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Title	Conversion, justice, and mercy at the Parousia: Liturgical apocalypses from eighth-century Northumbria, on the Ruthwell and Bewcastle Crosses
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Publication date	2012-11-02
Original Citation	Ó Carragáin, É. (2012) 'Conversion, justice, and mercy at the Parousia: Liturgical apocalypses from eighth-century Northumbria, on the Ruthwell and Bewcastle crosses', Literature and Theology, 26(4), pp. 367–383. https://doi.org/10.1093/litthe/frs054
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	https://doi.org/10.1093/litthe/frs054 - 10.1093/litthe/frs054
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Download date	2026-11-04 08:07:35
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/14805

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Conversion, Justice, and Mercy at the Parousia: Liturgical Apocalypses from Eighth-Century Northumbria, on the Ruthwell and Bewcastle Crosses

Éamonn Ó Carragáin

Abstract: The earliest surviving Northumbrian high crosses at Ruthwell and Bewcastle associate the Second Coming of Christ not only with Judgment but also with mercy. Each high cross has a sequence in which Christ in majesty is recognised by animals, once evil but now converted to good. Christ blesses the scroll of the Book of Life, which he holds: by implication he also blesses the converted animals. On both crosses, a panel representing John the Baptist holding the Agnus Dei (Christ seen as the Lamb of God) comes just above the panel of Christ acclaimed by the beasts. The Agnus Dei panels refer to the heavenly liturgy, in which the Lamb appears in glory, and also to the Latin 'Agnus Dei' chant ('Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us') recently introduced from Rome to accompany the breaking of bread at Communion. At Ruthwell, where the crosshead partially survives, the programme culminated in another scene of the Apocalypse, in which the four evangelists, each with his symbolic attribute, surrounded another image of Christ in glory. The remarkably optimistic images of the Second Coming of Christ on these two monuments indicate that the highly educated commissioner was familiar with versions of the early Christian liturgies in which the Second Coming of Christ was ardently desired, not feared.



FIG. I. (a) Ruthwell Cross, second broad side, two animals acclaim Christ (Photo: Ross Trench-Jellicoe, with permission).



FIG. I. (b) Ruthwell Cross, second broad side, John the Baptist acclaims Christ as the Agnus Dei (Photo: Ross Trench-Jellicoe, with permission).

The Ruthwell and Bewcastle Crosses are among the earliest, and most famous, Northumbrian monuments of the early eighth century, the age of Bede (d. 735).

The Bewcastle Cross still stands in the open air, in the parish churchyard.[1] It has a sun-dial on its southern side: because sun-dials on vertical shafts only work if they face south, we may be confident that the Bewcastle Cross was always oriented as it now is. In this article, our concern will be with the significance and contexts of a sequence of two panels that appears on each of the two crosses: an image of Christ, standing in majestic human form, acclaimed by two animals (Figs Ia and II) and, directly above that panel, an image of John the Baptist, also standing, and acclaiming Christ as the Agnus Dei (Figs Ib and II). I shall argue that this sequence of panels has apocalyptic dimensions: that it refers, among other things, to the Second Coming of Christ in glory at the Parousia and to the adoration of Christ as Lamb of God in the liturgy of heaven. This sequence implies a remarkably optimistic vision of the Second Coming in which judgment is tempered with mercy. This optimistic vision stems from a deliberate effort, by a highly educated designer, to sum up, in visual form, some ancient liturgical themes. The designer probably worked under the guidance of a person in the circle, or under the influence, of Bede: a bishop or abbot who had perhaps been to Rome and who had meditated deeply on what he had seen and learned there.[2] A voyage to Rome necessarily involved, in addition, experience of how these ceremonies were being imitated and developed in Gaul.

1 The standard account of the Bewcastle Cross is R.N. Bailey and R. Cramp, *Cumberland, Westmorland and Lancashire North-of-the-Sands* (Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture, 2) (Oxford: OUP, 1988), pp. 61–72; see also É . Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood: Liturgical Images and the Old English Poems of the* Dream of the Rood *tradition* (London and Toronto: British Library Publications and Toronto University Press, 2005), pp. 32–47; F. Orton, I. Wood and C. Lees, *Fragments of History: Rethinking the Ruthwell and Bewcastle Monuments* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 15–31.

2 On Bede's increasing concern with divine judgment and the end of the world in the last years of his life, see now P. Darby, *Bede and the End of Time* (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 165–221.



FIG. II. Bewcastle Cross, Animals acclaim Christ and John the Baptist acclaims the Agnus Dei (Photo: Jane Hawkes, with permission).

The Ruthwell Cross is constructed from two pieces of new red sandstone, the lower about four metres in height, the upper about two metres. It was damaged in the course of the 17th century: the upper stone was pulled down and broken in two, and the transom of the crosshead lost. The remaining fragments were reconstructed at the beginning of the 19th century. On each of the narrow sides of the Ruthwell Cross, the central image is an elaborate and rooted vine-scroll, inhabited by animals and birds that feed on the vines.[3] Each of these two matching vine-scrolls reaches from the foot of the shaft to just under the cross-head. It is likely that these paired vine-scrolls refer to a restored Paradise, in which a new Tree of Life 'stands in the midst of the garden' (cf. Genesis 2:9); It is likely that the vine-scroll also refers to members of the Christian Church united to Christ ('I am the vine, you are the branches', John 15:5). Here, Paradise is restored: the animals and birds feeding on the grapes suggest that this Tree of Life brings sustenance to all created beings.

The designer provided each of these matching paradisal images with an extensive *titulus* or caption, in Anglo-Saxon verse and in runes. The runes are beautifully laid out, so as to make them relatively easy to read: on each narrow

3 For detailed images of the Ruthwell and Bewcastle Crosses, see the books referred to in Note 1; the Wikipedia articles under 'Ruthwell Cross' and 'Bewcastle Cross'; the Wikipedia 'Ruthwell Cross' article has a link to the web version of É . Ó Carragáin, 'Christian Inculturation in Eighth-Century Northumbria: the Bewcastle and Ruthwell Crosses', *Colloquium* 4 (Autumn, 2007), 89–111, which has illustrations.

side, the *incipit* or beginning of the verse *titulus* runs from left to right across the top of the lower stone: this interrupts the vine-scroll, in order to ensure that none of the poem is placed too high to be read by an onlooker who stands at ground level. The poem then runs in matching beautifully spaced columns down the margins of the vine-scroll: these margins gradually broaden towards the bottom, as does the Tree of Life and the lower stone itself. On each side, the first of these runic columns flows directly on from the *incipit*, and runs down the right-hand side of the cross; the poem then continues on the second column, which runs down the left-hand side of the vine-scroll. The designer ensured that the runes would be the right way up when the cross was erected, and that, in order to ensure the beauty of the monument, all the runes would be the same size. If, for example, the poem had been laid out in a single continual 10-foot line of runes at right angles to the onlooker's vision, the runes near the bottom of the broadening border would have had to be taller than, and hence ill-matched to, the runes towards the top. The lack of word-division in the runes would have presented little difficulty to a reader who had got the poem by heart, from chanting it or hearing it chanted: the Anglo-Saxons associated their poetry closely with song. Furthermore, those familiar with Roman or Byzantine traditions, whether through pilgrimage to Rome or by the accounts of those who had been there, knew that the most prestigious ancient and early Christian inscriptions, such as those commissioned by Pope Damasus, were not provided with word-division, and demanded of the reader the effort to ruminate on, and thus to properly assimilate, the text.[4] Uniquely among insular high crosses, the Ruthwell Cross has poetry, song, memory, and prophecy at its centre.

Concepts of time—past, present and future—are central to the Ruthwell Cross. The two runic verse *tituli* for the vine-scrolls on the narrow sides comprise a highly original account of the heroic death of Christ. This poetic narrative is in the first person: the Cross (and by implication the Ruthwell Cross) speaks of its own experience on Good Friday. This faithful follower sees, in Christ, God Almighty who wills his own death. In an agonised dilemma, it sees that it must stand fast and become the bearer, and slayer, of its Lord. The first half of the poem (*incipit* and column to the right of the vine-scroll) can be translated as follows: 'Almighty God stripped himself. When he wished to mount the gallows, courageous before all men, [I dared not] bow […]'.[5] The verb 'I dared not', no longer legible at Ruthwell, can safely be supplied from the surviving later, 10th-century, manuscript edition of this narrative, *The Dream of the Rood*. As well as the verb, perhaps half a line of the narrative has been lost: the manuscript version

4 See Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, pp. 47–53.

5 The Anglo-Saxon text, with discussion, can be found in Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, pp. xxi–xxix and *passim*.

suggests that it might have read ‘but I had to stand fast’. The Ruthwell narrative implies that Jesus’ human act in freely choosing his own death on the gallows (the Anglo-Saxon verb *wolde* comes from the verb *willan*, ‘to will, to decide’) is a revelation of the divine, as well as the heroically human, nature of Christ. The *incipit* combines a verb describing a human act, stripping [*ondgeredae*], with a statement of Christ’s divinity: an excellent example of ‘the close union of the idioms’ to express the union in Christ of the human and the divine.[6] But ‘to strip’ has metaphoric overtones: it can naturally connote ‘to reveal’. ‘Almighty God’, who reveals himself on Good Friday, is ‘courageous before all men’, both in the sense that all men can now see his courage, and in the sense that his courage is ‘before’, i.e. greater than, that of any other man.[7]

The dilemma of the Cross is also central to the second column of the *titulus*, on the left side of the vine-scroll: ‘I lifted up a powerful king. The Lord of heaven I dared not tilt; men insulted the pair of us together: I was drenched with blood poured [from the man’s side]’.[8] Now for the first time we hear that others were involved in Christ’s death: the primary emphasis up to now has been on Christ’s act of willing his death, and on the dilemma this posed for the Cross. Now the Cross, although still agonised, is closely united to Christ: by the mockery which men direct at ‘the pair of us both together’, and by the blood ‘poured from the man’s side’. The narrative is profoundly kenotic, that is, shaped by the idea of stripping, self-emptying; if it began with ‘Almighty God’ who strips himself, by now the man (*guma*) is emptied even of his blood. One inspiration for the poem, clearly emphasised in the Ruthwell edition, is the great early Christian hymn, Philippians 2:5–11, then as now read in the Eucharistic liturgies for the Sunday before Easter.[9] But this tragic narrative forms the *titulus* for a great Tree of Life: an image of Paradise restored. The result is a paradox: the designer has created a profound unity between the narrative of Christ’s death and image in which created beings enjoy the fruits of life.

This paradox is also the key to the iconographic programme on the broad sides of the cross. To read the poem, the onlooker has already moved from column to column, from right to left, sunwise or clockwise. This direction leads him to the first broad side which, if the Ruthwell Cross was originally oriented as the Bewcastle Cross still is, faced east, towards the rising sun. This side is covered in figural panels: a scene of crucifixion at the base of the cross (added later, not part

6 On the rhetorical tradition of *communicatio idiomatum*, see Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, pp. 80–83.

7 On the importance in the period of Christ’s human will, see Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, pp. 81–83 and 225–28.

8 Again, the last phrase of the sentence must be reconstructed from the manuscript edition of the narrative, the *Dream*.

9 For the liturgical uses of the lection, see Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, pp. 316–21.

of the original design); then four large panels on the tapering shaft, and finally a series of smaller panels on the cross-head.[10] Like the vine-scroll on the narrow sides, all of these original panels were provided with *tituli*: none in Old English, practically all in Latin.[11] The four large panels on the shaft are all of scriptural scenes, arranged in a remarkable way. Reading from the bottom of the shaft, the first and fourth panels represent the Annunciation (Luke 1:26–38) and the Visitation (Luke 1:39–56). The *titulus* for the Annunciation panel is damaged; but enough remains to make it seem likely that it comprised Luke 1:28, in which Gabriel acclaimed Mary as 'blessed are you among women'.[12] The *titulus* for the Visitation panel was also in Latin, but in runic, not in Latin script: all the panels of this, first, side of the upper stone are in inscribed in runes.[13] The panel is badly damaged; its fragmentary *titulus* referred to 'ladies' (*dominnæ*), and implies that these ladies included not only 'Mary the mother' (*maria m*[*ate*]*r*) but also '[Mary and] Martha': on the badly damaged left-hand side of the panel, the runic word '*marþa*' survives, and there was room for the words '*maria et*' before '*marþa*'. Mary's cousin Elisabeth had, like Gabriel, acclaimed Mary as 'blessed among women':[14] it was therefore appropriate that the *titulus* for the Visitation panel should, like that for the Annunciation panel at the foot of the shaft, emphasise that the Virgin Mary was 'blessed among women'.[15]

The Annunciation panel (at the foot of the shaft) is separated from the Visitation panel (at its top, just under the cross-head) by two panels, each with its own Latin *titulus*. Just above the Annunciation panel there is a dramatic image

10 As the transom of the cross has been lost, and replaced by a modern transom in the early 19th century, only two of these small panels survive, one below the transom (the archer), the other above it, at the top of this broad side of the cross (the eagle on the branch).

11 All are in Latin except for the inscription for the small archer panel, on the cross-head just below the missing transom, now illegible except for two runes: see Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, pp. 141–43; and the mysterious runes around the eagle on the branch, just above the missing transom, at the head of this side of the cross. For a summary of the explications suggested for these runes, see Ó Carraga`in, *Ritual and the Rood*, p. 49 and note 186.

12 Luke 1:28: 'benedicta tu in mulieribus'.

13 I will later (see below) suggest a reason why all the inscriptions on this first broad side of the upper stone are in runes, while all those on the second side of the stones are in Roman script (and also in Latin).

14 Luke 1:42: 'benedicta tu inter mulieres'.

15 There were strong contemporary reasons to choose '*Marþa*' as well as, presumably, Mary [of Bethany] among the blessed women associated with the Virgin Mary. On the greatest Marian feast of the year, her death day (i.e. her Natale or birthday into the Kingdom of Heaven, 15 August), the lection of Martha and Mary of Bethany (Luke 10:38–42) was widely used, presumably because its resounding final verse 'Mary has chosen the better part, which shall not be taken from her' could fittingly be applied to the Virgin Mary on the day of her entry into Heaven. Second, in the panel just below the Visitation, Mary Magdalen (identified in the early Middle Ages with Mary of Bethany) is represented washing the feet of Christ. The Ruthwell Visitation panel represents Mary and Elizabeth; but its *titulus* associates Mary with other women, and especially with Martha and Mary of Bethany.

of Jesus healing the man born blind, a lection (John 9:1–36) chanted during the ceremonies of the Lenten catechumenate: the *titulus* begins by quoting the incipit of that lection (John 9:1), then provides a neat summary of the lection.[16] The panel clearly provides an image of enlightenment by faith. Just above this, at the top of the lower stone, there is a particularly moving image of the Woman who was a sinner (identified by Bede, following Gregory the Great, both with Mary Magdalen and with Mary of Bethany) at the feet of Christ. The Latin *titulus*, taken from Luke 7:38 ('She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears, and to dry them with her hair') makes it clear that the primary reference is to Luke 7:36–50, a lection intoned during Lenten ceremonies of public repentance and reconciliation. Two groups of laity were singled out in those Lenten ceremonies. The catechumens (here represented by the man blind from birth) were instructed in the faith, and prepared for baptism, which ideally took place during the ceremonies of the Easter vigil. Secondly, the public sinners were 'expelled' from the church during Lent, in preparation for their public repentance, and reconciliation with the church community, on Holy Thursday. Luke's lection of the Woman who was a Sinner (7:36–50) was associated with such Lenten public penitents.[17] In eighth-century Northumbria, infant baptism was the norm; but the ancient ceremonies appropriate to the Christian initiation of adults were still prescribed in the *Ordines Romani* which circulated in France and England in the eighth century. In any local liturgies based on such documents, the ancient ceremonies were performed not merely to purge the infants of original sin, but also to edify the godparents who carried them, and the relations and family friends. An eighth-century clerical audience would certainly have seen these panels as a pair, symbolising Lenten catechumenate and Lenten repentance.

For those paired scenes, the Ruthwell designer provided an enclosing frame: the Annunciation panel (just below) and the Visitation panel (just above). This brilliant strategy encouraged a Ruthwell ecclesiastical community to relate their Lenten spiritual growth closely to the growth of Christ in Mary's womb. The result is a unique visual meditation on a central theme of the ancient Roman Lenten liturgies: that, in Lent, the Church acted like a mother, bringing her catechumens and penitents, both, to a new spiritual birth at Easter, from the 'womb' of the baptismal font. In the words of Pope Leo I (d. 461), 'He placed in the font of Baptism that very origin which he had assumed in the Virgin's womb. He gave to the water what he had given to his mother. For, the same power of the Most High and overshadowing of the Holy Spirit [Luke 1:33] that caused Mary

16 For the text and discussion see Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, p. 126. The damaged *titulus* may be reconstructed as follows: 'As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth [so far, John 9:1] and [healed him from his infirmity]' (the added summary).

17 See Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, pp. 126–28 (on the catechumenate and the man blind from birth); and pp. 128–37 (on the public sinners and Luke 7:36–47).

to bear the Saviour makes the water regenerate the believer.'[18] While no image of baptism itself now survives on the Ruthwell Cross, it is not impossible that such an image figured on this first side of the now-missing transom of the cross-head.[19]

Moving from the narrow (north) to the broad (east) side has brought the onlooker from an enigmatic Tree of Life, adorned with a unique runic narrative of Christ's death long ago, to an equally original meditation on the contemporary implications of that death. The Tree of Life and its *titulus* implied that from Christ's death life flowed for all creation; the images of the first broad side showed the implications of that paradox for a contemporary ecclesiastical community at Ruthwell. Catechumens and repentant sinners were not simply babies being brought to new birth: they were also growing to spiritual adulthood and preparing to become, like the Virgin Mary, bearers of Christ to others.[20]

It is remarkable that, on the lower stone of this first broad side, all the *tituli* come from liturgical lections intoned during the Lenten season. From Bede's account of Caedmon onwards, we know that ideally Anglo-Saxon poetry was chanted or sung, often to the harp.[21] A Northumbrian reader who made out even a few words of the runic narrative is likely to have been reminded of a poem that he and his community heard and remembered as chanted. If such a reader moved from the narrow (north) side to the first broad (east) side, they would have been reminded of a different form of chant: that of the liturgical lections intoned during Lent, and presumably of the liturgical antiphons based on those lections.[22] For an eighth-century clerical audience, the Ruthwell cross must have seemed not so much to speak as to chant, in Old English (narrow sides) and in Latin (broad sides).

Movement from the first narrow side to the first broad side would with equal force have reminded clerics of two contrasting dilemmas, both associated with the same day in the year: 25 March, the Spring Solstice in the Julian Calendar

18 Sermon 25, Sec. 5; *CCSL* 138, p. 123; further discussion in Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, p. 139.

19 See É. Ó Carraga`in, 'Chosen Arrows, First Hidden, then Revealed; the Visitation-Archer Sequence as a Key to the Unity of the Ruthwell Cross', in S. Baxter, C. Karkov, J.L. Nelson and D. Pelteret (eds) *Early Medieval Studies in Memory of Patrick Wormald* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 185–204 (at pp. 202–4).

20 For the idea that Christians themselves should be 'bearers of Christ', the crucial scriptural authority was Matthew 12:50, 'Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother'. The idea, fully developed in Bede, is discussed by Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, pp. 138–40.

21 Concise accounts, with bibliographies, of these issues can be found in *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. M. Lapidge and others (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), under 'Cædmon', 'Chant', 'Music', and 'Musical Instruments'.

22 On the intonation (chanting) of lections, see D. Hiley, *Western Plainchant: a Handbook* (Oxford: OUP, 1997), pp. 55–58.

(usually, in the early Middle Ages, counted as New Year's Day).[23] For centuries Christian scholars had understood 25 March to be the anniversary of Good Friday, the day of Christ's death. Recently, from the late seventh century, a new Byzantine feast of the Lord had come to be celebrated, in Rome and the West, on the same day: that of *Adnuntiatio Domini*, the Annunciation of the Lord. From about the year 700 the feast had been given new prominence at Rome by Pope Sergius (686–701), and Sergius' action was recorded by Bede.[24] For Anglo-Saxon clerics, the Annunciation involved a dramatic dilemma. Since the late fourth century, theologians (Augustine and Ambrose, followed by Bede) had held that Mary had taken a vow of chastity; had, in effect, taken a vow appropriate to nuns. At the Annunciation, it first seemed to her that she must break this vow (Luke 1:34), but she was immediately reassured by Gabriel: 'the Holy Spirit will come upon you' (Luke 1:35). The Ruthwell designer edited, for his Tree of Life images, a Good Friday narrative that modelled the dilemma of the Cross, required to bear Christ to his death, on that of Mary, requested to bear him into human life on the same day some 33 years before.

On the Ruthwell Cross, the ancient runic narrative, and the modern liturgical sequence of images, cross and complement each other. Onlookers would naturally have been first struck by the broad sides, with their coherent meditations on contemporary communal practice; but they would later come to appreciate that behind these images there was an ancient idea, which went right back to the Book of Genesis (2:9): a highly original *titulus* in English chant telling how the Cross, by facing the terrible dilemma asked of it on the first Good Friday, became the Tree of Life for all created beings.

In order to understand the way in which each of these complementary narratives is completed, it is important to understand that, in the early Middle Ages, the rites of initiation were seen as a unity, and that they always included reception of the Eucharist. As prescribed in eighth-century documents, the Easter Vigil baptismal celebrations always culminated, directly after baptism, with a return to the altar and the reception of communion under both kinds (bread and wine). The importance of the Eucharist as the climax of Christian initiation can be appreciated by the striking fact that, even when the surviving documents explicitly describe infant baptism, they prescribe that the infants must receive communion under both kinds at the end of the ceremony.[25] We will find that on the second half of the cross, the second narrow side and the second broad side are unified by images intended to recall the Eucharist. But the Eucharist is not merely

23 See B. Blackbourn and L. Holford-Strevens, *The Oxford Companion to the Year* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), pp. 6–7 (on New Year's Day) and 132–35 (25 March); Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, pp. 79–119.

24 Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, pp. 98–99.

25 Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, pp. 125–26 and 292–96.

seen to refer to current liturgical practice in Northumbria; it is equally seen to look to the heavenly liturgy, and to the future revelation of Christ in Glory. It is in the context of the Eucharist, itself seen as the climax of Christian initiation, that the programme of the Ruthwell Cross culminates in its gentle apocalypse.

The *titulus* for the second image of the Tree of Life brings the tightly edited runic narrative to its conclusion. On the opposite (north) side we heard of the blood that drenched the Cross when Christ's side was opened by the spear. The new *titulus* begins just after Christ's death. The unity of Cross and Christ has been achieved: 'Christ was on the Cross. But eager ones came thither from afar, noble ones came together. I beheld all that. I was terribly afflicted with sorrows. I bowed [to the hands of the men].' On the opposite (north) side, the Cross and Christ were surrounded by mocking enemies; now (on the more auspicious south side) Christ's noble friends come 'from afar', as though on pilgrimage. The unique idea that the sorrowing Cross presents the body of Christ to his followers has clear Eucharistic implications. The poem ends, in the column of runes to the left of the Tree of Life, as the followers contemplate Christ's dead body and recognise in it the Lord of Heaven. They do not yet recognise him in the breaking of bread; rather, in his broken corpse: 'They laid him down, wounded with arrows, brought to death by his limbs [*limwoerignæ*]. They took their stand at the head and feet of his corpse. There they looked on [the Lord of Heaven].' The kenotic theme of the poem is given moving final expression in the term 'limb-weary': Christ is tired out, worn out, emptied of life, by the wounds in his limbs. The corpse that his followers contemplate is emptied even of its blood.

The poem poses an abrupt challenge: how is a contemporary follower of Christ, at Ruthwell in the eighth century, to imitate these first followers? The west-facing second broad side shows the implications of the ancient runic narrative for the present life of the Ruthwell community, and for its future hopes. This second broad side also completes the liturgical narrative that had begun with the catechumenal images of the first broad side. It comprises the richest and most coherent sequence of Eucharistic images in pre-Carolingian Christian art. In this sequence, images of Christ in human form regularly alternate with symbolic images of Christ. He is presented (reading from the bottom of the side) as a regal child, seated on his mother's lap on the return from Egypt (a fulfilment of the manna that fed the Israelites in the desert); then as the bread, broken by the first Egyptian monks, Saints Paul and Anthony. Thirdly, at the top of this second side of the lower stone, Christ, now again in majestic human form, is acclaimed by two animals (Fig. Ia). The animals are anonymous, in the sense that they cannot be identified with specific species. The Latin *titulus* of the panel makes their action clear: 'Jesus Christ the judge of equity. Beasts and dragons recognized in the desert the saviour of the world'. If Saints Paul and Anthony recognised

Christ in the breaking of bread, these animals recognise him in human form. Their recognition, though silent, is eloquent. Their inner paws cross, to form a clear 'Chi' pattern, and this pattern visually echoes the letter *chi* in the *incipit* of the *titulus*, at the top of the panel: *'IhS XPS IVDEX AEQUITATIS*': these animals acclaim Christ as the anointed one ('*christos*'), the Messiah. The *titulus* lays emphasis on the desert: this not only echoes the similar emphasis in the *titulus* to the Paul and Anthony scene below, but also reminds us of the account of the desert beasts, at the beginning of Mark's gospel, just after Christ's temptation by Satan ('And he was with the wild beasts, and angels ministered to him', Mark 1:13). Everything in the panel subverts what a person familiar with Christian iconography would expect. Christ over the Beasts is a recurrent early Christian image: found in the catacombs at Rome, and found several times at Ravenna.[26] But in all these versions of the image, the beasts are specific evil beasts: lions and dragons, asps and basilisks. The image was created to illustrate Psalm 91:13 (Vulgate 90:13):

> Super aspidem et basiliscum ambulabis [you will walk on the asp and the basilisk] et conculcabis leonem et draconem. [and you will tread down the lion and the dragon].

But here this image has been transformed; the beasts have been converted, in and through their recognition of Christ. We are already looking beyond the present, to the imminent Second Coming of Christ, 'the Judge of Fairness'. His left hand holds a rolled-up scroll: presumably the Book of Life, in which the names of the saved will be found inscribed, at the Parousia; his right hand is raised to bless the scroll. This scene is not only one of Judgment, but also one of transformation and mercy. A clerical onlooker would have remembered Good Friday as well as the Last Judgment: a factor in the Northumbrian transformation of the traditional image of Christ and the beasts is the Responsory chant 'Domine audivi', which was sung together with Psalm 91 (Vulgate 90) to commemorate the moment of Christ's death, at the ninth hour on that day. It included the words 'you will be known in the midst of two animals', and it is between their bodies that the Ruthwell animals cross their paws to proclaim Jesus as the 'Christ'.[27]

The theme of mercy is developed in the panel immediately above, on the upper stone (Fig. Ib). As we have seen, the upper stone was broken in two and is badly damaged. Some four to six inches of stone is missing along the break, across the middle of the panel. The panel once more represents a standing male figure. The dimensions of the upper stone compelled the sculptor to create a rather squat

26 Most famously in the Archbishop's private chapel, where Christ is dressed in armour, as a Roman officer: for an image, see Wikipedia under 'Archbishop's Chapel, Ravenna'.

27 See Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, pp. 201–8.

figure, its squatness now increased by the missing inches of the break. The figure points with his right hand across the heavy pallium he wears over his shoulders, to acclaim the lamb which he cradles in his left arm. The standing male figure is John the Baptist, clad in ecclesiastical garments, indeed 'soft garments' (Matthew 11:8), not the eremitic garb he wore on earth.[28] This panel is directly opposite the Visitation scene on the first broad side of the upper stone. There the two cousins were hidden in the wombs of Mary and Elizabeth: but now they appear, fully grown, in the glory of the heavenly liturgy. The Northumbrian designer adapted traditional iconography with confident originality. The divinity of the Lamb of God was often emphasised by placing him within a mandorla, so as to isolate him from non-divine figures such as the pointing Baptist. The Ruthwell designer, or the model he used, omitted the mandorla, placing the Lamb on the same realistic and intimate plane as the Baptist, or as the benign figure of Christ, the merciful Judge in the panel just below.[29] The closeness of the cousins, Jesus and John, had already been established in the Visitation scene on the opposite side of the upper stone: the archer image, just above that panel, had emphasised that both were 'chosen arrows' hidden in God's quiver, as in their mothers' wombs. What was hidden there is now revealed. All the inscriptions on the first broad side of the upper stone were in 'secret' runic script, but all the inscriptions on this second broad side of the upper stone are 'revealed' in Roman letters, the script of liturgical manuscripts and gospel-books.[30] In the early eighth century, some Northumbrian monasteries had started to use the 'Agnus Dei' chant, introduced at Rome shortly before AD 700.[31] While the celebrant silently broke the Eucharistic loaf for communion, other clerics (or a choir) repeatedly sang 'Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world'; the congregation responded with 'have mercy on us'. The chant, like the Ruthwell panel, emphasises that the heavenly Lamb is

28 J. Hawkes and É . Ó Carragáin, with R. Trench-Jellicoe, 'John the Baptist and the Agnus Dei: Ruthwell (and Bewcastle) Revisited', *The Antiquaries Journal* 81 (2001) 131–53.

29 Paul Meyvaert argued that the standing figure is not the Baptist, but God the Father: 'Reclaiming the *Apocalypse Majestas* Panel for the Ruthwell Cross', in C. Houihane (ed.) *Insular and Anglo-Saxon: Art and Thought in the Early Medieval Period* (Princeton: Index of Christian Art and Penn State University Press, 2011), pp. 109–32. He has, on both the Ruthwell and Bewcastle crosses, mistaken the heavy pallia worn over the shoulders of John the Baptist for a book, cradled in John's right arm; further, he has mistaken the standing Ruthwell figure as seated. Meyvaert undervalued the creativity with which these Northumbrian sculptors adapted the models available to them, as for example in the 'Christ acclaimed by the beasts' panels just below the 'Agnus Dei' scenes. I am grateful to Richard Bailey, Rosemary Cramp and Jane Hawkes for discussion of these panels, and of Meyvaert's article.

30 Runic script was often associated with secrecy: see *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England* (n 21) under 'runes'.

31 Bede was familiar with the chant: see Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, pp. 247–57.

close to the people, merciful and responsive to their prayer.[32]

The crosshead, just above, provided an explicit image of the Parousia (Revelation 4–6). Below the transom, St Matthew points towards his symbol, an angel; above the transom, St John faced his symbol, the eagle. It is likely that on the missing transom a central portrait-bust of Christ was flanked by images of St Mark with his lion and St Luke with his ox: if so, Christ was once more to be known 'in medio duorum animalium'.[33] The designer of the Ruthwell Cross emphasised that at each celebration of the Eucharist the local community not only recalled the heroic death of Christ and participated in the liturgy of heaven, but that the Eucharist, celebrated 'until he come' (I Corinthians 11:26) always looked forwards to the Parousia, the revelation of Christ in glory.

That the upper two large panels just below the crosshead at Ruthwell have a strong and optimistic eschatological dimension is confirmed by the way in which analogues of these panels are placed towards the top of the shaft on the west side of the Bewcastle Cross. The Ruthwell and Bewcastle crosses may possibly have been sculpted by the same workshop, or by different but cooperating workshops. The Bewcastle monument now lacks its crosshead, but early descriptions make it certain that it was in position until the 17th century.[34] Cross-patterns are important in the iconography of the surviving shaft: not only the cross-shaped chequer patterns central to the north side (see below), but the panel of complex interlace growing out an equal-armed cross at the foot of the south side (Fig. III).

Time, reflected in the sun's daily and seasonal course, is a central concern of the Bewcastle Cross. After the Spring equinox and before the Autumn equinox, each dawn and just before nightfall the rising and setting sun shone directly (but slantingly) on the north side. The raised (hence 'bright') and recessed (hence 'dark') patterns of the chequers of the central panel of this side thus take on greater life and sharper definition at dawn and sunset during this period. On the east side, the morning sun shines on a great Tree of Life, a rooted vine-scroll with eight volutes, all but the topmost of which are inhabited by birds and animals, as in the Trees of Life on the narrow sides at Ruthwell. A tree is naturally associated with time and the seasons. On the south side, the sun-dial itself inhabits the upper of two panels of the Tree of Life motif (vine- or foliage-scrolls) (Fig. III). As evening comes, the setting sun shines on the west side of the shaft (Figs II and III). Here, the sense of an ending is paramount. This side is divided into

32 The single word that survives from the damaged *titulus*, '[A]DORAMVS', 'we adore', reinforces the Eucharistic dimensions of the panel.

33 See the Good Friday responsory 'Domine audivi', discussed above. Roundels with images of Christ (either as a human bust-portrait or as the Agnus Dei image), were found on the transoms of broken eighth-century high crosses at the monastic site of Hoddom, near Ruthwell: see Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, pp. 32–35.

34 See Bailey and Cramp 1988, p. 70, and Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, pp. 33 and 36.

four panels of roughly equal height. The panel at the foot of the shaft frames a male figure clad in a mid-length tunic (perhaps royal or aristocratic rather than ecclesiastical?). He is clad for peace, not war: he wears neither sword nor armour. He faces towards the right, i.e. towards the south. In his right hand he bears a staff or walking-stick; a falcon or eagle perches, facing us, on his left forearm. Under the extended forearm, a perch for the falcon/eagle is visible, to the right of the panel. This much-discussed figure is perhaps the figure of a local king, perhaps the figure of a saint (St John the Evangelist with his eagle?).[35] Just above this panel the designer has placed a panel entirely filled with runes; sadly, few of them are legible. The panel began by proclaiming, in Old English, that 'Waetred [and others] erected this victory-sign [*Þis sigbecn*]'; after what appears to be a list of names, the final runes asked onlookers to 'pray for their souls'.[36]

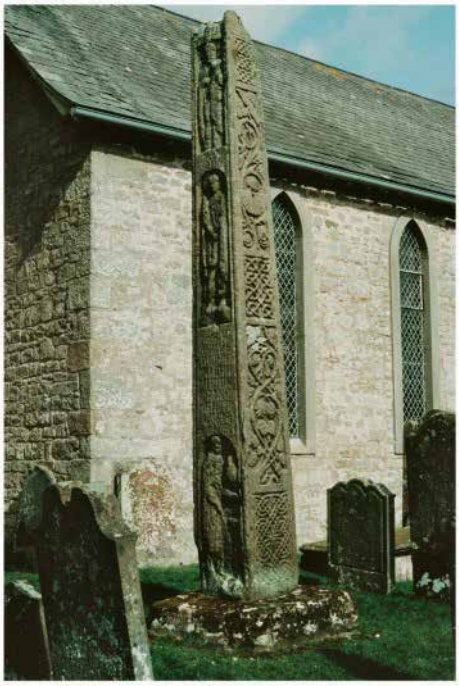


FIG. III. Bewcastle Cross, overall view of Bewcastle shaft, south and west sides (Photo: Ross Trench-Jellicoe, with permission).

The two panels directly above the runic panel correspond to the two-panel sequence at the top of the second side of the shaft at Ruthwell. Two anonymous 'animals' appear just above the top margin of the panel of runes. As at Ruthwell, the majestic figure of Christ is borne aloft on their snouts (Figs II and III). The

35 Bailey and Cramp, *Cumberland*, pp. 69–70; for recent discussion, see A. Gannon, *The Iconography of Early Anglo-Saxon Coinage, Sixth to Eighth Centuries* (Oxford: OUP, 2003), pp. 95–98; and D. Thomson, 'The Bewcastle Falconer-Evangelist', *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* 161 (2008), 1–23.

36 Bailey and Cramp, *Cumberland*, p. 61.

religious dimension of the scene is even more explicit than at Ruthwell: each of the Bewcastle animals raises both forepaws, on either side of its snout, so as to enact the 'orans' gesture, the ancient gesture of prayer. The two inner paws of the beasts touch, and seem to cross (more than a millennium of rain and frost, and water dripping down from the snouts just above, has almost worn away these inner paws). If indeed the paws did cross, as they do at Ruthwell, these animals would again have acclaimed Christ as the anointed one, the Messiah. Once more, Christ holds a rolled-up scroll in his left hand, and blesses it with his raised right hand. The acclaiming animals, who seem to grow out of the runic panel below, have a different function here than they had at Ruthwell: they stand for the people named in that panel and their hopes. Like the people named below, the animals are contrite and transformed from evil to good by their contrition. If onlookers pray for the people named in the panel (whether for the commissioners, presumably still living, or for the others, presumably dead) they (and those generous onlookers who respond with prayer) will find themselves blessed by Christ when he reveals himself at the Parousia, and opens the Book of Life with the names of those who are saved.

It is Christ as the Agnus Dei who will open the Book of Life (cf. Revelation 5:9); and at the top of the shaft, John the Baptist acclaims the Agnus Dei (Fig. II). Once more, as at Ruthwell, John is standing (no squatness in this figure!); again, he wears a heavy pallium and long ecclesiastical garments: the 'soft garments' of the heavenly liturgy. Between the upper two figural panels, a runic inscription '+ gessus kristtus' may refer to either panel, or to both. But it also has another function: the initial 'g'-rune of 'gessus' has a similar 'X'-shape to the Greek 'chi' (for *christos*). The Bewcastle designer found in the futhorc a rune that enabled him to match the way in which, at Ruthwell, the beasts cross their paws to echo the 'chi' of the *nomen sacrum* XPS at the top of that panel. He may have been inspired by the Ruthwell monument. Most scholars have considered Bewcastle to be the earlier monument, and that the much more extensive Ruthwell figural programme came later.[37] But it is not inconceivable that Bewcastle was the later, in which case its designer has produced an iconographic epitome of the Ruthwell figural programme.[38] If so, he chose a new context: death, and prayer for the living and the dead. He encouraged the Bewcastle community to remember their own approaching deaths and to see them as a final encounter with a majestic Christ who, benign and human, would bless converted creatures, even if they had once acted as beasts and dragons; and also with an Agnus Dei who, both at present at Mass and when in future glory he breaks the seals of the book of Life (Revelation 5:9) would in mercy take away the sins of the world.

37 Bailey and Cramp, *Cumberland*, pp. 70–71; Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, p. 36.

38 As argued by Fred Orton, in *Fragments of History*, pp. 81–104.

The two-panel apocalyptic sequence at Bewcastle and Ruthwell presents a remarkably optimistic vision of life after death and the coming Parousia. In the early eighth century, much more frightening images of Judgment and the afterlife were being copied, and new ones composed, in Northumbria. Pehthelm, bishop of Whithorn passed on to Bede a much more ominous scene incorporating the Book of Life. On his deathbed, a bad-living thane of King Coenred of Mercia (reigned 704–709) had a vision in which the small pamphlet of his good deeds was contrasted with the huge volume in which his evil deeds were written out. He died in despair soon after.[39] No surviving later Anglo-Saxon cross presents such a reassuring picture of the Parousia as we find at Ruthwell and Bewcastle: in the now-fragmented Rothbury Cross, demons and snakes had a prominent role to play in the punishment of damned souls.[40] Why do Ruthwell and Bewcastle imply such confidence in the face of Judgment? Primarily because their commissioner seems to have been, uniquely in the eighth-century insular world, in touch with the spirit of early Christian liturgies, in which the return of Christ was desired, not feared. The confident eschatological sequences at Ruthwell and Bewcastle find their closest conceptual analogues in surviving early Christian apses, for example at Rome and Ravenna. At Rome, at the sixth-century basilica of Saints Cosmas and Damian, we once more find the alternation between the human image of Christ, returning in glory, and symbolic images of the Agnus Dei.[41] The Ruthwell and Bewcastle crosses bring to a new landscape at the ends of the earth, north of Hadrian's Wall and north of Solway Firth, some of the spirit of early Christian liturgical, and in particular Eucharistic, celebration.

39 Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 5:13, B. Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors (eds) *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford: OUP, 1969), pp. 498– 503. Whithorn lies 30 miles to the west of Ruthwell, and Ruthwell may have been within Pehthelm's diocese. For a suggestion that Pehthelm, or his friend Acca of Hexham, might have commissioned the Ruthwell Cross, see Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, pp. 265–66. On Bede's emphasis on eschatology in the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, see now Darby, *Bede and the End of Time*, pp. 207–21.

40 See J. Hawkes, 'The Rothbury Cross: an Iconographic Bricolage', *Gesta* 35 (1996) 77–94.

41 Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, pp. 247–57.