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At Once Elitist and Popular: the Audiences of the Bewcastle and Ruthwell Crosses

Éamonn Ó Carragáin

THE Bewcastle and Ruthwell Crosses are the finest sculptured monuments to survive from early eighth-century Northumbria. For what audiences were they designed: clerics, monks or lay people? Of the two monuments, it is likely that the Bewcastle Cross is the earlier. Its designer wished to commemorate a number of benefactors of his or her community, whose names were inscribed on a panel of runic inscriptions on the west face (they are, unfortunately, now largely illegible: see figs 1 and 2). He or she was the first to introduce a number of highly significant theological ideas into Northumbrian sculpture. The Ruthwell designer, who did not set out to commemorate any individuals, expanded and developed theological ideas found in embryo on the Bewcastle Cross (figs 3 and 4). The Bewcastle and the Ruthwell Crosses, both, are best understood in terms of the theological and liturgical interests of Bede's scholarly circle, in particular of Bishop Acca of Hexham, Bede's bishop and patron; and of Bede's friend and correspondent Bishop Pehthelm of Whithorn. Hexham lies east of Bewcastle, and Whithorn west of Ruthwell: I would date Bewcastle within the episcopacy of Acca, i.e. between 709 and 731; and Ruthwell a little later, say between 732 and 740 (the year Acca died). In this period the abbot of Wearmouth-Jarrow was Hwaetberht (abbot 716–c.750). Hwaetberht was known as 'Eusebius' to his scholarly friends, presumably because of his interest in Eusebius of Caesarea, Constantine and the cult of the Cross. Rosemary Cramp and Richard Bailey have convincingly related the beautiful cross-slab at Jarrow to the abbacy and patronage of Hwaetberht.¹ In his account of King Oswald's victory, in the sign of the Cross, at Heavenfield, Bede implies that the Cross was, for the Northumbrian aristocracy and the clerics associated with them, the primary symbol of the Christian Faith.² The cult of the Cross had greatly developed within the Western Church during Bede's own adult life. About 700 AD, Pope Sergius had made the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross universal in the Western Church. Bede records in his *De temporum ratione* that Hwaetberht-Eusebius had 'hastened to Rome in the time of Pope Sergius of blessed memory and stayed no little time there, learning, copying and bringing back whatever he thought necessary'.³

Hexham practised a powerful local variant of the cult of the Cross. Bede,

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- 1 Rosemary Cramp, *County Durham and Northumberland*, *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture* 1, 2 vols (Oxford, 1984), 1: 112–13; 2: pi. 95, fig. 518, and pi. 96, figs 519–20; Richard N. Bailey, *England's Earliest Sculptors* (Toronto, 1996), 49.
 - 2 Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, III.2, in *Venerabilis Bedae Opera Historica*, ed. Charles Plummer, 2 vols (Oxford, 1896), 1:128.
 - 3 Bede, *Historia Abbatum*, 18, in *Venerabilis Bedae Opera Historica*, ed. Plummer, 1: 383

writing about 730 CE, tells us that the monks there had for many years ('multo iam tempore') celebrated a Vigil at nearby Heavenfield on the anniversary of Oswald's death. Bishop Acca, Bede's own close friend and patron, developed the cult: the Hexham community had built a church at Heavenfield 'lately' ('nuper'): evidently, well after Acca became bishop in 709.⁴ The devotional interest which produced the Heavenfield church is consistent with that which produced the Roman cross-slab at Jarrow. The *incipit* of the runic panel at Bewcastle refers to that cross as a 'symbol of victory' ('þis sigbeon ...'): ⁵ like the Jarrow cross-slab, the Bewcastle Cross was designed as a Constantinian symbol of spiritual and political victory.

To refer to the Bewcastle monument as a 'cross' at all is, at the moment, mildly controversial. In four articles published since 1998 Professor Fred Orton of Leeds has argued that the monument was designed not as a cross, but as an obelisk; and that the Ruthwell Cross was originally designed as an obelisk, to which a cross (the upper stone) was added later.⁶ But the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century descriptions of the Bewcastle monument by Reginald Bainbrigg, Nicholas Roscarrock, and other antiquarians in the circles of Lord William Howard and William Camden all explicitly refer to it as a cross, and Bainbrigg's description of Ruthwell explicitly calls that monument a cross. These early statements are reliable, and the objections which Professor Orton raises against them are unconvincing.⁷

4 Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, III. 2, ed. Plummer, 1: 130; Bailey, *England's Earliest Sculptors*, 50.

5 Richard Bailey and Rosemary Cramp, eds, *Cumberland, Westmorland and Lancashire North-of-the-Sands*, Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture 2 (Oxford, 1988), 1: 61–3.

6 Orton's fourth statement of this position is a good place to begin, as it contains references to his three earlier articles: Fred Orton, 'Rethinking the Ruthwell and Bewcastle Monuments: Some Deprecation of Style; Some Consideration of Form and Ideology', in George Hardin Brown and Catherine E. Karkov, eds, *Anglo-Saxon Styles* (Albany, NY, 2003), 31–67.

7 See the courteous but devastating assessment of Orton's work by Richard Bailey, 'Innocent from the Great Offence', in Catherine E. Karkov and Fred Orton, eds, *Theorizing Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture* (Morgantown, WV, 2003), 93–103; and the discussion of Orton's treatment of the early antiquarian evidence in Éamonn Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood: Liturgical Images and the Old English Poems of the Dream of the Rood Tradition* (London Toronto, 2005), 63, n. 10 (on Ruthwell); 30 and 68, n. 106 (on Bewcastle).



Fig. 1. The Bewcastle Cross-shaft, north and east sides:

(a) North side: panels of interlace, foliage scrolls and abstract ornament, with spaces between panels where names were inserted (including the surviving 'kynibur*g').

(b) East side: vine scroll, with eight surviving volutes. No inscription.
(Photos: Durham University, Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture).

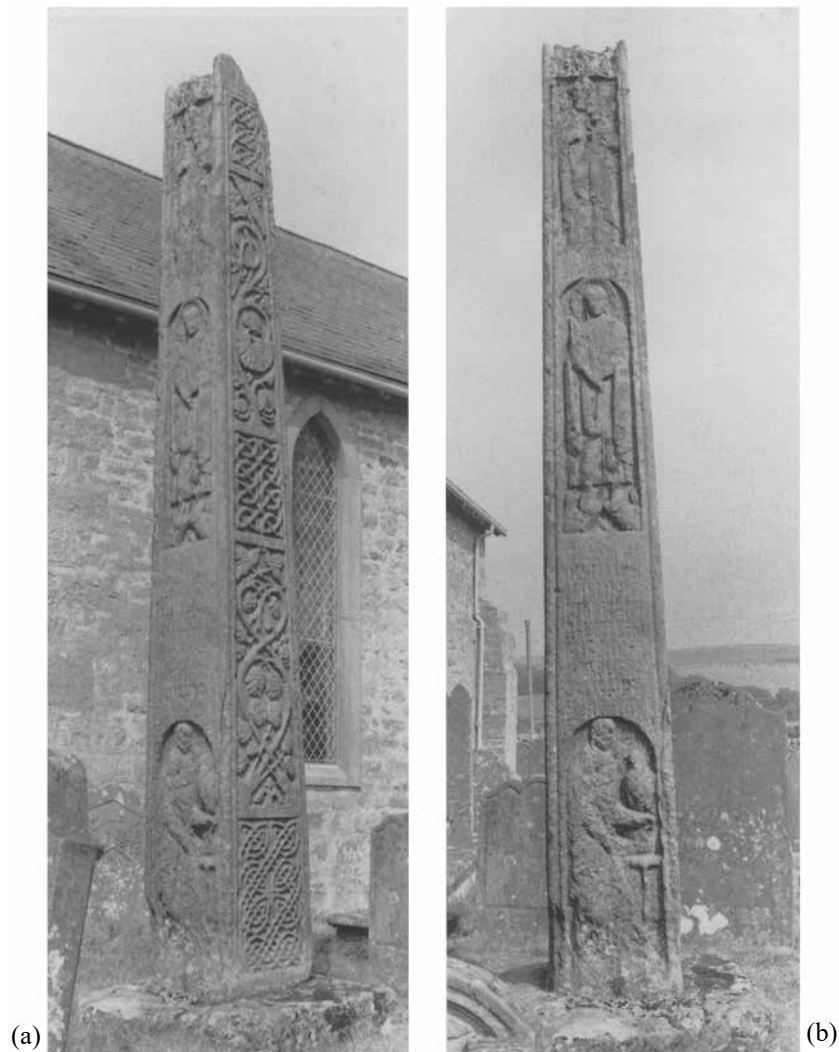


Fig. 2. The Bewcastle Cross-shaft, south and west sides:
 (a) South and west sides, showing the relationship between the sundial (south side) and the 'Christ acclaimed by the beasts' and 'John the Baptist acclaiming the Agnus Dei' panels (west side).

(b) The Bewcastle Cross-shaft, west side: Reading upwards: (1) the falconer; (2) the panel of runic inscriptions; (3) Christ acclaimed by two animals and (4) John the Baptist acclaiming the Agnus Dei. (Photos: Durham University, Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture).

The iconography of the surviving Bewcastle cross-shaft is consistent with these early descriptions. On the upper half of the west face, a panel represents Christ acclaimed by two beasts. Directly above, St John the Baptist points towards the Lamb of God (fig. 2). The same sequence of panels will recur on the second broad side at Ruthwell (fig. 4). This suggests that the Ruthwell designer

was familiar with the Bewcastle achievement. The Bewcastle Cross provides important evidence about the original orientation of the Ruthwell Cross. It stands where it always stood. A sundial, incorporated into one of the panels of the south side of the cross, could only function if that side faced south. Thus the figural panels on the west side of the Bewcastle Cross always faced west; to see them properly, onlookers need to face east. From early times Christians traditionally prayed facing east, oriented towards the rising sun. It is reasonable to assume that the Ruthwell Cross was originally oriented as the Bewcastle Cross still is. At Ruthwell the second broad side (with Christ acclaimed by the Beasts and the Agnus Dei) probably faced west as at Bewcastle, and consequently the first broad side (with the Annunciation) faced east.

On the west face of the Bewcastle Cross, 'Christ acclaimed by the Beasts' and the panel of runes (just below), together form the two 'inner panels' of the surviving sequence. The two 'outer' panels of the surviving sequence comprise a symbolic portrait of Christ as the Agnus Dei (above) and an aristocratic or royal portrait, the falconer (below).⁸ In the central figural panel, 'Christ acclaimed by the beasts', Christ holds a scroll in his left hand; his right hand is raised in blessing. It is likely that the scroll represents the heavenly *Liber Vitae* referred to in the New Testament.⁹ If so, Christ's gesture of blessing presumably encompasses the scroll (the heavenly book which would be understood to contain the names of the blessed), but also the beasts who joyfully acclaim Christ, the names to be prayed for in the panel below, the falconer in the panel at the foot of this side, and any onlookers who in prayer faced east towards this side of the cross. Such onlookers would have hoped that the names of the living and dead persons, inscribed in runes on the panel just below, were inscribed in the heavenly *Liber Vitae* symbolized by the scroll which Christ blesses, and that their own names were also inscribed on it. The formal request to 'pray for their souls' could be responded to by monks and laity as well as by priests. The Bewcastle Cross implies that in that local area secular and religious social structures were interdependent and mutually supportive.

The metaphor of the heavenly *Liber Vitae* enables us to appreciate the conceptual relationship between the west side and the north and south sides of the cross-shaft: these contain a series of panels of various design (figs 1 and 2).

8 A number of scholars have interpreted the Bewcastle falconer panel as a portrait of John the Evangelist: see the survey in Bailey and Cramp, eds, *Cumberland, Westmorland and Lancashire North-of-the-Sands*, 69–70. In recent years, scholarly consensus has swung back to a royal portrait: the decisive studies in changing the consensus were Ernst Kitzinger, 'Interlace and Icons: Form and Function in Early Insular Art', in R. Michael Spearman and John Higgitt, eds, *The Age of Migrating Ideas: Early Medieval Art in Northern Britain and Ireland* (Edinburgh and Stroud, 1993), 3–15; and Bailey, *England's Earliest Sculptors*, 66–8.

9 Phil. 4:3; Luke 10:20; Rev. 3:5, 5:1–10, 20:12, 21:27, 22:19; for the Old Testament background, see Dan. 7:10, 12:1.

Between each panel room was left for one further name. Some names seem to have been added, but some spaces may have been left blank. Apart from the fragment of the sacred name '[..]ssu/s' at the top of the north side, only one name is still legible, over the lowest panel of ornament on the north side: 'kynibur*g'.¹⁰ The Bewcastle designer seems to have left space for his community to incise, or paint in, further names when appropriate. The design of the north and south sides thus enabled the community to update progressively the commemorative runic panel of the west side, which in turn refers to the heavenly *Liber Vitae* blessed by Christ in the panel just above. The east side is taken up by a magnificent vine-scroll of which eight great volutes survive. The single great uninscribed vine-scroll provides an eloquent image of the unity between Christ and the members of his body: 'I am the vine, you are the branches' John 15:1–8).¹¹

On the west side, the two visual representations of Christ were particularly appropriate to a high cross. The panel of 'Christ acclaimed by the beasts' refers to two chants sung together only at Good Friday at the ninth hour, the moment of Christ's death on the cross: the tract 'Domine audiui' taken from the Cantic of Habbakuk, which prophesied that Christ would be known 'between two living creatures' ('in medio duorum animalium'), and the tract 'Qui habitat', based on Psalm 90, which prophesied that Christ would 'tread on the lion and the dragon'. In order to refer at once to both texts, the Bewcastle designer transformed the traditional iconography of Christ's victory in Psalm 90: he or she converted the two beasts from evil to good, and reduced them to a new and significant anonymity. They are no longer lions and dragons, but simply 'duo animalia', two living creatures, who, by crossing their paws, refer to the X-shaped 'g'-rune which begins the name 'gessus kristtus', inscribed just above the panel; and, by implication, to the Greek letter 'chi', the first letter of the messianic title in Greek, 'Christos'. At Bewcastle, these converted animals take up the *orans*- or prayer-posture, raising both paws in acclamation; they acclaim Christ as the anointed one, the Messiah. As Adam was placed in paradise among the beasts on the sixth day of Creation, a Friday, so with Christ's triumph over death on Good Friday (the sixth day of Holy Week), the ancient harmony between man and animals is restored. On Good Friday, Christ, who 'did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited', reversed Adam's sin of pride. His heroic act of obedience 'to the point of death, even death on a cross' (Phil. 2:6–8) re-established the harmony of Paradise that Adam had lost.¹²

10 Bailey and Cramp, eds, *Cumberland, Westmorland and Lancashire North-of-the-Sands*, 62–3.

11 On the religious significance of Anglo-Saxon vine-scroll patterns, see Bailey, *England's Earliest Sculptors*, 52–7.

12 See Éamonn Ó Carragáin, 'Christ over the Beasts and the Agnus Dei: Two Multivalent Panels on the Ruthwell and Bewcastle Crosses', in Paul E. Szarmach, ed., *Sources of Anglo-Saxon Culture* (Kalamazoo, MI, 1986), 377–403.

The restoration of harmony between humankind and other creatures is also implied by the falconer portrait at the foot of the west side, and by the panel in which John the Baptist points to the Lamb. By the early eighth century, that panel would have recalled a communal chant recently introduced into the Mass at the breaking of bread: ‘Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis’ (‘Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us’). The chant had recently been introduced by Pope Sergius, who had made the Exaltation of the Cross an official and universal feast in the Western Church. The rite of breaking the bread for Communion was always interpreted as symbolizing the breaking of Christ’s body by the nails and spear on the Cross. We may thus conclude that each of the upper two panels on the Bewcastle cross-shaft symbolically represents Christ’s victory on the Cross on Good Friday at the ninth hour at Jerusalem: the unique act of heroic humility, through which the falconer and those whose names were commemorated on the cross might hope to have their names included in the heavenly Book of Life. The ‘Christ acclaimed by two animals’ and ‘Agnus Dei’ panels, taken in sequence, provide important evidence that the Bewcastle monument was from the beginning designed as a cross. This iconographic sequence is consistent with the opening words of the main runic inscription, which refers to the monument as ‘pis sigbecn’, ‘this victory-standard’. Within the Roman and Constantinian tradition, the Cross was above all a symbol of victory.

The most brilliant achievement of the Bewcastle designer was to relate Christ’s paschal victory on the Cross to the Christian solar cycle which commemorated his Incarnation. The sundial, on the south side of the Bewcastle cross-shaft, doubtless had practical functions.¹³ But for a monastic audience, it would have recalled Psalm 18 (19), ‘the heavens show forth the glory of God’:

⁶He hath set his tabernacle in the sun: and he, as a bridegroom
 coming out of his bride chamber,
 Hath rejoiced as a giant to run the way.
⁷His going out is from the end of heaven,
 And his circuit even to the end thereof: and there is no one that
 can hide himself from his heat.¹⁴

An onlooker who proceeds around the Bewcastle Cross sunwise, from south to west, can see that the panel of foliage scroll containing the sundial is at a level which corresponds to that of the sequence of related panels, ‘Christ acclaimed

13 For discussion, see Bailey and Cramp, eds, *Cumberland, Westmorland and Lancashire North-of-the-Sands*, 66.

14 Psalm 18 (19), Douay version, which preserves the identification between Christ and the sun found in the Vulgate: ‘In sole posuit tabernaculum suum; et ipse tanquam sponsus procedens de thalamo suo, Exsultavit ut gigas ad currendum viam’.

by two animals' and 'Agnus Dei' panels on the west side (fig. 2). These two panels not only refer to Christ's victory on the Cross at the ninth hour on Good Friday: they also refer to the sun's yearly course. In St Luke's gospel, the Angel Gabriel informed the Virgin Mary that her cousin, Elizabeth, was six months with child (Luke 1:36); the Prologue to the Gospel of St John tells us that Christ was the Light that illuminates every person that comes into the world, while John the Baptist was not the Light, but was to give testimony to the Light (John 1:5–10). Later in the same Gospel (3:30), John the Baptist proclaims of Christ that 'he must increase, I must decrease'. It was logical for the Western Church to celebrate Christ's incarnation and nativity on the 'growing days' when the sun began to overcome the winter darkness: the Annunciation on 25 March (VIII kal. Aprilis) near the spring equinox, and the Nativity of Christ on 25 December (VIII kal. Ianuarii), near the winter solstice, a date which, in pagan Rome, had from the third century been the feast of the Unconquered Sun (*natale solis invicti*). Conversely, John the Baptist's conception and birth were celebrated on the lessening days, to proclaim that he was not the light, but that he gave testimony to the light even when the darkness seemed to overcome it: his conception was celebrated on 24 September (VIII kal. Octobris) near the Autumn equinox, and his Nativity on 24 June (VIII kal. Iulii), near the Summer solstice: a feast which counterbalanced the midwinter feast of Christmas. Thus the sequence, from Christ over the beasts to John the Baptist pointing to the Agnus Dei, refers not only to Good Friday at the ninth hour, but also to the solar cycle in which the Nativities of Christ and that of his cousin the Baptist were celebrated. The sundial on the south side prepares onlookers to appreciate the logic of juxtaposing 'Christ acclaimed by two animals' to 'John the Baptist pointing to the Agnus Dei' on the upper half of the west side of the cross-shaft (fig. 2).

The importance of seeing Christ's incarnation and his Passion in a single perspective was strengthened by the ancient Christian tradition that the first Good Friday happened on 25 March. In seventh-century Northumbria, how to calculate Easter was a major ecclesiastical problem: the Irish had one method, and the Anglo-Saxon monks had another method which they had learned from Rome. But the Northumbrians, the Irish and the Welsh all believed that Christ had died on 25 March, on the precise anniversary of the day, thirty-four years before, on which he had been conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary. The tradition affirmed that Christ's life, from his conception in Mary's virginal womb to his triumphant death on the Cross, had the coherence and integrity of a divine plan: as Ambrosiaster had put it in the fourth century, 'the Saviour did all things at the appropriate places and times'.¹⁵

¹⁵ *Pseudo-Augustini Quaestiones Veteris et Novi Testamenti CXXVII*, ed. Alexander CSEL 50 (Vienna, 1908), Quaestio iv, p. 100: 'omnia propriis locis et temporibus gessit Salvator'.

In the course of the seventh century, the unity and coherence of Christ's life, and in particular his virginal birth, came to be seen as issues on which the unity of the Church depended. Monotheletism, the theory that Christ did not have an independent human will, but only participated in the divine will which he shared with his Father and the Holy Spirit, threatened to split the Church. Against Monothelete byzantine emperors, Rome and the West defended the reality of Christ's human will: in effect, the reality of Christ's courage. Those who opposed Monotheletism held that Christ's human will could never be in conflict with the divine will precisely because Christ was uniquely born from the Blessed Virgin. The struggle against Monotheletism demanded that Christ's Passion be seen in the context of his Incarnation; and every educated nun, monk or cleric was aware that 25 March was the day, near the Spring equinox, on which both events had occurred. In order to affirm Christ's full humanity, as well as his divinity, a great development of Marian liturgy and devotion took place at Rome in the late seventh century.¹⁶

The Anglo-Saxon Church gave its official response to the Monothelete crisis on 17 September 679 at the synod of Hatfield. Theodore of Tarsus, Archbishop of Canterbury, presided; the Papal representative was John the Archcantor, the man responsible for the liturgy at St Peter's basilica in Rome which, from the time it was built in the 330s, had been the first Roman basilica to celebrate Christmas.¹⁷ In the 670s, just before the abbot John set off with Benedict Biscop and Ceolfrid for the synod of Hatfield, St Peter's had introduced a new Mass for the feast of the Annunciation on 25 March. It is likely that the prayers of the new Mass were composed by the head of liturgy or precentor at the Basilica, John the Archcantor itself. The central idea of the new Mass was precisely that the Annunciation, which on 25 March almost always fell during Lent, should be celebrated in the context of Christ's Passion. The title of the Mass proclaimed that 25 March should be seen as 'The Annunciation of the Lord and His Passion', 'ADNUNTIATIO DOMINI ET PASSIO EIUSDEM'. Its offertory prayer stated explicitly that the congregation offered the Mass on 25 March 'on account of the Incarnation and likewise the Passion of our Redeemer Jesus Christ'. The collect of the Mass provides the most complex and moving statement in the Roman liturgy of the idea that Christ's birth, death and Resurrection provided a unified pattern in which humankind could share: 'Gratiam tuam quaesumus domine mentibus nostris

The unknown author of this treatise is referred to in modern scholarly discussion as 'Ambrosiaster'.

16 See Michael Hurley, 'Born Incorruptibly. The Third Canon of the Lateran Council, AD. 649', *The Heythrop Journal* 2 (1961), 216–36.

17 See Henry Chadwick, 'Theodore, the English Church and the Monothelete Controversy', in Michael Lapidge, ed., *Archbishop Theodore: Commemorative Studies on his Life Influence* (Cambridge, 1995), 88–95.

infunde, ut qui angelo nuntiante Christi filii tui incarnationem cognouimus, per passionem eius et crucem ad resurrectionis gloriam perducamur: qui tecum ...'.¹⁸

This prayer, the collect *Gratiam tuam*, would be used for centuries: indeed, it is still used, both in the Roman and in the Anglican liturgies (the Book of Common Prayer provides a noble translation as the collect for Lady Day, 25 March).¹⁹ In 679 Benedict Biscop also brought back from Rome an icon of the Virgin, together with icons of the twelve apostles, to adorn the monastic church of St Peter at Wearmouth; and in the next few years, he would build next to that church a chapel dedicated to Mary.²⁰ Like Theodore of Tarsus, Benedict Biscop was closely in touch with the struggle against Monotheletism, and saw that Christ's virginal birth, the central rationale for the cult of the virginal Mother of God, was central to that struggle.

A generation later, in the early eighth century, the cult of the Virgin Mary was also given striking new importance at Hexham. Returning from Rome in early 705, St Wilfrid was struck down by serious illness at Meaux in Francia. St Michael the Archangel appeared to him on his sick-bed, bearing the urgent message that the Virgin Mary had obtained for him a few more years of life, so that he should fulfill a specific mission for her:

[...] you have built churches in honour of the Apostles St Peter and St Andrew; but you have built nothing in honour of St Mary, ever Virgin, who is interceding for you. You have to put this right and to dedicate a church in honour of her.²¹

Wilfrid was directed by an archangel, no less, to imitate the most up-to-date Roman devotion. Pope John VII, newly-elected in March 705, took as his motto 'servus Sanctae Mariae', 'the servant of St Mary'.²² St Michael in effect

18 *Die älteste erreichbare Gestalt des Liber Sacramentorum anni circuli der römischen Kirche (Cod. Pad. D 47, fol. 11r–100r)*, ed. L. C. Mohlberg, *Liturgiegeschichtliche Quellen und Forschungen* 11–12 (Münster-im-Westfalen, 1927), 29–30; transl.: 'Pour your grace into our minds, we beseech thee, O Lord: that we to whom the Incarnation of Christ your Son was made known by the message of an angel may, by his Passion and Cross, be brought to the glory of his resurrection, who with you [lives and reigns in the unity of the Holy Spirit for ever and ever, Amen]'.
19 For an analysis of the Vatican Mass for 25 March, see Éamonn Ó Carragáin, 'Rome, Ruthwell, Vercelli: *The Dream of the Rood* and the Italian Connection', in Vittoria Dolcetti Corazza, ed., *Vercelli tra Oriente ed Occidente, tra tarda antichità e Medioevo* (Alessandria, 51–100; for the history of the 'Gratiam tuam' prayer, see idem, 'The Annunciation of the Lord and His Passion: a Liturgical Topos from St Peter's on the Vatican in *The Dream of the Rood*, Thomas Cranmer and John Donne', in Jane Roberts and Janet Nelson, eds, *Essays in Anglo-Saxon and Related Themes in Memory of Dr Lynne Grundy* (London, 2000), 339–81.

20 Bede, *Historia Abbatum*, 6, ed. Plummer, i: 369.
21 Stephen, *Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, 56: *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus*, Bertram Colgrave (Cambridge, 1927), 122–3.
22 See Per Jonas Nordhagen, *The Frescoes of John VII (AD 705–707) in S. Maria Antiqua Rome*

commanded Wilfred to imitate the new pope and to take the phrase ‘servus Sanctae Mariae’ as the motto for the last years of his life (705–09), which spanned the short pontificate of John VII (705–07). After the vision, Wilfrid immediately enquired ‘Where is Acca our priest?’, and privately revealed to his chaplain the message he had received.²³ The following year (706), in a synod at the river Nidd, Wilfrid was restored to the bishopric of Hexham, the monastery of Ripon, and his Northumbrian lands.²⁴ At Hexham Wilfrid now built a second church, and dedicated it to the Virgin Mary. This brought Hexham closer to the liturgical spirituality of Wearmouth, where Benedict Biscop had provided a church dedicated to her a generation before. It is reasonable to assume that Wilfrid, lately come from Rome, would have provided his new church with up-to-date Roman liturgical usages. Doubtless, as a bishop often beleaguered by jurisdictional difficulties, he saw the political relevance of the papal cult of the Virgin. If, like the Pope, Wilfrid was ‘servus Sanctae Mariae’, this service placed clear limits on his subordination to any lesser authority, ecclesiastical or secular.²⁵ Just before his death in 709, in a speech which has the character of a last testament, Wilfrid stated his desire to visit Rome one last time, and ‘to carry presents to the Church dedicated to St Mary the Mother of the Lord’, as well as to St Paul’s outside-the-walls.

Wilfrid bequeathed the monastery and bishopric of Hexham to his chaplain Acca. Acca’s experience of Rome, his intimacy with Wilfrid, and his devotional interests, provide the most convincing contexts, not only for the erection of the Bewcastle Cross, but also for the remarkable wealth of Marian panels on the Ruthwell Cross. As we shall see, the verse *tituli* for the two Ruthwell vine-scrolls emphasize the links between the Annunciation and the Passion, and in this way relate the solar Incarnation-cycle to the lunar Paschal-cycle. Acca, Bede’s bishop and friend, was committed to two important cults: that of the Cross, centred on Heavenfield; and that of the Virgin, in which, through the message of an archangel, Hexham had lately come to imitate Wearmouth and Rome.

Acca provides the context within which we can understand how the Ruthwell Cross expands and transforms the iconographic programme on the earlier Bewcastle Cross. The Ruthwell designer made the vine-scroll, or ‘tree of life’, even more central. At Bewcastle, the single great vine-scroll on the east side, an image of the blood of Christ, had been balanced against the images of Christ’s Body on the west side. The Ruthwell designer now provided his cross with two

(Rome, 1968).

23 *Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, 56, ed. Colgrave, 122–3.

24 *Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, 60, ed. Colgrave, 128–33.

25 On the political importance of the papal theme of service to Mary, see Eric Thuno, *Image and Relic: Mediating the Sacred in Early Medieval Rome*, *Analecta Romana Instituti Supplementum* 32 (Rome, 2002), 29–38.

matching vine-scrolls, which spread on each side from the lower to the upper stone (fig. 3). These paired vine-scrolls, by far the largest and most important icons of the Ruthwell monument, place images of Christ's blood at its very heart. At Bewcastle, the single great vine-scroll has no *titulus*; but the Ruthwell designer provided both vine-scrolls with matching *tituli*, in English verse and in runes. The vivid poem quoted in these carefully-edited *tituli* was probably composed in the aftermath of the synod of Hatfield in 679. The poem makes the cross speak, from the very heart of its experience, of its ordeal on Good Friday. It is unique in emphasizing Christ's courage when he confronts the Cross, and the dilemma of the Cross when it realizes that it must bear its Lord to his death, and so become the slayer of its Lord. It is unique in retelling the Crucifixion in terms reminiscent of the Annunciation: on 25 March Mary was troubled when the Angel Gabriel requested of her that, though she did not know man sexually, she should bear the Lord into life by the power of the Holy Spirit.²⁶ Since the late fourth century, theologians were agreed that she had taken a vow of perpetual virginity, which it seemed that she must now break.²⁷ Now, in the English poem, the Cross obediently, but in startled agony, bears its Lord to his courageous death. The way in which the poem's Crucifixion narrative is modelled on Luke's narrative of the Annunciation emphasizes not only the similarities between the two scenes, but the tragic differences between them. Gabriel immediately reassured Mary, resolving her dilemma; but for the Cross, there is no reassurance, no resolution: it must, uncomprehending, become the instrument of its Lord's death. The English poet was unique in realizing that the Incarnation and Passion both involved the cooperation of startled but obedient creatures, Mary at the Incarnation and the Cross at the Passion:

1 Almighty God stripped himself. When he willed to mount the
gallows,
2 Courageous before all men,
3 [*I dared not*] bow [...]
5 I [*lifted up*] a powerful king —
6 the lord of heaven I dared not tilt:
7 men insulted the pair of us together; I was drenched with blood
8 poured [*from the man's side*] [...]

At the heart of the Ruthwell Cross, its two vine-scrolls and the vernacular *tituli*, which celebrate Christ's heroic self-giving on 25 March, provide the unifying

26 The Old English text of the Ruthwell poem is edited and discussed in Éamonn Ó Carragáin, 'The Ruthwell Crucifixion Poem in its Iconographic and Liturgical Contexts', *Peritia* 6–7 (1987–88), 1–71.

27 Augustine, Sermon 51:18 (PL 38–9, 343); Sermon 215:2 (PL 38–9, 1073); Sermon 291:5–6 (PL 38–9, 1318–19); the theme is discussed in Kim Power, *Veiled Desire: Augustine's Writings on Women* (London, 1995), 181–2, 293.

principle behind the rich iconographic programme of the broad sides; while the broad sides themselves set forth the liturgical means by which the audience can enter the mystery of Christ's heroic Passion. At the centre of the first broad side are images of the catechumenate and baptism, the means by which Christians at Ruthwell could enter into the paschal mystery: conversion, in the Man born Blind; and repentance, in the Woman who was a Sinner. The Ruthwell designer saw these images as stages in spiritual growth. Therefore he placed them between a moving image of the Visitation, above on the upper stone, and of the Annunciation, below, at the foot of the slender shaft of his Cross (fig. 4 (a)). The designer saw conversion and repentance, both of which allowed Christ to grow in the Christian soul, as imitations of the growth of Christ within the womb of the Virgin.²⁸ The Ruthwell iconography grows out of the two mysteries which took place on 25 March: the incarnation and the Passion of Christ.

28 See Éamonn Ó Carragáin, 'Between Annunciation and Visitation: Spiritual Birth and the Cycles of the Sun on the Ruthwell Cross: a Response to Fred Orton', in Karkov and Orton, eds, *Theorizing*, 131–87.



Fig. 3. The Ruthwell Cross: to right, vine-scroll with first runic verse *titulus* and, to left, part of the first broad side with (reading upwards: lower stone): healing of the man born blind; repentance of the woman who was a sinner. (Photo: Ross Trench-Jellicoe).

The design of the second half of the Ruthwell Cross is as dynamic as that of the first half. The *titulus* for the second vine-scroll envisages the followers of Christ coming from afar, as it were in an imaginary pilgrimage, to gather at the Cross on Good Friday; the Cross, still uncomprehending, silent and overcome by sorrow, bows down to present the body of Christ to his followers. The second *titulus* reverses the themes of the first, where the dilemma of the Cross sprang from the fact that as long as Christ still lived it dared not bow, but had to stand fast:

9 Christ was on the Cross.
 10 But eager ones came thither from afar,
 11 the noble ones [came] together. I looked upon all that:
 12 I was terribly afflicted with sorrows; I bowed [*to the hands of*
 the men.]
 13 Wounded with arrows,
 14 they laid him down limb-spent, and took their stand at the
 head and feet of his corpse;
 15 there they looked on [*the Lord of heaven*] [...]

The wonderful image in which the Cross bows down to present the body of Christ to his followers occurs nowhere else in medieval art, literature or theology. But this second *titulus* ends with a moment of pause and expectation, as the followers of Christ, standing at his head and feet, contemplate Christ's dead body, emptied even of its blood. How will the narrative be completed?

Knowing that the vine-scrolls were images of the blood of Christ and of the tree of life, the Ruthwell designer had the brilliant idea of 'completing' the narrative with a powerful sequence of images of Christ's life-giving eucharistic body. As central elements in this sequence, we find developed versions of two panels we have seen at Bewcastle: Christ acclaimed by the beasts, at the top of the lower stone (here the 'X' formed by the beasts' crossed paws echoes not an X-shaped 'g'-rune, as on the Bewcastle Cross, but the similarly shaped Greek letter *chi* which begins the word 'Christus' on the upper border of the panel: 'IhS XPS'); and John the Baptist pointing to the Agnus Dei, on the upper stone (fig. 4 (b)). Below Christ acclaimed by the Beasts, the designer expanded this sequence of two images by adding a third: the earliest surviving Insular representation of the first monks, Saints Paul and Anthony, breaking bread in the desert (fig. 4 (b)). This image transformed older Roman images of the harmony between Saints Peter and Paul, the iconography of the '*concordia apostolorum*'. It is best seen as the earliest surviving example of an Insular transformation of that tradition: as a '*concordia monachorum*'.²⁹ Its form and placing at Ruthwell was inspired by a liturgical ceremony at Iona, where for over a century, since the time of St Columba, the arrival of a clerical visitor had been celebrated by a liturgical re-enactment, during the Mass, of how Saints Paul and Anthony had broken bread in the desert, when St Anthony the abbot had come to visit St Paul of Thebes in his desert hermitage.³⁰ At the bottom of this side of the cross-shaft, the Ruthwell designer placed the third Marian icon to survive on the monument. The Virgin

29 See Kees Veelenturf, 'Irish High Crosses and Continental Art: Shades of Iconographical Ambiguity', in Colum Hourihane, ed., *From Ireland Coming: Irish Art from the Early Christian to the Late Gothic Period and its European Context* (Princeton, NJ, 2001), 83–101.

30 Adomnan, *Vita Columbae*, 1:44, trans. Richard Sharpe, *Adomnan of Iona: Life of St Columba* (Harmondsworth, 1991), 147, discussed by O Carragain, *Ritual and the Rood*, 153–60.

bears Christ across the desert to the Holy Land, in fulfillment of the manna which had once sustained the people of Israel: a foreshadowing of the Eucharist, which sustains the Church.

Not only does the iconographic sequence of the second broad side at Ruthwell develop the sequence of two images on the upper half of the west side at Bewcastle; the two crosses have similar symbolic structures. At Bewcastle it is natural to move sunwise from the sundial on the south side, with its implication that the heavens show forth the glory of God (Psalm 18/19:1), to the panels of the upper half of the west side, which celebrate the relations between Christ and John the Baptist: the cousins whose conceptions and nativities marked into balanced quarters the yearly solar cycle. Similarly, at Ruthwell it is natural to move sunwise from the narrow sides, in which the vine-scrolls, with their runic verse *tituli*, tell of Christ's heroic victory on the Cross, to the broad sides, in which figural panels make clear the contemporary relevance of Christ's heroic humility. The first broad side shows how spiritual growth in conversion (the blind man) and repentance (the woman who was a sinner) both imitate the growth of Christ in Mary's womb (the Annunciation and Visitation). The eucharistic images of the second broad side not only complement the poem's description of how the Cross presented the body of Christ to his followers, but provide an ordered meditation in five stages on the human and symbolic ways in which Christ was to be known: as the fulfillment of the manna (return from Egypt), in the breaking of bread (Paul and Anthony), between two living creatures (acclaimed by the beasts), as the Lamb of God (Agnus Dei), and surrounded in glory by the four Evangelists with their symbols (cross-head). Among its other achievements, the Ruthwell Cross provides a measured response to the question of how images should be used in Christian worship. It is reasonable to assume that its designer was aware, like Bede, that the Emperor Leo III had espoused iconoclasm in 726 CE, and that he had been condemned by Popes Gregory II (715–31) and Gregory III (March 731–41). In particular, Gregory III formally condemned iconoclasm and excommunicated its adherents at a synod in St Peter's on 1 November 731.³¹ The Ruthwell Cross brilliantly develops the unified vision of Incarnation and Passion already found in embryo on the upper half of the west side of the Bewcastle cross-shaft: both crosses are outstanding examples of the successful inculturation of Christianity in Northumbrian society.³²

In order to explain the theological rationale for the ways in which the Ruthwell Cross builds and expands upon the links which the Bewcastle designer

31 The controversy is examined in O Carragrain, *Ritual and the Rood*, 257–9.

32 For good discussions of the theory and practice of inculturation, see Anscar J. Chupungco, *Liturgical Inculturation: Sacramentals, Religiosity, and Catechesis* (Collegeville, 1992), 13–31; and especially Bruno Luiselli, *La formazione della cultura europea occidentale*, Biblioteca di cultura Romanobarbarica 7 (Rome, 2003).

had already established between Christ's Incarnation and his Passion, I have had to give an 'elitist' reading of each monument. That reading has tried to imagine the issues which an educated ecclesiastic of the circle of Bishops Pehthelm (d. 735) or Acca (d. 740) would have seen as involved, implicitly in the structure of the Bewcastle Cross, and much more explicitly in the extended programme of the Ruthwell Cross. The Ruthwell Cross is unique. Never again would any sculptured monument in the insular world be provided with such an extensive set of descriptive and ekphrastic narrative *tituli*. Never again, anywhere in Western Europe, would vine-scrolls be adorned with vernacular verse *tituli* which make clear the significance of these vine-scrolls. The Ruthwell Cross was designed in a fleeting but glorious moment, probably in the 730s, probably by a designer in touch with the circle of Bede: in particular, with Bishops Acca of Hexham to the east, and Bishop Pehthelm of Whithorn to the west. The circle included Abbot Hwsetberht of Wearmouth-Jarrow and Bishop Aethilwald of Lindisfarne (AD 721–40). The Ruthwell Cross presents the most profound and coherent meditation on the unified rites of initiation to survive from early medieval Europe.



Fig. 4. Overall view of the iconographic programme on the broad sides of the Ruthwell Cross, from the casts in Durham Cathedral library: (a) First broad side (which originally faced east), reading upwards: base, Crucifixion; shaft: (1) Annunciation; (2) Christ healing the blind man; (3) Repentance of Mary Magdalen; (4) (upper stone) the Visitation; (5) Archer. (b) Second broad side (which originally faced west), reading upwards: shaft: (1) Return from Egypt; (2) Saints Paul and Anthony break bread; (3) Christ acclaimed by two animals; (4) (upper stone) John the Baptist acclaiming the Agnus Dei; (5) St Matthew and his angel. (Photos: Durham University, Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture).

But the Ruthwell Cross was by no means simply intended for a monastic elite. All Christians made the baptismal renunciations, and all shared in the royal priesthood of Christ through baptism: therefore, the cross was profoundly relevant to the laity. The illiterate as well as monks could appreciate the universal images of its iconographic programme. Both the Bewcastle and Ruthwell crosses incorporate, as a major part of their designs, the image of the vine-scroll. Richard North has shown that the World-Tree was an important religious symbol in pre-Christian Northumbria, and has suggested that the vine-scrolls could, by local audiences, have been seen as a new version of that ancient religious

symbol.³³ North's perception is consistent with that of Jennifer O'Reilly, who has emphasized that

the form and iconography of the Ruthwell Cross, its Christology and use of the written word show the Anglo-Saxons to be a people engrafted into the universal Church and familiar with its Romanized culture but also highly creative in adapting its conventions and integrating elements from their own tradition.³⁴

The Bewcastle falconer, seen within the iconographic sequence of the west side, embodies the hope that a local aristocrat, and no doubt other members of the community he led, would be incorporated within the eucharistic Body of Christ; and that his name would be found in the heavenly Book of Life. Ruthwell avoids any such reference to a local aristocracy: its universal human images, of pregnant women, of conversion and repentance, of hermits who share their bread in the desert, emphasize even more clearly that incorporation into Christ's eucharistic body was open to all men and women, not just to aristocrats. Ruthwell, even more clearly than the Bewcastle Cross, is an eschatological monument, and stands as a silent but eloquent criticism of all manmade power-structures, racial divisions and especially (with such scenes as the man blind from birth and the woman who was a sinner) of the importance of aristocratic birth. The monument was designed to attract the attention of both men and women: any woman who looked on the Ruthwell Cross in the eighth century could not fail to be struck by the number of female images it presented: four on the first side of the monument, and at least one on the second (the base of which may possibly once have had a nativity scene, with yet another image of the Virgin Mary). Of the five surviving images of women, three are of the Virgin Mary.

The most startling way in which the Ruthwell designer transformed the visual ideas derived (directly or indirectly) from Bewcastle is the new placing of the vine-scrolls. Instead of the one great scroll, without inscription, on the east side at Bewcastle, balanced over against the images of Christ's body on the west side, the Ruthwell Cross has two matched vine-scrolls, one on each of the narrow sides, each spreading from the lower to the upper stones. The *tituli* for the vine-scrolls celebrated human courage: vital to eighth-century christology, but also available to audiences, in the eighth century and in modern times, who had (or have) no knowledge of or interest in christology. The poem's universality stems from the fact that it brought urgent christological issues into creative contact with the traditional values of the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy, to whom strength and courage

³³ Richard North, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature* (Cambridge, 1997), 287–94.

³⁴ J. O'Reilly, 'The Art of Authority', in Thomas Charles-Edwards, ed., *After Rome* (Oxford, 2003), 140–89, at 153.

were central heroic values. The verse *tituli* dramatized a startlingly new form of heroism, in which Christ the hero does not conquer or attack other men or women, but defeats the powers of darkness by pouring forth his blood for humankind, while enduring the mockery of his human enemies, and forbidding his follower the Cross from taking vengeance on these enemies. By retelling the Crucifixion in terms reminiscent of the Annunciation, the narrative presents the whole of Christ's life, from Incarnation to Crucifixion, as a single heroic act of self-giving, based on humility. Christ's humility was first manifested at the Incarnation, when, with the obedient cooperation of Mary, he 'emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness, and being found in human form' (Phil. 2:7). It was supremely exemplified at the Crucifixion, when, with the obedient cooperation of another startled creature, Christ 'humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross' (Phil. 2:8). The poet achieved a revolutionary synthesis: using the latest christology, he or she revalued traditional Germanic values, transforming them towards a new Christian vision of heroism. The narrative of the *tituli* is an outstanding example of the successful inculturation of christological thought. It is also an outstanding example of the Christian tradition *oisermo humilis*: like the gospels, they express central truths of the faith in simple, comprehensible and non-technical language. Their narrative is of great interest to historians of theology: it provides clear evidence that an English poet, and at least one early eighth-century Bernician community, had grasped the issues at stake in the struggle against Monotheletism, and had fully understood the kenotic christology central to the Epistle for the sixth Sunday of Lent, Philippians 2:5–11. But the modern reception of the Old English Crucifixion narrative (usually in the longer version embedded in the dream-vision frame of *The Dream of the Rood*) has shown that it can be appreciated, not only by theologians and Christian readers, but by peoples of other faiths, and with little or no knowledge of, or interest in, Christian theology. The Ruthwell narrative is a perfect example of unobtrusive yet effective catechesis. Already in the eighth century, it would no doubt have been appreciated at various levels.³⁵ All those at Ruthwell who heard the poem, even those who were as yet poorly instructed and who had as yet only a vague perception of Christian thought, would have seen it to be a vivid and memorable heroic narrative about a hero 'possessing all the values that attached to a *kyningc*, *hlafard*, and *dryctin*, [...] a terrifyingly brave warrior'.³⁶ Such an uneducated audience would have as yet little idea of the wider rationale which led this particular warrior to choose his own death on the gallows: to that extent the narrative might still have puzzled as well as fascinated them.

35 For a fine analysis of how Anglo-Saxon high crosses were appreciated on various levels by the original audiences, and also by modern scholars, see J. Hawkes, 'Reading Stone', in Karkov and Orton, eds, *Theorizing*, 5–20.

36 Orton, 'Rethinking', 53.

They would have had, as yet, no perception of the relations between the heroic narrative and the vine-scrolls which it complements, nor of the relationships between the vine-scrolls and the iconography of the broad sides. They would probably have ‘marginalized’ the narrative, in the sense of thinking that it was not relevant to the vine-scrolls and to the programmes of the broad sides. But even this primitive and uneducated understanding of the vine-scroll and its *tituli* could have provided a useful foundation on which an educated nun, monk or cleric might bring them gradually to an awareness of Christ’s heroic humility, and to appreciate (for example) how the second *titulus*, in which the Cross hands on Christ’s body to his followers who ‘beheld there the Lord of Heaven’, was complemented by the eucharistic images of the second broad side (fig. 4 (b)). Even elementary readings of the Ruthwell Cross could (and still can) lead, gradually and naturally, to a deeper appreciation of the monument’s coherence. Monks or nuns, educated by regular liturgical observance, who lived their lives in the protecting shadow of the Ruthwell Cross, would naturally come, over the years, to a full appreciation of its profound unity, its theological complexity, and how the vine-scrolls, with their unique vernacular verse *tituli*, made the cross speak from the heart of its experience on Good Friday. The Ruthwell designer deftly subverted all facile dichotomies between the ‘secular’ and the ‘sacred’, or between what is ‘popular’ and what is ‘elitist’.