and its replica(s) over 1,200-plus years. With ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in 2017, this is also one of the first qualitative social studies of replicas and how they ‘work’ at places of historic interest. We invite new ways of thinking about the authenticity, value and significance of replicas by uncovering the values that replicas hold, whether for locals, visitors or heritage professionals. We also tell important new stories about the much-loved, world-renowned island of Iona and its internationally-significant carved stones.

With its 50th anniversary on 6 June, we focus here on the replica’s story and aim to convey some sense of its significance. Historic Environment Scotland is listing it at Category A (“buildings of special architectural or historical interest which are outstanding examples of a particular period, style or building type”). This is a landmark decision given that replicas tend to be dismissed in heritage contexts as proxies for originals, lacking their own lives and cultural values. As well as addressing traditional cultural values, our research revealed the contemporary social and spiritual values of the replica, reinforced the linked biographies of the original and replica, and made connections between the creativity, craft and passion of the people who created the original and replica.

The artistic and technological achievement of this highly unusual replica, with its prestressed post-tensioned concrete engineering, has previously been recognised by awards, including the Concrete Society Award (Mature Structures Category) in 2000-2001. Today it has age-value, recognised by those who encounter it to have had a life and experienced things: ‘It must have a lifespan, well everything has a lifespan… It’s nice the way that…’

Erected in the base of the original cross, the replica stands immediately in front of the first stone shrine-chapel in the Irish world, built over St Columba’s grave.
Laying their hands on the replica, people told us they were able to ‘touch’ the past. The shadow of the replica hits St Columba’s Shrine. It’s weathered’, Gertrude told us. Such experiences are enhanced by lichen growths on its surfaces, which were moulded from the weathered original (above image).

Erected in the base of the original cross, the replica stands immediately in front of the first stone shrine-chapel in the Irish world, built over St Columba’s grave. These monuments lay at the heart of a massive mid-8th-century transformation of the early medieval monastery on Iona, an investment thought to be associated with the translation of the saint’s relics. A feature of contemporary special interest is that the replica casts a shadow on the recreated shrine-chapel in the late afternoon and evening, just as the original did (above right). The interplay with natural phenomena, such as sunlight and the casting of shadows onto other structures or locations, is understood to be a deliberate design feature of the 8th-century monks to enhance the ‘performance’ of the crosses in daily life and liturgical rituals. Given its location and inherent structural weaknesses, the St John’s Cross collapsed at least four times. Reconstructed in 1927, it fell in 1951, was reconstructed in 1954 and fell again in 1957. No longer possible to re-erect it outside, the fate of the fallen cross re-ignited discussions at national level about the future of Iona’s internationally-significant corpus of carved stones.

The Iona Cathedral Trustees who own Iona Abbey committed to a more permanent solution for the St John’s Cross, and in 1967 they began the process of commissioning a replica. In practice, the replica happened because of the concern, determination and energy of members of the public who loved Iona, were saddened by the loss of the Cross, and strove over many years to enable a replica to be made. The design brief, informed by traditional materialist ideas about authenticity, was for the replica to accurately resemble the original and be durable enough to withstand the extreme weather of this Hebridean island. The first step was to create a plaster model of the cross, based on plaster casts of the original. In 1970, Exposagg Limited then cast, transported and erected the replica. It was skilfully engineered in...
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Concrete to resist strong winds and the corrosive effect of the maritime environment. In Edinburgh, the model was cast in large gelatine moulds, the concrete worked to recreate the finish, colour and texture of the original (below).

Transported in parts to Iona, the replica was erected with enormous care and pride. Murdo MacKenzie recorded this activity in a cine film that also captures contemporary Iona life and its involvement with the Abbey. He talks of filming a wedding and two funerals, one of them the island’s concrete mixer!

Iona has been and continues to be important to the identity of thousands of people, and that special relationship is also to the fore in the stories of how the replica was manufactured and then erected on the island. Experiencing and engaging with the replica today, islanders and visitors create links with its biography, the people involved, their own lives, and of Iona. In many senses the replica ‘is’ St John’s Cross.

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**FURTHER READING**

*My Life as a Replica: St John’s Cross, Iona* (Oxford, 2020), S.M. Foster with S. Jones. *History Scotland* readers can buy a copy at £28 (20 percent discount) using code REPLICA201 from www.oxbowbooks.com, or when ordering on tel +44 (0)1226 734350. Discount is valid until 30 June 2020.

Digital scans of both the replica and original St John’s Cross can be found on Sketchfab: https://scot.sh/stjohn

Murdo MacKenzie’s 1970 cine film *A Study in Concrete by Exposagge: St. John’s Cross, Iona* at: https://scot.sh/murdo