

**IN ENGLAND: THE RUTHWELL CROSS AND THE DREAM OF THE ROOD:  
SIGNPOSTS FOR PILGRIMS/ IN INGHILTERRA: LA CROCE DI  
RUTHWELL E IL SOGNO DELLA CROCE: CIPPI MILIARI PER I  
PEREGRINI  
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{ This paper is presented within a Conference dedicated to ‘The City and the Book’. I understand the city to be the heavenly Jerusalem of Revelation 21-22, and the Book as the Bible itself; the first, in the Christian perspective, is the goal of life, the second is a guide to reach it. My paper deals with a monument, the RUTHWELL CROSS in Scotland, and a poem known as the 'DREAM OF THE ROOD', sculpted in runes on the Cross and later given in an Anglo-Saxon manuscript left by a pilgrim at Vercelli, the VERCELLI BOOK , Vercelli, Biblioteca Capitolare CXVII. They are connected not only by having the Cross as their subject, but also by the fact that the stone cross has the runic inscription which corresponds to part of the poem. What I propose here is to read the three works in close connection, considering them eminently as different but complementary versions of the Book, or at least that part of the Book related to the Passion and Resurrection of Christ, providing thus a series of signposts towards the heavenly city. In few words, they present the Cross as *via gloriae*, a way to glory.

I am deeply aware that it is not easy to add a new contribution to the scholarship which has been showered upon the RUTHWELL CROSS and the ' DREAM OF THE ROOD' for years. In a recent publication a bibliography on the RUTHWELL CROSS, which “does not claim to be comprehensive” and where the poem is not particularly considered, lists no less than 450 items (Cassidy-Kiefer, 1992, pp. 167-199). On the other hand, in the standard edition of the 'DREAM OF THE ROOD ', edited by Swanton, the text of the poem takes only 7 of the 150 pages of the book. Both works have proved to be a rich mine for a wide variety of critical and interpretative approaches, including art and liturgy, patristic theology and missionary activity of Irish and Anglo-Saxon monks. While referring to all this, I prefer to remain in the field I am most familiar with: that of textual analysis, which I will extend to both the monument and the poem. In fact the RUTHWELL CROSS , as actually any work of art, can be read as a book, and the more so since it contains both words and images; on the other hand the poem is a well-wrought ‘sermon’ using at least four literary genres, full of images both explicit and implicit in the highly iconic character of the words it uses.

Before proceeding let us summarily describe the three objects under consideration. The first is a monumental Cross erected at Ruthwell, dated in the first quarter of the eighth century, the second is a poem of sixteen lines (or sixteen lines of a poem) devoted to the Crucifixion which are chiselled in runes on the narrower lateral sides of the shaft; the third is another poem of 156 lines, known as the 'DREAM OF THE ROOD ', copied in the tenth century and preserved in a codex now at Vercelli, the VERCELLI BOOK , together with twenty three anonymous Old English prose homilies and five other poems. The connection between the monument and the book comes from the fact that the short

poem carved on the cross is literally part of the longer poem. Whether this is a quotation from the ' DREAM', or on the contrary the ' DREAM' is an expansion of the original nucleus attested in the short poem is a question which I do not intend to examine. A main point should be made here. The very style of Anglo-Saxon poetry, where the lines are based on short self-contained phrases and sentences linked by alliteration and cut by a regular caesura, allows many processes of selection and recomposition with no apparent difficulty. The two possibilities are thus to be taken into account, either from the long poem to the short one, and/or viceversa. I think that the best way to deal with this problem is to consider the short poem as we can reasonably read it now something complete in itself, and to examine it accordingly. In fact, if the sculptor selected and quoted lines from a longer poem (which is not necessarily the ' DREAM' as we have it now), he did exactly what we do when we analyse a text by selecting, stressing and examining a few passages which we consider more important or more meaningful. That is the reason why I think that the Ruthwell poem is worth an analysis of itself.

## **1. THE RUTHWELL CROSS: AN ILLUSTRATION OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE AND LIFE**

It is well known that in the early Middle Ages the crucifixion was rarely represented as a death scene: even when not dressed as a pontifex, with a regal crown on his head, Christ was in any case a living body, shown with his eyes wide open. More often crosses were treated either as symbols, preferably glorious, covered with gold and gems, or they may be treated as 'theological summaries' of the history of salvation by the selection of figures or events recorded on the cross itself. A very good example of this treatment is the world-famous twelfth-century ivory cross coming from Bury St. Edmunds and now at the Cloisters, New York.

Apparently, the use of erecting large crosses was typical of the Anglo-Saxon Church in the northern part of Britain, at least from the second part of the seventh century, since «building churches in stone and working in stone was a new skill introduced into Northumbria from the Continent in the 670s, the days of Wilfrid and Benedict Biscop» (Meyvaert, pp. 150-1). From what is usually called 'The Age of Bede' about 1500 fragments of stone crosses remain, and if we consider that probably there were also wood crosses, many more should have existed (Swanton, p. 47). We read in the *Vita Willibaldi* that «It is a custom among the Saxons to erect, in lands belonging to noble and virtuous persons, not a church, but the image of the holy cross, which is dedicated to our Lord and held in great reverence. It is placed on some eminent spot for the convenience of those who wish to pray daily before it» (MGH SS. xv.i.88: see Pezzini, pp. 8-9). With this in mind, the location of the RUTHWELL CROSS may be of importance. Whether it was within or, as the similar BEWCASTLE CROSS, without a church we do not know. The monument is 5.28 m. high, and it is not easy to imagine it located in the rather small Anglo-Saxon churches such as we know them. Paul Meyvaert thinks that it stood «at a point in the nave indicating the demarcation between the portion of the church accessible to the lay congregation and that reserved to the monks», a thesis which would confirm his reading of the monument as showing on the north side the 'Vita monastica', and on the south side the 'Ecclesia' (p. 125). But he is honest to say

that this is only a supposition (see p. 151). Farrell and Karkov remark that «It is very probable that the cross was originally much closer to the sea than it is now [...] It lies at the end of Hadrian's Wall, with easy communication by land with the monastic centres at Monkwearmouth and Jarrow, and a quick direct route by sea to Ireland by way of the Solway Firth. This places the cross at a series of major nexus points with the possibility that it might originally have served as a beacon for those arriving from Ireland» (p. 35). It is easy to infer from this that the cross could appear at the same time the mark of where Christianity had arrived, a leading signpost for travellers, both in material and spiritual sense, and a continuous invitation to preach the Gospel of Christ, which found in the cross its highest point of manifestation and its major driving force to tell around the good news of salvation.

Starting from these considerations, I think, together with other scholars, that the best way to interpret the RUTHWELL CROSS is to consider it as a 'preaching' book, containing a particular summary of the spiritual life, which includes both monastic asceticism and apostolic urgency. I will do this by carefully looking at its iconographic programme, although I must warn from the beginning that there is a wide margin of hypothesis in this discussion, because the Cross, due to weathering and seventeenth-century Puritan fanaticism, is not in very good condition, and quite a few of its images are hardly legible, so that this programme can be only suggestively reconstructed. I agree with Robert T. Farrell who says: «The current state of the Ruthwell cross, due to the many indignities it has suffered, leads to the inevitable conclusion that any credible assessment of its style, iconography and meaning must accept the sculpture as it exists at present, a much-battered, weathered, and worn partial record of a once magnificent monument. Early representations of the cross are no sure guide to its earlier appearance and, indeed, may be positively inaccurate and misleading» (p. 46).

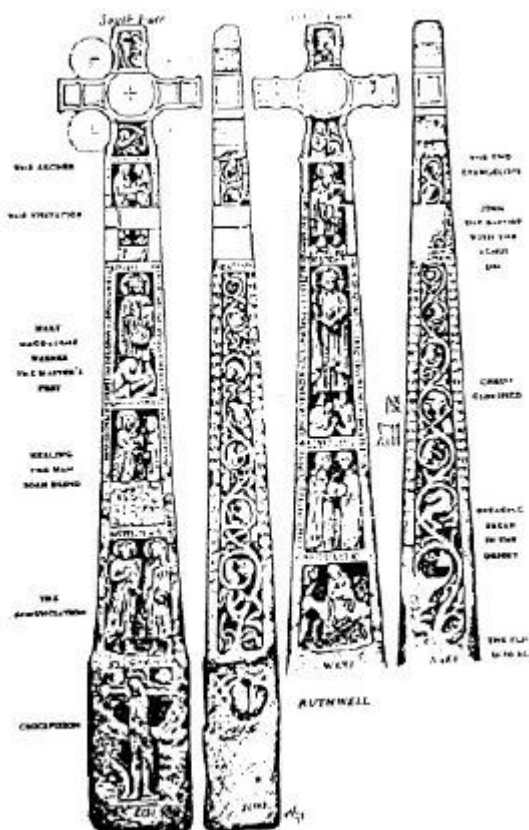
The RUTHWELL CROSS is neither realistic nor symbolic: it belongs more properly to the type of encyclopaedic crosses, where the cross is used to illustrate some tenets of the Christian doctrine by recalling events of the Old and the New Testament, which may become examples to be imitated by any follower of Christ. So, on the two broad and principal faces (looking now North and South) of the Cross we have a series of figurative scenes, surrounded by Latin quotations mostly taken from the Bible and used as captions. The two narrower sides (West and East faces) are decorated with a vine scroll inhabited by birds and fantastic animals, and surrounded by borders containing some lines of a poem on the crucifixion written in Old English runes. It may be suggestive to note the intriguing ambiguity inherent to the fact that the runes are chiseled (but it is not sure whether their sculpting is contemporary or posterior to the monument) on the sides of the Cross where natural life displays its intricacies of leaves and animals on one big stem which could be interpreted as a 'Tree of Life' (Swanton, p. 13), while Latin letters and language are applied to illustrate the figurative realistic scenes carved on the two broad sides. Symbolism (through vegetal and animal life and mysterious letters) versus reality, one would say, to which we should add the choice of connecting the death of Christ with the flowering of a tree on which various kinds of creatures are feeding, a paradox which is at the very centre of the Christian theology of Redemption.

The principal face of the Cross, now looking north (N), but originally turned to west, from where (Ireland) pilgrims probably would come, contains scenes which are connected in some way with the desert. Their sequence, from top to bottom, is:

- N1 John the Baptist bearing the Lamb of God
- N2 Christ in majesty adored by beasts
- N3 The hermits Paul and Anthony breaking bread
- N4 The Flight into Egypt
- N5 (Deposition? See D. Howlett, p. 74)

The southern face (S) presents only gospel scenes, arranged in the following order:

- S1 Two women embracing: the Visitation or more probably Martha and Mary
- S2 The woman (Lk 7,37-38) wiping Jesus' feet with her hair
- S3 The healing of the man born blind
- S4 The Annunciation
- S5 The Crucifixion, almost obliterated



[For coloured photographs of the faces of the Ruthwell Cross, see Alexander Bruce's website](#)

The message of the northern scenes sounds as a clear invitation to the contemplative monastic life of the Desert Fathers, involving both hardness and security, both temptation and salvation. All figures can be interpreted according to these double meaning.

Scene N1: John the Baptist, at the top, is a typical desert figure, and as such it was recognised as the founder of monasticism, especially in the form of solitary life. He announces the coming of the Lamb of God, an image which alludes both to death and glory, both to Jesus, as the man dying on Calvary hill, and to the triumphant apocalyptic Lamb sitting at the right hand of the throne of God. N2 (Christ in majesty adored by beasts) directs our attention to the days of the temptation in the desert, at the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus, after the Baptism. As Mark says in his Gospel (although the Cross's Latin quotation comes from elsewhere, reading «**IUDEX AEQUITATIS BESTIAE ET DRACONES COGNOVERUNT IN DESERTO SALVATOREM MUNDI**», that when he was tempted in the wilderness, he «**was with the wild beasts**» (Mk 1:13), adding that «**the angels ministered unto him**». So, the desert is here again a place of hardship and comfort, and above all a place where the 'evil' part of creation is subjugated and drawn to quiet and adoration in a world reconciled by the Cross, according to the majestic perspective of the Letter to the Ephesians: «**Now in Christ Jesus you who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of partition between us; having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of two one new man, so making peace; and that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby**» (Ephesians 2:13-16). Paul Meyvaert quotes a significant passage of an Irish biblical commentator, Cummian, Abbot of Clonfert, who, contrary to a well established tradition which reads the Markan mention of wild beasts as signifying the presence of the devil, says that, following the example of Christ, we are led into the desert to conquer evil forces, «**and then the beasts will be at peace with us, namely when in the inner chamber of our souls we, being cleansed, will grow gentle with the unclean animals, and like Daniel we will lie down with the lions, when the spirit will not be pitted against flesh and blood (Eph 6:12), and the flesh will not lust against the spirit (Gal 5:17)**» (Meyvaert, p. 127). It may of some interest to note, as Meyvaert does, that a text connecting the wild beasts with the desert in the context of the Flight into Egypt is found in an incomplete copy of the Psalter (Psalms 39-151) with a Latin commentary and some Irish and Northumbrian glosses, considered to belong to the early 8th century and to derive from a monastery which was part of the paruchia of St. Columba in Northumbria (Meyvaert, p. 128). The manuscript is now Palatinus latinus 68 of the Vatican Library [edited by Professor Martin McNamara and discussed in his paper on [Irish Psalters and Gospels](#) given at this Congress.] In the desert the hermits Paul and Anthony break the bread together (N3). As it is well known, the breaking of the bread has eucharistic connotations, which direct both to the sacrifice of the Calvary (the bread is 'broken') and to the desired effect of this sacrifice, the building of a new community based on service and fraternity (the bread is 'shared'). Paradoxically (but the cross is first and foremost a paradox), the desert where some men try to follow the example of Christ by leading a hard and solitary life becomes the place where to celebrate the joy of brotherhood. The Flight into Egypt (N4), involving a long journey through the desert, may indicate the vocation to take to the wilderness in order to fly from the world and from the new Herods who inhabit it. It has been suggested (Meyvaert, p. 130) that the scene may be read as a «Return from Egypt», meaning in this case the journey towards the promised land. The main point remains, and it is the passage through the desert. The



icon of Exodus is in the background, as it is clearly stated by Matthew in his gospel, where he mentions the flight in order to quote the realisation of the prophecy: «**Out of Egypt have I called my son**» (Mat 2:15). So, the desert is a road to freedom, and it is in the desert that the protection of God is experienced. The exile is but the manifestation of the real condition of men on earth, who are pilgrims towards the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb 13:14). As Bede says: «**He teaches us that we should even now remember that as he saves believers through the waters of baptism – of which the Read See was an image – so he expects that after baptism we should continue to live a life of humility, cut off from the deformity of vices. And this aptly designates the secret monastic life of the desert**» (CCSL 121, 336. Cit. in *The Ruthwell Cross*, p. 130). The monastic vocation, as is known, with its strong eschatological overtones, has at its core the visualisation of earthly life as a pilgrimage. I anticipate here that the motif of pilgrimage is taken up consistently and impressively in the 'DREAM OF THE ROOD'. So, the North face celebrates the desert as a place where to meet God, and to experience that death to oneself which opens the door to giving life to others.

The south face presents with the Annunciation (S4) and the Crucifixion (S5), the beginning and the end of the story of Christ with us. Incarnation and Redemption constitute the two basic polarities of Christian faith, and contrary to what may seem, the two events of Annunciation and Crucifixion are closely interconnected. In the Middle Ages it was believed that the date of these two events coincided: Christ was conceived and died on the 25 March. «Many calendars of the early Middle Ages have entries like «*Dominus crucifixus et adnunciatio sanctae mariae*» (Meyvaert, p. 109). The theme appears more explicitly in the Dream of the Rood, where the cross personifies both the angel of God (as a messenger it announces the vision of the cross and its meaning) and Mary (the cross is elected, as she was, to carry the Word of God to the world). The Annunciation includes both the delivering of a message (“**The Lord is with you**”) and the life of obedience as a response to it (“**I am the servant of the Lord**”), both missionary and contemplative life, both word and silence. It appears a perfect icon of the spiritual programme of the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Church of the time, and its link with the Crucifixion sculpted under it presents, so to speak, a programme and its realisation, the beginning and the end, enhancing thus the meaning of the monument, not only as a place where people are gathering to hear a sermon, but as being a sermon itself. The other three scenes form the ‘practical’ part of this sermon. The [healing of the man born blind](#) (S3, see Martin McNamara in connection with Irish Gospels, poetry on Crucifixion) is a notorious and clear image of baptism as illumination. It hints at the healing power of the cross, and shows what happens when a man meets Christ and hears his words. Since the rich meaning of this event is well known I do not need to expand on it. Let it suffice to remember that the particular force of this miracle is that the man born blind is an image of humanity sunk in original sin, from which it could have never been saved except by an intervention of God himself. The scene with the woman wiping with her tears the feet of Jesus (S2) is a sign both of love and of forgiveness of sins, especially in the sacrament of penance thought of as a second baptism. If the two upper figures are Mary and Martha (S1), as they may be, they allude at the two ways of serving God, through active or contemplative life, according to the well known interpretation of the two sisters given by Gregory the Great and the Venerable Bede. It may be interesting to

compare the two meeting women of the south face with the two meeting men of the north face, and to see it as a celebration of the new fraternity deriving from the cross.

To summarise the homiletic meaning of this part of the cross, we may read the message of salvation as saying that: God heals our wounds by dying on the cross, realising in this way what had been announced to the Virgin Mary. She is the first to be illuminated by listening to the announcement given by the angel, and by offering her life to the service of God. In the figure of the man born blind salvation reaches humanity at large, taking away the original sinfulness and opening our eyes into salvation. The woman at the feet of Jesus is a sign both of love and repentance, showing thus the practical effect of the coming of Jesus and of meeting him. The sacraments of baptism and reconciliation are figured here, as the Eucharist was alluded to in the figures of the desert fathers, Paul and Anthony, breaking the bread together. All these sacraments are the ways through which God's salvation comes to us as a healing power, and by which our response goes to God in a life transformed through service, love and reconciliation, as the embracing figures may mean.

This is certainly what I would preach today looking at those scenes, drawing out their potential meaning, whether the sculptor intended it or not. In any case, I think that Michael Swanton is right when he summarises the complex meaning of the sculpture by saying that: «With an overall artistic scheme at once ascetic and missionary, the Ruthwell cross is a monument to the extending Celtic frontier of the Northumbrian church» (Swanton, p. 25). It may be useful to remember that at the time there was no distinction between asceticism and mission, between being a pilgrim and building a Christian community, between monasticism and evangelism, given the basic fact that a monk thought of himself, and was thought of by other Christians, as the ideal version of Christian faith and discipleship, to be imitated, at least intentionally, by all, and that the monastic profession was accordingly interpreted as a second baptism. Speculations about the sort of community which commissioned the RUTHWELL CROSS have led to the conclusion that «this cross was conceived by a Northumbrian monk, brought up in the Lindisfarne tradition, who was familiar with the works of Bede», and that the presence of exegetical developments (for example the reading of the presence of the beasts in some scenes) not found in Bede or in the wider Western tradition would suggest «a Celtic monastic community absorbed, like that of Whithorn, by the Anglian advance along the banks of the Solway Firth» (Meyvaert, p. 164). Before concluding this part I do not want to forget what Michael Swanton remarks concerning the style of the sculpture: «The form and stance of Christ here (the scene of the woman at the feet of Jesus), as in the Judgement scene, are virtually identical with that incised on the wooden coffin of St. Cuthbert, made at Lindisfarne in 698, while in mannered drapery both have much in common with figure work in the LINDISFARNE GOSPELS , themselves made about the year 700, or in the CODEX AMIATINUS , copied from an Italian model at Wearmouth-Jarrow at about the same time» (Swanton, p. 22).

## **2. THE POEM SCULPTED ON THE MONUMENT: THE STEADFASTNESS OF THE CROSS**

What we may call the RUTHWELL 'DREAM OF THE ROOD' (RDR) is composed of sixteen lines in runes disposed in four parts of four lines each on the borders of the two narrower sides (west and east) of the RUTHWELL CROSS. They are now in a badly damaged condition, and the reconstruction owes something to the much longer text now extant in the VERCELLI BOOK (VDR) . As D. Howlett says, «the text established by collation of the cross and drawings suggests that the source of the Ruthwell poem was similar to, but distinct from, lines 39-65 of 'The Dream of the Rood'» (Howlett, p. 85). After the reasonable integrations derived from the longer poem to replace lost or illegible lines, the short poem, or what remains of it, reads like this. The parts in square brackets are taken from the VERCELLI BOOK version of the ' DREAM OF THE ROOD', whose corresponding lines are likewise given in brackets.

[For the runes on the Dream of the Rood go to http://www.georgetown.edu/labyrinth/library/oe/texts/ruthwell/html](http://www.georgetown.edu/labyrinth/library/oe/texts/ruthwell/html)

I.

[ond]geredæ hinæ god alme3ttig.  
tha he walde on galgu gistiga  
modig fore [allae] men  
[buga ic ne dorstae  
ac scealde fæstae standa.]

Stripped himself God Almighty  
when He wanted to ascend on to the gallows,  
strong before all men.  
Bow I dared not [39-41].

II.

[ahof] ic riicnae kynync  
heafunæs hlafard hælde ic ni dorstæ.  
Bismærædu unket men ba ætgadre;  
ic [wæs] miþ blodæ bistemid,  
[begoten of þæs guman sidan sithan he hæfde his gastæ sendæ.]

I held a powerful king,  
the Lord of heaven, I dared not bow down.  
They insulted us both together; I was drenched with blood,  
sprinkled from [that man's side, after he sent forth his spirit]. [44-45; 48-49]

III.

krist wæs on rodi.  
hweþræ þer fusæ fearran kwomu  
æþþilæ til anum: Ic þæt al biheald.  
sare ic wæs miþ sorgum gidroefid;  
hnag [ic þam secgum til handa.]



Christ was on the cross.

Then many came quickly, faring from far  
noble ones to that one. I beheld it all.

Sorely I was smitten with sorrow, I bowed [to the men, to their hands] [56-59]

IV.

mip̃ strelum giwundad  
alegdun hiæ hinæ limwoerignæ;  
gistoddun him [æt his] licæs heafdum  
bihealdu hiæ þer

With arrows wounded,  
Limb-weary they laid Him down;  
they stood at the head of His body;  
They beheld Him there. [62-64]

On the principle already stated, that we must evaluate the text as it is now, I think that if we take these lines as making a self-contained poem, we can draw interesting conclusions as to its meaning. No one will fail to notice, first of all, the strong insistence of the need from the cross not to 'bow down' in Parts I and II, at least until the work of redemption is accomplished by the death of Christ, when the cross 'bows', 'hnag', lending herself to the hands of the friends of Jesus (III), as the longer **VERCELLI BOOK** poem expressly says ( *hnag ic hwæðre þam secgum to handa*, 59). The two contrasting attitudes of the cross, not bending and bending, are located, characteristically on the two contrasting sides of the monuments. The fact of the RUTHWELL CROSS being of stone gives an added meaning to this verb (actually three verbs in Old English: *bugan*, *hyldan*, *hnigan*): before suffering, and since it is necessary for Christ to die, the only accepted position is to stand firm, to hold on, where the invitation to carry one's own cross turns into being oneself a cross, hard and stable as a stone cross. On the other hand, when the work has reached its goal, that is, when the death of Christ has been assimilated into one's life, firmness turns into the meekness of the cross who lends herself to the hands of men (III), *eaðmod elne micle*, "humble with great courage", as the **VERCELLI BOOK** 'DREAM OF THE ROOD' says in the following line (l. 60). Humility is in fact the fruit of breaking one's own pride, and in this sense is like dying. This passage may be illustrated by another echo: the bending of the cross accompanies the Deposition, and corresponds to the body of Christ being laid down, in an attitude of submissive surrender, as Michelangelo's Pietà of St. Peter, Rome, so movingly illustrates.

There are other themes in this poem, which will be extensively developed in the longer **VERCELLI BOOK** 'DREAM OF THE ROOD'. The first part focuses on Christ's courageous mood: his nakedness has military and heroic overtones, he mounts on to the gallows as it were his throne, echoing the *regnavit a lingo Deus* of Fortunatus's hymn, his strength is showed before all men. The conclusion of the cross is only natural: such great and triumphant enterprise cannot be jeopardised by a weak attitude on the part of the cross: she cannot bow, she does not want to bow.

The second part shows the actual suffering which lurks behind the heroic and majestic side of the scene. Two kinds of suffering are mentioned: physical and mental, blood and insults. In such a compressed stanza (if we can take it as a stanza) glory and humiliation, joy and pain go side by side, because before introducing images of sorrow, one is reminded that the suffering protagonist is in fact the great king, the Lord of Heaven. In this context, the verb 'hold' may acquire a new spiritual sense: it means that the two sides of the Paschal mystery must be held together, and that to do this we must hold all this in our mind. So, a passage is built in Parts II, III, and IV using the same verb: the cross, who 'holds' the man hanging from it, is also the same 'beholding' the scene of the Deposition, and its attitude of contemplation passes on to the companions of Jesus who at the end 'beheld him there'.

If we remember what was said in the *Vita Willibaldi*, that the great crosses erected in the open air were places where people would gather to pray, these words of the short poem are very appropriate, and praying may be intended literally as staying at the head of the Lord, before his cross, to behold and contemplate what he did for us, to re-enact the story of his death in order to come to a new eternal life, as he did. The process of identification with Jesus, a major theme of the longer poem, is underlined also in the short one. The cross is strong as Jesus (she does not bow: I), suffers physically and mentally with him (II and III), with Christ sees men coming to the Lord seeking for him (III); with them stays at the foot of Jesus, where it is at the same time wounded like him and adoring him after the great battle he has fought to crush death (IV). This poem is thus another little sermon, moving through images, echoes and suggestions, much as the longer 'DREAM OF THE ROOD' in the VERCELLI BOOK will be.

### **3. THE DREAM OF THE ROOD: FROM PASSIVITY TO ACTIVITY**

It is evidently out of the scope of this paper to analyse the 'DREAM OF THE ROOD' in much detail. Let it suffice to give first a short idea of its themes and composition, and then to focus on some points more connected with the RUTHWELL CROSS and the short poem inscribed on it.

I read the poem on the 'DREAM OF THE ROOD' in the VERCELLI BOOK, like that on the RUTHWELL CROSS, as composed of four parts, having approximately the same number of lines, with the narrator as a protagonist of the two outer parts, and the cross of the two inner ones. In I (VDR, lines 1-27), a narrator describes a vision he had at night, when he saw a mysterious sign, both glorious and bleeding, appearing in the sky. In II (28-77), the sign, which is now explicitly the cross, narrates the death of Christ and its own involvement in it. III (78-121) is a sort of homily in which the cross explains the theological and spiritual meaning of the death of Christ. In IV (122-156), the narrator, having absorbed the message of the cross, prays and shows his desire to follow Christ bearing his cross in order to be with him and with all the preceding followers of his in the kingdom of heaven.

Viewed in the light of the two narrators, the dreamer, the Cross, the chiasmic structure of the poem (1-2//2-1) may have a meaning in that it constitutes a verbal cross. On the other

hand, the number four is crucial in the very symbolism of the cross, as it is shown in a much quoted text of St Paul, where the love of God has four dimensions: **breadth, length, depth and height**(Eph 3:18). Theologically, a more simple structure is probably the best way to read the poem, whose meaning can be reduced to a variously expressed polarity: *fiducia gloriae and doctrina patientiae* (hope of glory and teaching on patience) to quote Augustine, or, more concisely, *sacramentum et exemplum* (mystery and example) to use the words of Pope Leo the Great. The *sacramentum* is the paradoxical intertwining of life and death, humiliation and glory; the *exemplum* is the invitation to follow Christ's footpath in accepting suffering and death in order to share his everlasting happiness (Pezzini, 1972).

Anyone reading the 'DREAM OF THE ROOD ' can verify how Christ is constantly showed to be both man and God, either by using opposite qualifications when he is named, or by contrasting any humiliating situation with the memory of his glorious real condition, or even by the ambiguity of some words (for example ascend, OE *gestigan* , used to indicate the actual mounting of Jesus on to the gallows, and to suggest his final ascension into heaven). A reader can never forget that the man who is dying on the cross is the Lord of creation, which is shown weeping at the death of its king. Here are some powerful lines from the longer and later version:

Geseah ic weruda God  
þearle þenian. Þystro hæfdon  
bewrigen mid wolcnum wealdendes hræw,  
scirne sciman; sceadu forðeode  
wann under wolcnum. Weop eall gesceaft,  
cwiðdon Cyninges fyll. Crist wæs on rode. (51-56)

[I saw the Lord of hosts  
Grievously suffer. Darkness had  
Covered with clouds the ruler corpse,  
That radiant splendour. Shadow went forth  
Wan under heaven; all creation wept  
Bewailing the King's death. Christ was on the cross.]

Being obliged, for reasons of space, to choose only few points, I would like to stress a couple of things. One is the passage of the cross, and consequently of the believer, from passivity to activity; the other is how the following of Christ can be read as a pilgrimage.

In the way the cross tells the event of the passion we can detect a movement in three stages: in the first she is totally passive, being so to speak acted upon; in the second she acts simply by standing, with a sort of passive resistance which is anyway a kind of activity; in the third stage, being now totally transformed in Christ, she acts as a protagonist: she preaches the message of the cross and she invites the reader so much as any man to « **taste bitter death as he did on the tree**» (113-114) in order to be saved at the Day of Judgement. The first of these three stages can be read in lines 28-33. The second is the attitude of ' **not bending**' which is adequately and appositely stressed in the verses

chiselled on the RUTHWELL CROSS, and which recurs quite often in the VERCELLI BOOK 'DREAM OF THE ROOD' (see lines 35-36, 38, 42-43, 45). Here passivity is perceived and described as a conscious choice, that is being firm in suffering ( *I trembled in terror, / but I dared not bow me:42-43*), a refusal to be aggressive ( *All foes I might fell, yet I stood firm: l. 38*; and *Those sinners pierced me... I dared injure none: 46-47*), and above all a capacity of humble surrender ( *In meekness I bowed / to the hands of men: 58-59*), which is the supreme realisation of Christ's self-offering: « *Take and eat it: this is my body which is broken for you* » (1Cor 11:24). The third stage is illustrated in the whole third part of the poem, to which I refer the reader. A spiritual programme is offered here, described as a passage from passivity to activity, in which, paradoxically, the highest point of activity coincides with the deepest experience of passivity.

The other point traces us back to where we started: the cross as a beacon, a signpost, indicating the way to travellers, « *a healing tree* » (see l. 85) erected along the road of humanity as a good Samaritan, so that « *every soul* », no matter how gravely wounded, « *from the ways of earth through the cross shall come / to heavenly glory, who would dwell with God* » (119-121). The idea of pilgrimage has a very long story and is deeply embedded in the Christian spirituality. In Celtic Christianity it had become a way of living. In this perspective I think we may read Part I and IV, where the narrator is the protagonist, as signifying two sorts of pilgrimage: the pilgrimage of the mind in the first part (the vision), and the pilgrimage of desire (the prayer) in the second. The startling nocturnal vision is meant to wake up the imaginative powers of the mind and to start contemplation. After Part II and III have so movingly re-enacted the experience of the crucifixion, in which the cross is deeply and progressively involved, Part IV expands on the pilgrimage of desire. This is explicitly described:

Gebæd ic me þa to þan beame bliðe mode,  
elne mycle, þær ic ana wæs  
mæte werede. Wæs modsefa  
afysed on forðwege; feala ealra gebad  
langung-hwila. Is me nu lifes hyht  
þæt ic þone sigebeam secan mote  
ana oftor þonne ealle men,  
well weorþian. Me is willa to ðam  
mycel on mode, ond min mundbyrd is  
geriht to þære rode. (122-131)

[I prayed to that beam with an ardent spirit  
and earnest zeal, there where I was alone  
without companions. My mind was  
driven towards departure. Many I had endured  
hours of longing. Now it is my life's hope  
that I may seek ... this token of triumph,  
I alone more often than all men  
and worship it well. This desire towards it

is great in my heart, and all my hope  
is directed to the cross.]

To comment on this image of pilgrimage we can quote a statement by Leo the Great in the second of his Sermons for the feast of the Ascension: « The vigour of the great minds, and the light of the faithful souls is to believe without hesitation what cannot be seen by bodily sight, and fix the desire where you cannot thrust your eyes». A pilgrimage is a quest, and the best and simplest verb to indicate a quest is 'seek'. In the DR this verb, OE *secan*, recurs at important points. Christ will come in judgement to « seek mankind» ( *mancynn secan*: l. 104). Our quest corresponds to His: The narrator prays to be able to « seek this token of triumph» (l. 127), and remembers friends «who have gone away from these earthly delights to seek the king of glory» (l. 132-133).

'*Quaerere Deum*' 'To seek God only' was, and is, the main purpose of monastic life, from where most probably the RUTHWELL CROSS and the VERCELLI BOOK have come to us. It remains the main Christian ideal, and it is refreshing to notice that, through time, in this respect things have not changed, and to consider how profitably ancient monuments and old texts continue to help us in this searching for God.

Da parte mia ritengo che questa sia anzitutto una croce "missionaria", connessa con l'opera di evangelizzazione, e non essenzialmente con la vita contemplativa. Sebbene ciò sia in realtà presente (solitudine). A questo condurrebbe la presenza di Giovanni Battista, il profeta messaggero, che mostrando l'agnello indica molto chiaramente la croce e l'evento sacrificale centrale per il Cristianesimo e la sua missione. Anche la presenza dei due Padri del Deserto come due importanti testimoni di una vita interamente dedicata alla "ricerca" di Dio. Il deserto stesso è una possente metafora della vita come una peregrinazione verso la terra promessa, ricca di frutti (i lati!): la croce come "vite", e il vino come "sangue". La figura della donna pentita è un simbolo del pentimento e dell'amore, mentre la figura del cieco nato guarito simbolizza la necessità della grazia celeste per comprendere la crocifissione ed il suo apparente fallimento: questo è, in realtà, il significato di questo miracolo, perlomeno nel Vangelo di Marco. Importanza del verbo "secan" (cercare) che mette in relazione il narratore con coloro che l'hanno preceduto nel regno dei cieli.

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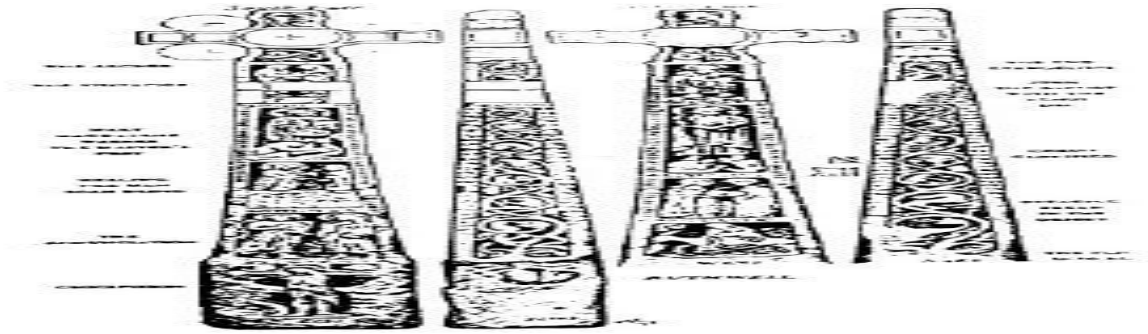
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