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Studies in Honor of Rosemary Cramp

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Who Then Read the Ruthwell Poem in the Eighth Century?

Éamonn Ó Carragáin

In a paper given at University College Cork in late 1975, Rosemary Cramp reexamined the relationships between Old English literature and Anglo-Saxon archaeology, a subject on which she had years before written a highly influential paper.[1] She was cautious about the possibilities of making direct links and stressed the different methodologies and problems of the two disciplines. But she ended her lecture by making an important exception. There was one site where the archaeologist had to take an interest in literature, while the literary scholar had to take an interest in archaeology and iconography: the Ruthwell Cross, on which poetry and iconography formed a unity. The present essay is a footnote in memory of that inspiring lecture, the occasion on which the present writer first met Rosemary Cramp. She has always seen the Ruthwell poem as a primary feature of the monument:

> Even if one supposes the runic poem was inscribed to fill in the ugly wide margins (which would have to be left for reasons of symmetry on the narrow sides) there seems no convincing reason why they should have been carved in later. . . . There is nothing in the cutting of the runes, as Baldwin Brown and Blyth Webster first pointed out, to suggest that the inscription was a later addition to the cross, quite apart from the commonsense improbability of leaving the broad margins blank.[2]

To appreciate the force of Rosemary Cramp's remark about the "the commonsense improbability of leaving the broad margins blank," one need only look at the related Bewcastle Cross (fig. 1). There is a major difference in design between it and the Ruthwell Cross. The Bewcastle shaft has rounded corners. Two long thin vertical incisions on each face, parallel with and close to the corners, mark out at each corner a slender scroll (a roll molding), partially detached from the shaft. Thus while all the panels have wide vertical borders, these borders are all curved and unsuitable for

1. Cramp, "*Beowulf* and Archaeology."
2. Cramp, "Anglian Sculptured Crosses of Dumfriesshire," p. 12.

inscription. All the inscriptions are on the flat spaces *between* panels, not on the vertical borders with their roll moldings.[3] But the Ruthwell cross-shaft has squared corners (fig. 2). Its panels have flat vertical borders suitable for inscription.[4] The vertical borders of every surviving large panel are inscribed, except for those of the Crucifixion on the base, and that was certainly a later addition to the cross. There are many Anglo-Saxon monuments with inscriptions, but the Ruthwell Cross is unique among them in being designed to have inscriptions on the vertical borders of all of its four sides. If all scholars admit that the Latin inscriptions on the broad sides are original features of the cross, there is no logical reason to deny that the runic poem on the narrow sides is similarly an original feature of the cross. That the Ruthwell designer should have provided *tituli* for all the large panels on the broad sides, but none for his largest panels, the vine scrolls on the narrow sides of the lower stone, was clearly, to use Cramp's expression, a "commonsense improbability."

Rosemary Cramp's position on Ruthwell was implicitly challenged, in 1973, by Professor Ray Page, who gave a highly censorious account of the layout of the *tituli* to the two vine scrolls on the lower stone:

> The runes of the top stone were cut sensibly so as to run in fairly long text lengths along the borders they filled. Not so those of the lower stone, for where these occupy the vertical borders of the east and west faces they are set, not along the length of the border, but in a succession of short horizontal lines of two, three or four letters each. Thus that section of the text which fills the top and then the right-hand vertical border of the east face is divided up "[.]gere / da / hi / næ / go / da / lm / eg / tti / gþ / a*h* / ew / al / de / on / ga / lg / ug / ist / iga / *mod* / igf / [.] [.] / men / [.]." This looks absurd and is maddeningly hard to read. So odd does it appear that I incline to think it may not be part of the original design for the cross, and to wonder if these runes were added by a later carver who had less command over the space he had to fill. But this is a heretical view and not shared by art historians.[5]

Page's vivid and highly judgmental phrases, "looks absurd," "maddeningly hard to read," and "odd," were clearly based on his own experience as an epigrapher and runologist, and on a personal sense of what was fitting. He saw it as sensible to lay out inscriptions in a continuous

3. See the description by Rosemary Cramp in Bailey and Cramp, *Cumberland, Westmorland and Lancashire-North-of-the-Sands,* pp. 61–72.

4. See the plates in Cassidy, *Ruthwell Cross.*

5. Page, *Introduction to English Runes,* p. 150 (2nd ed., p. 147).

line from left to right, or from top to bottom, even when such inscriptions ran along a vertical border at right angles to the reader's vision. Conversely, he considered it absurd to lay out inscriptions in vertical columns without word divisions, even when such a layout ensured that the letters were the right way up when the reader looked at them. Page also implied that Anglo-Saxon runes did not provide any directly comparable material, because nothing survives that is quite like Ruthwell. With some 260 surviving runes (and perhaps as many as 480 runes originally), the Ruthwell poem is by far the longest continuous runic inscription from England to survive. The second longest group of runes to survive from England is that of the Franks Casket, which has over 260 runes in all; but these are divided between the four sides and the top of the casket, so that there are "five sculptured panels, each with one or more runic legends, making up eleven discrete inscriptions on the casket."[6] Otherwise, the corpus of English runic inscriptions comprises "perhaps forty significant texts, and several of these consist only of personal names in the nominative case,"[7] and no other surviving runic inscription from England compares in length to the Ruthwell poem. As we shall see, a major difficulty in understanding what the Ruthwell designer was about has stemmed from the fact that his design is unique among surviving runic inscriptions. As far as we know, no other English designer of runic inscriptions was remotely as ambitious. The designer of the Franks casket set out his inscriptions (a mixture of runic and Roman scripts) in a variety of ways: some inscriptions are upside down as the casket stands; one group of runes is retrograde, so that each rune is back to front, and the inscription reads from right to left; one inscription is encrypted, using unique forms for all the vowels.[8] It hardly seems likely that the designer of the Franks Casket shared Page's criteria of what was "sensible" and what "absurd." But it was the Ruthwell inscription, not that on the Franks Casket, that Page described as "absurd," and in doing so he failed to cite any comparative material from nonrunic scripts.

In 1978, Professor Ute Schwab provided the comparative and historical material that previous discussions had lacked. She pointed convincingly to the rich Roman and Byzantine tradition of inscribing the uprights of crosses, or vertical borders of reliquaries, in short groups of letters reading left to right without word division, so that the inscription forms a solid vertical column of letters, as at Ruthwell.[9] Schwab's contribu-

6. Page, *Introduction to English Runes,* p. 175 (2nd ed., p. 173).

7. Page, *Introduction to English Runes,* 2nd ed., p. 14, modifying his first edition, p. 15, which referred to "under thirty significant texts."

8. See Page, *Introduction to English Runes,* pp. 174–82 (2nd ed., pp. 172–79); and the plates and excellent survey in Webster, "Iconographic Programme of the Franks Casket."

9. Schwab, "Das Traumgesicht vom Kreuzesbaum."

tion was of the greatest importance: it provided new evidence to support the arguments of earlier scholars, such as Fritz Saxl and Rudolf Wittkower, that Mediterranean contexts are important for understanding the Ruthwell and Bewcastle Crosses.[10] As we shall see in the present essay, this tradition was to be seen on at least two of the relics most revered in seventh- and eighth-century Rome: the Cross of Justin II and the miraculous icon of Santa Maria in Trastevere.[11] One might have expected that Schwab's study would have settled the scholarly debate: she demonstrated conclusively that the layout of the *tituli* to the Ruthwell vine scrolls had close analogues in a major tradition of Early Christian epigraphy and, in particular, of epigraphic verse. This tradition was exemplified in highly prestigious objects to be seen in Rome, the city that in the eighth century was for Anglo-Saxons, kings and clerics alike, the most sought-out pilgrimage center in Europe.[12]

In 1987, the present author built on Schwab's work in order to argue that there were particular reasons why the Ruthwell designer should have followed this tradition for the verse *tituli* of the vine scrolls on the lower stone.[13] To understand the designer's procedure, we need to make a distinction between, on the one hand, his layout for the *tituli* of the panels on the broad sides and the vine scrolls of the upper stone and, on the other, his layout for the runic verse *tituli* of the vine scrolls on the lower stone. All the *tituli* on the upper stone, and those for the panels on the broad sides of the lower stone, were relatively short, because all of those panels are relatively small. In general (with some exceptions, such as the Man Blind from Birth on the first broad side) the incipit of each *titulus* ran across the top of a panel; it then continued down the right side. The *titulus* usually ended on the left vertical border (reading downward), and where the inscription was particularly long, it could end on the lower margin of the panel (this happened in two cases: the panels depicting Mary Magdalen at the feet of Christ on the first side of the lower stone, and John the Baptist pointing to the Agnus Dei on the second side of the upper stone). The parts of the *tituli* on the vertical borders usually run downward; those on the horizontal borders invariably run from left to right. To this there is a major exception on one large panel: the now fragmentary runic *titulus* for the Visitation panel on the first side of the upper stone seems to have run upward along the left vertical border (on this border the inscription,

10. Saxl, "Ruthwell Cross"; Schapiro, "Religious Meaning of the Ruthwell Cross"; Saxl and Wittkower, *British Art and the Mediterranean*, §§ 15–18.

11. Schwab, "Das Traumgesicht vom Kreuzesbaum," pp. 156–62.

12. See Levison, *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century*, pp. 15–44; Stancliffe, "Kings Who Opted Out"; Ó Carragáin, *City of Rome*.

13. Ó Carragáin, "Ruthwell Crucifixion Poem."

largely lost, ended with the surviving word "[-] m(a)rþ(a)"), then across the upper border (perhaps "mar [-] m r", though this inscription is doubtful in the extreme: in most lights nothing can be made out on the upper border), and then downward on the right border (where the inscription began with the word "dominnæ [-]": its continuation is lost). In an ingenious but ultimately unsatisfying reconstruction of this inscription, Page failed to consider what is likely to have been lost in the damaged borders before "marþa" and after "dominnæ", and thus reconstructed a single complete sentence out of these few fragments; this imaginative procedure was followed by David Howlett who, within the narrow limitations of that procedure, gave a better account of the surviving fragments.[14]

On the vertical borders of all these panels, the *tituli* are set out at right angles to the reader's vision. As Page has put it, such relatively short *tituli* are "cut sensibly, so as to run in fairly long text lengths along the borders they filled."[15] The layout is indeed sensible, but only because these *tituli* are all relatively short. Thus, as a rule, they have a reasonable balance between text that runs from left to right (along the top and in two surviving instances the bottom margin of a panel) and text that runs in a single continuous line along the right or left margin. Readers could usually read, or recall, one of these *tituli* by looking at a line of horizontal script. Then they could read or recall the rest of the *titulus* simply by making a single quick sideways tilt of the head. To take in the sideways inscription on any one of these short vertical borders, a reader would have had to make two, or at most three, eye movements.[16] Such a balance between horizontal and vertical layout was not available to the designer in the *tituli* for the vine scrolls on the lower stone. If, as originally designed, the two Ruthwell verse *tituli* may together have comprised over 480 runes, each *titulus* may have originally comprised some 240 runes. Allowing about ten runes for each horizontal incipit, each of the two vertical columns in each *titulus* may have had, say, 115 to 120 runes. In 1987, the present writer concluded that:

> The designer may have felt that to inscribe each margin, practically the whole length of the lower stone, with a continuous row of runes laid at right angles to the onlooker's vision, might have had the Ruthwell community murmuring of cricks in their necks, or else of runes running up and down before their eyes.

14. For discussion of this difficult inscription, see Ó Carragáin, *City of Rome*, p. 34 and nn. 144–46.

15. Page, *Introduction to English Runes*, p. 150, quoted above (2nd ed., pp. 146–47).

16. See the discussion of how the eyes move in reading, in Saenger, *Space between Words*, pp. 1–9.

> By adopting the solution he did, the designer at least ensured that all the runes of the poem were the right way up when the cross was erected, even if he sacrificed logical word-division in the process. As the margins around the foliage scrolls grow broader towards the bottom of the stone, the designer was free to choose when to change from two to three, or from three to four, runes per line. In this way he could use the space available to him in the most economical way, and at the same time keep the runes to a consistent size throughout the design of the border. By using short lines, therefore, it was easier for the designer to ensure that the area covered in runic script was aesthetically coherent.[17]

Ute Schwab had already called attention to close contemporary analogues; now, in addition, a close examination of the problems facing the Ruthwell designer indicated that his layout was the most realistic way of coping with these problems.

Schwab's important paper had far less impact than it should have done. Four years after her study appeared, but without any reference to it, Paul Meyvaert published the first of two studies of the Ruthwell Cross, both of which accepted as original all the *tituli* to the panels on the broad sides. However, he too viewed the runic *tituli* to the vine scrolls on the lower stone as secondary and added later. Instead of referring to Schwab's examination of contemporary analogues, Meyvaert provided a series of schematic diagrams of how inscriptions might ideally be laid out, in order to show that the layout of the *tituli* to the vine scrolls on the lower stone are "a total anomaly" and "a complete anomaly."[18] "Anomalous" is, of course, simply the negative for "unique." Again, the argument was weakened by a lack of knowledge of the relevant comparative material. In 1992, in his second paper, Meyvaert still based his rejection of the *tituli* as integral to the vine scrolls on the lower stone simply on his study of runic monuments:

> As regards the runic verses—linked to the Old English *Dream of the Rood*—that are incised around the borders enclosing the inhabited vine-scroll, and that loom so large in the literature on the Ruthwell cross, nothing has been said in the preceding pages. This is only because I consider these verses to be a later addition, which did not influence the original design and iconography of the cross. I have encountered no new evidence, or serious criticism of the argument I presented in 1982, to prompt me to change my opinion on this point. On the contrary, an even broader survey of the manner in which runic inscriptions were displayed through the centuries, always with a view to legibility, has kept me convinced that the lay-out at Ruthwell is a total anomaly demanding a very different kind of explanation. The explanation put forward in 1982—which has since been accepted by others—still seems to me the most logical and reasonable one, namely, that the cross was no longer lying flat, in sections, in the stonemason's workyard, but was standing erect in the church, when the runes came to be incised upon it.[19]

17. Ó Carragáin, "Ruthwell Crucifixion Poem," p. 9. I wish to acknowledge the assistance of Professor Jane Roberts, who first pointed out to me that the designer probably chose his layout for the runic *tituli* on the lower stone to cope with the fact that its vertical borders gradually grew broader from top to bottom. See now Roberts, "Some Relationships."

18. Meyvaert, "Apocalypse Panel on the Ruthwell Cross"; Meyvaert, "New Perspective on the Ruthwell Cross," pp. 164–65 ("a total anomaly"), and n. 266 ("a complete anomaly").

While Meyvaert once more rejected the *tituli* to the vine scroll on the lower stone as later, he now explicitly stated that the fragmentary *tituli* to the vine scrolls on the upper stone were original. For him, all depended on the notion of what was a "sensible" layout: "The runic inscription which once occupied the upper stone of the cross, of which now only a few runes remain . . . , was laid out in exactly the same manner as the Latin inscriptions, thus indicating that it belongs to the original carving, done before the cross was erected. The problem is to explain how the shaft came to be incised so differently."[20] The footnote to that passage continues with an explicit rejection of the present author's defense of the layout of the runes on the lower stone as practical:

> Ó Carragáin . . . has recently suggested that the new procedure was intended to facilitate reading and prevent the Ruthwell community from getting the crick in the neck that would have resulted, had the runes been incised in the same way as the Latin letters. But anyone who peruses the numerous illustrations of runic monuments—some with very long inscriptions—shown in E. Moltke, *Runes and their Origin, Denmark and Elsewhere,* Copenhagen (1985) will have to conclude that the runes on the Ruthwell shaft represent a complete anomaly, demanding some explanation unrelated to legibility or twisted necks. My own explanation is to suggest that the tall cross was already standing when the decision was made to add the runic verses.[21]

19. Meyvaert, "New Perspective on the Ruthwell Cross," pp. 164–65.

20. Meyvaert, "New Perspective on the Ruthwell Cross," p. 164.

21. Meyvaert, "New Perspective on the Ruthwell Cross," n. 266. Elisabeth Okasha is more circumspect than Page and Meyvaert on the question: "the runic texts, whether or not they were always intended to be part of the design of the cross, are certainly highly decorative and enhance its appearance": "Literacy in Anglo-Saxon England," p. 88.

Meyvaert here refers to the very passage in which the present writer had pointed out the importance of Schwab's work, and on that very page he had listed some of the most important analogues adduced by Schwab and paraphrased (with due acknowledgement) some of her discussions of these objects.[22] The central weakness of Meyvaert's argument thus becomes his refusal even to consider Schwab's evidence. He wrote as if for him runes existed in a self-enclosed Germanic cultural world so that, in considering their layout, only runic tradition need be considered. Apparently, the practices of Northumbrian Christian rune-masters of the eighth century were to be assessed solely in the light of the achievements of other Germanic rune-masters, including those of the Scandinavians, even though eighth-century Christian Northumbrians, fortunately for them, had not yet seriously encountered Scandinavians in large social groups. On the other hand, it was evidently felt that the Roman or Greek epigraphic traditions set forth by Schwab could be ignored, even though Northumbrian ecclesiastics (such as, say, Bishop Acca of Hexham) had certainly been to Rome and clearly valued the ecclesiastical traditions they found there.[23] Meyvaert not only ignored Schwab's evidence and conclusions, his dismissal of Schwab also implied a rejection of the demonstrations by Saxl, Schapiro, and Wittkower that Mediterranean traditions were central to the Ruthwell monument. The assumption that runes occupied an autarchic German epigraphic tradition recalls the assumptions of nationalist German scholars such as Helmut Arntz.[24] David Parsons has recently made it seem even less likely that runes can be understood in isolation from other contemporary scripts, with his convincing suggestion that it was the monastic communities that propagated the seventh-century Anglo-Saxon reform of the *futhorc:*

> Roman script appears at much the same time in much the same areas, and it is used for much the same purposes, as Christian-period runic script, and its spread is surely due to the Church.

22. Ó Carragáin, "Ruthwell Crucifixion Poem," p. 9. In addition, Schwab's article is listed in the bibliography to the volume in which Meyvaert's remarks appear: Cassidy, *Ruthwell Cross,* p. 194.

23. See Ó Carragáin, *City of Rome,* passim.

24. Arntz, *Handbuch der Runenkunde,* see pp. 124 and 210, where the Ruthwell runes are discussed without any reference to their iconographic or Christian contexts. Arntz's National Socialist assumptions are amply set forth in his "Vorwort," pp. vii–x. John M. Kemble had already delivered a magisterial rebuke to such romantic epigraphic nationalisms in 1840: "as nearly every inscription we have must be referred to Northumberland, we find this the more intelligible, when we bear in mind, that before the close of the eighth century Northumberland was more advanced in civilization than any other part of Teutonic Europe" ("On Anglo-Saxon Runes," p. 338).

> It is tempting, therefore, to wonder whether the dissemination of the standard *futhorc* might also have been due to the Church. This hypothesis . . . not only accords with the distribution of inscriptions, it also links what appears to be a swift and—on present evidence—complete change in runic practice to the institution which was effecting profound cultural changes across Anglo-Saxon society. What other authority, around the turn of the eighth century, is likely to have exerted an influence away from heterogeneous local practice and towards a standard that was observed from East Anglia to Northumbria?[25]

If Parsons is right, then runic inscriptions demand to be seen in the context of all other evidence of Anglo-Saxon ecclesiastical interest in varieties of script and alphabets, ancient and modern.

The arguments of Page and Meyvaert were adopted with enthusiasm by Eric Stanley.[26] His article attempted to document the philological consequences of their theories about layout. Understandably, Stanley also ignored Schwab's evidence. His philological arguments are inconclusive: the impression left by his paper is that runes simply cannot be accurately dated on philological grounds alone. Although Stanley could find no evidence definitively to exclude an eighth-century date, he nevertheless suggested that the poem might have been added as late as the tenth century.[27] He did not discuss the question why, if the runes were added in the tenth century (i.e., long after the Viking invasions and settlement), no one had yet suggested Scandinavian influence on the form of the runes or the language. In his fundamental article, published in 1840, John Mitchell Kemble had pointed out that the Ruthwell runes were Northumbrian, pre-Viking in form.[28] Stanley's arguments did not find acceptance among other specialist philologists.[29] While Page was characteristically polite to Stanley's methodology, he implicitly rejected his tenth-century dating.[30]

25. Parsons, *Recasting the Runes,* pp. 97–98. See also two important earlier studies, each of which independently argues that runes, which are regularly associated with Roman script on ecclesiastical sites, were widely used in Anglo-Saxon monasteries in the eighth and ninth centuries: Parsons, "Anglo-Saxon Runes in Continental Manuscripts"; and Fadda, "Aspetti e significati della compresenza delle scritture romana e runica nelle iscrizioni anglosassoni."

26. Stanley, "Ruthwell Cross Inscription."

27. Stanley, "Ruthwell Cross Inscription," p. 396. Stanley's iterations of Meyvaert's conclusions are listed by Ó Carragáin, "Ruthwell Crucifixion Poem," p. 7 and n. 9 (on p. 55).

28. Kemble, "On Anglo-Saxon Runes," p. 352.

29. His dating is rejected explicitly by Fulk, *History of Old English Meter,* p. 342.

30. Page, *Runes and Runic Inscriptions,* pp. 43–46, 336.

By the end of the last century, the mutually reinforcing opinions of Page, Meyvaert, and Stanley had become widely influential among English-speaking Anglo-Saxonists. Weak though their arguments were, they set a new fashion. By the early 1990s opinions based on their studies were so widely iterated on the Ansaxnet discussion list as to become canonical.[31] As the present writer put it in 1987, "a new centrifugal orthodoxy, . . . a new consensus" had been created in which the Ruthwell poem was seen as having nothing to do with the cross.[32] By the 1990s Rosemary Cramp's interdisciplinary approach to the cross and her ideas about the relevance of the poem to the cross had become distinctly unfashionable. Not Page but Cramp now held to heretical opinions. The orthodox scholarly consensus, following Page, held that the layout of the runic *tituli* on the lower stone showed them to be an afterthought to the cross, and hence irrelevant to its iconographic program, although not all scholars did, or do, subscribe to this view.[33]

As we have seen, the arguments about the layout of the *tituli* on the lower stone summarized above can only be upheld by dismissing the comparative evidence put forward by Schwab. In addition to their reluctance to consider nonrunic analogues, the work of Page, Meyvaert, and Stanley shared another methodological weakness: a failure to consider how the act of reading was conceived in eighth-century monasteries. For the rest of this essay I shall concentrate on some early medieval attitudes to reading, particularly of *tituli.* The question is best approached by considering a later contribution by Ray Page. Good jokes are rare in Anglo-Saxon scholarship, and the following is one of Page's best. In 1984, he provided a learned and helpful discussion of how to transliterate English runes. He said that one way of presenting runes was to reproduce in the transcription their original layout. In such a procedure a transcript of the Ruthwell poem would roughly correspond to the shape of the borders of the lower stone. Page gave an example of how this would look, and then commented: "This is certainly useful in showing how inefficiently the runes are set out on the cross and how hard it must always have been to understand the texts."[34] Page then continued in a footnote that showed that his negative opinion of the Ruthwell runic *tituli* had not mellowed over the years: "This lay-out helps to justify my suspicion that these runes, so clumsily arranged, are a later addition to the cross, not part of its original plan. However, U. Schwab has pointed to foreign models for this lay-out."[35] Yet Page gave no consideration to the significance of Schwab's "foreign models"; instead, immediately after the reference to Schwab, he prints nine short columns of letters, which readers will find amusing to decipher:

Pro	amp	hed	his	out	ien	ein	eei	sag
fes	tel	oes	way	tex	t,b	ter	fot	ree
sor	lsm	not	ofs	tsi	uti	est	her	wit
R.J	eth	thi	ett	nef	twi	ing	rea	hhe
.Cr	ats	nkt	ing	fic	llb	tos	der	r.

When the original version of the present essay was read in the presence of Rosemary Cramp at Kalamazoo in May 2000, the audience deciphered the nine columns in unison and aloud. At the end of their *praelectio* they all burst out laughing, and none laughed more heartily than Rosemary herself. The joke is marvelous fun, and the audience agreed that it had an added and perhaps unintended charm. The joke shows clearly how far, when he laboriously composed it, its author was from appreciating why the Ruthwell designer laid out the runic *tituli* on the lower stone in the way he did, and how he or she intended those *tituli* to be read. Let us examine why this is so.

1. Page's satires on the Ruthwell *scriptura continua* imply that a more "sensible" norm had prevailed by the eighth century. They would have some force if regular word-division was normally to be found in the Early Christian inscriptions valued by Northumbrian ecclesiastics. But this was not the case. In the ancient world, lack of word division had been the rule in all kinds of writing.[36] A text, before it could be read out, had to be got by heart in the process of *praelectio,* preliminary reading.[37] Readers first assimilated the text, mentally providing their personal word-division and punctuation, as it were. Once they had performed the arduous process of *praelectio,* they could subsequently refer back to the written text as a mnemonic aid to recitation. *Scriptio continua* or *scriptura continua* was the norm

31. See, for example, the remarkable discussion of the Ruthwell Cross on Ansaxnet in October 1992 and following months. Search Ansaxdat under the keyword Ruthwell at www.mun.ca/Ansaxdat.

32. Ó Carragáin, "Ruthwell Crucifixion Poem," p. 7.

33. See, for example, Karkov, "Naming and Renaming."

34. Page, "On the Transliteration of English Runes"; repr. Page, *Runes and Runic Inscriptions,* p. 261.

35. Page, "On the Transliteration of English Runes," repr. p. 261, n. 47.

36. See Parkes, *Pause and Effect,* pp. 1–15; Saenger, *Space between Words,* pp. 6–13.

37. On *praelectio,* see Parkes, *Pause and Effect,* pp. 11 and 14; Saenger, *Space between Words,* pp. 6–9.

in the ancient and Early Christian world. In the eighth century it had all the prestige of being ancient, like the oldest Christian manuscripts known to the Anglo-Saxons and the verse inscriptions they saw, for example, in the Roman basilicas. The verse dedication-inscription over the entrance door at Santa Sabina (dated to the reign of Leo I, 440–61) provides an example. Here I print a transcript with word divisions and an interlinear translation; these aids to *praelectio* are intended to help the reader to read the original verse inscription, given in figure 3, with enjoyment:[38]

CVLMEN APOSTOLICVM CVM CAELESTINVS HABERET
When Caelestinus used to hold the apostolic height (= AD 422–32),
PRIMVS ET IN TOTO FVLGERET EPISCOPVS ORBE
And when he, first among bishops, was shining throughout the whole world,
HAEC QVAE MIRARIS FVNDAVIT PERSBYTER VRBIS
A priest of the city founded this which you are now admiring
ILLYRICA DE GENTE PETRVS VIR NOMINE TANTO
A man called Peter of Illyria, of such a great name
DIGNVS AB EXORTV CHRISTI NVTRITVS IN AVLA
Worthy (i.e., to be called Peter); from birth brought up in Christ's hall:
PAVPERIBVS LOCVPLES SIBI PAVPER QVI BONA VITAE
Rich to the poor, making a poor man of himself: fleeing the good things
PRAESENTIS FVGIENS MERVIT SPERARE FVTVRAM
Of the present life, he was justified in hoping for the future (life).

The verse *titulus* demands to be interpreted in the context of the two flanking figures who represent the Church chosen both out of the Jews ("Ecclesia ex circumcisione," "the Church of the circumcision") and out of the gentiles ("Ecclesia ex gentibus," "the Church taken out of nations"). Here, as on the Ruthwell Cross, visual and verbal icons complement each other. The dedication *titulus* was not simply designed to impart information, but also to be enjoyed as design: it forms a pleasing visual unity. From this coherent block of script, careful *praelectio* yields a meditation on membership of the Church. Verbal meaning emerges from visual spacing: in the course of *praelectio* the reader comes to see that at the center of the unified block of script is PETRVS, the fourth word of the fourth line in the seven-line titulus. PETRVS refers at once to Peter the apostle, the rock on whom Christ founded his Church, and to Peter's namesake, the priest Peter from Illyria, who built this local church on the Aventine during the reign of Pope Celestine (422–32), St. Peter's late successor in the "culmen apostolicum."[39]

38. Text from Duchesne, *Le Liber Pontificalis,* 1:235, Life of Sixtus III, AD 432–40; interlinear translation by the present author. See also Krautheimer et al., *Corpus Basilicarum Christianarum Romae,* 4:75 and 91.

39. The centrality of "Petrvs" to the inscription has been examined by Higgitt, "Design and Meaning in Early Medieval Inscriptions"; Higgitt, "Emphasis and Visual Rhetoric."

Malcolm Parkes has demonstrated that it was Irish and Anglo-Saxon monks, working from the sixth to the eighth centuries, who gradually introduced word division and the features of layout that make a text easy to read at the first try, such as the use of majuscule and minuscule scripts on the same page.[40] When the Ruthwell Cross was erected, word division was a modern innovation, still in the process of development. If one wanted to tell in verse an ancient story, it still made sense to require of your reader the additional effort of *praelectio.* Page himself has argued that runes seem to have been valued, not as magical, but rather as a script of historical interest, suitable for inscription on Christian monuments.[41] If so, it made sense to lay out the long runic *tituli* on the lower stone in *scriptura continua,* long venerated in Christian tradition.

2. The joke is funny precisely because the message hidden in the columns of letters is so banal. We are persuaded to spend some time and effort making out a prosaic message that, if it were laid out "sensibly," we could have read in seconds. In this joke bathos triumphs: we laugh because we have been intrigued into wasting our time. The puzzling layout is intended to provide an amusing contrast to what is implied to be the only "sensible" way of laying out texts: so as to enable the reader to assimilate the maximum amount of new information in the minimum amount of time. But we do not read verse *tituli* like that. Poems yield pleasure when ruminated on and, if the poem is good, the longer the better. It was by contemplating the Ruthwell poem at leisure, "memorizing it and ruminating over it, like some clean animal chewing the cud," that monastic readers gradually came to see the quality of the verse, how intelligently it was edited for the cross, and its centrality to the whole iconographic program of the cross.[42] The patient effort of *praelectio* needed to assimilate the Ruthwell verse *tituli* and get them by heart was and is, for any reader sensitive to poetry, its own reward.

3. The joke exposes a third flaw in Ray Page's understanding of the Ruthwell runes. All of the lines in his nine columns, except the final line, consist of three elements: either three letters or two letters and a punctuation mark. But we have seen that the Ruthwell Cross poem is not laid out like that. Page evidently failed to realize the significance, for a sophis-

40. Parkes, "Contribution of Insular Scribes"; see also Saenger, *Space between Words,* pp. 14–44.

41. Page, "Anglo-Saxon Runes and Magic"; Page, *Introduction to English Runes,* pp. 116–17 (2nd ed., pp. 96–116).

42. For the phrase, "rememorando secum et quasi mundum animal ruminando," see Bede's account of the poet Cædmon, in his *Hist. eccles.* 4.24.22, pp. 418–19. See the classic account of the centrality of leisure (*otium*) in monastic culture, as a normal precondition for contemplation, in Leclercq, *Love of Learning,* pp. 73–75, 250–65.

ticated rune-master, of the fact that the available space on the tapering lower stone of the Ruthwell Cross widens gradually: that is, that it is broader at its base than at its apex. The margins around the foliage scrolls grow broader toward the bottom of the stone. Only by laying out the runes as he did could the designer keep his runes to a consistent size throughout each *titulus*. If the designer had been compelled to lay out his runes "sensibly" in a single line running downward at right angles to the reader's vision, not only would the audience have been complaining of sore necks, they are likely also to have complained that the runic *tituli* on the lower stone were very ugly. The runes at the bottom of each vertical border of that stone would have been much bigger than the runes at the top of that border. The Ruthwell designer was, in the matter of inscriptions, at once more sophisticated and more practical than any of his modern critics. We may permit ourselves to rejoice that, as the Ruthwell designer clearly was an expert in the layout of inscriptions, he had freedom to make the choices he did.

The rationale behind Page's layout is best appreciated by looking at one of the most precious reliquaries of the treasury of St. Peter's basilica on the Vatican in Rome: the sort of reliquary of the True Cross that early Anglo-Saxon pilgrims to Rome are likely to have admired and venerated.[43] The reliquary Cross of Justin II (fig. 4) contained one of the major relics of the Holy Cross in St. Peters. (Pope Sergius was to find another one, forgotten by the monks who ran the basilica, in the *sacrarium* of St. Peter's about 700.) The Cross of Justin II is likely to have been displayed in the *porticus* or chapel of the Holy Cross, near the baptistery area of the north transept (the transept to the right as one faced the principal altar).[44] The feast of the Exaltation of the Cross developed at Rome from the second quarter of the seventh century, precisely in this *porticus*-chapel at St. Peter's, and perhaps around this very reliquary.[45] The Cross of Justin II enables us to see how natural it was to inscribe the upright of a cross in such a way that the inscription could be read without tilting the cross or bending one's neck. Like the vertical borders around the vine scroll on the lower stone at Ruthwell, the upright of this reliquary becomes narrower as the inscription descends. It then becomes broader again toward the base. Thus we move from groups of three letters to single letters, and then back to three-letter groups again.

43. On the reliquary Cross of Justin II, see Schwab "Das Traumgesicht vom Kreuzesbaum," p. 156 and n. 134; Belting-Ihm, "Das Justinuskreuz in der Schatzkammer der Peterskirche zu Rom"; Cameron, "Artistic Patronage of Justin II."

44. On the "porticus ubi vivificae crucis vexillum servatur" in Old St. Peters, see Ó Carragáin, "The Term *Porticus* and *Imitatio Romae*," p. 25.

45. See Van Tongeren, "Vom Kreuzritus zur Kreuzestheologie."

Let us try to imagine the stages in which literate early medieval pilgrims might have instructed themselves by *praelectio* of the inscription on this Roman cross. During the first stage of their *praelectio,* they would have made out the individual letters. There must have been false starts, initial mistakes about word order. The result of this preliminary study might perhaps be represented by the following transcript:

[SHAFT]:
+LI/GNO/QUO/CH/RI/ST/US/HU/MA/NV/M/S/VB/DI/DI/TH/OS/TE/M/DA/TRO/MAE
[CROSS BEAM]: JUSTINVSOPEM / ETSOCIADECOREM

The second stage would be to decide how the letters made sense: deciding where the word divisions came; realizing that the end of the inscription on the upright ran on to the beginning of the inscription on the crosspiece; beginning to see that the inscription was in verse; and starting to get some sense of its meter. How the inscription might have been understood by readers after this second stage might perhaps be represented as follows:

[SHAFT]:
+ LIGNO QUO CHRISTUS HUMANVM SVBDIDIT HOSTEM DAT ROMAE
[CROSS BEAM]: JUSTINVS OPEM ET SOCIA DECOREM

The third and final stage of *praelectio* would have involved realizing that the verse formed a unified distych. To come to such a decision, the best way would have been to murmur the Latin text out loud, or at least under the breath. In the act of making out that it existed, a literate reader would have more or less learned the distych by heart. Monastic readers would have recited the verse *titulus* "like a clean beast ruminating" in order to produce a personal "edition" of the verse in their memories, and so appreciate it as poetry. The way the text was understood after this final stage might be represented as follows:

+ LIGNO QUO CHRISTUS HUMANVM SVBDIDIT HOSTEM
DAT ROMAE JUSTINVS OPEM ET SOCIA DECOREM

(With the wood by which Christ overcame the enemy of humanity:
to Rome Justin gives the work, and his consort the decoration.)

By the third and final stage, the Latin distych would have come free from the cross, as it were. The readers now hold it in their memory, but have not forgotten how it was originally laid out. They can appreciate how the second line of the distych, which begins on the upright, is completed on the crosspiece. They also no doubt appreciate how, reciting the poem

by heart but with occasional reference to particular letters on the cross itself, their eyes perform a "sign of the cross." The act of reading becomes a symbolic recognition that the Cross of Justin II is itself a symbol of the relic contained within it. Memory of how the distych was laid out reinforces the memory of the whole reliquary. By making the effort of *praelectio,* the readers of the Cross of Justin II find that they have discovered a poem; and the poem preserves the memory of the cross and of its donors. The effort needed to get the poem by heart is its own reward: it is pleasing and instructive. The Latin poem, while competent, is hardly outstanding. How much greater was the contemplative pleasure and instruction provided by *praelectio* of the crucifixion poem on the Ruthwell Cross.

Now let us look at a second Roman relic, the icon of Santa Maria in Trastevere (fig. 5). From the seventh century, the icon of the Madonna in that basilica was venerated as an *acheiropita,* a relic not made by human hands. A seventh-century pilgrim-guide describes the icon of the church as "the icon which was made by itself" ("quae per se facta est").[46] It is difficult to imagine any Anglo-Saxon pilgrim not visiting Santa Maria in order to venerate such a miraculous icon. The icon we have at present has been variously dated: as early as the reign of the Emperor Justin II (565–78) or as late as the reign of Pope John VII (705–07).[47] In any case we can be sure that the present icon was the icon of Santa Maria in Trastevere from 707, perhaps a generation before the Ruthwell Cross was erected. Here again we have a poem, and this time the poem runs across the top of the icon, down its right side, and then down the left side. This corresponds to the design of the *tituli* for the vine scrolls on the lower stone at Ruthwell. On the icon the verse *titulus* is sensibly laid out: in *scriptura continua* and upright, so that onlookers do not have to tilt their heads to read it. This ancient procedure is followed even though the designer of the icon did not have the additional motivation that the Ruthwell designer had, that each vertical border grew broader as its runic *titulus* descended. Like the two Ruthwell verse *tituli,* this verse *titulus* is not a mere label; instead, it is a concise meditation on the theological significance of the icon it frames. Although the inscription is badly damaged, enough remains for us to see that the effort to puzzle out the *titulus* would have been worthwhile: the poem leaves in readers' memories a verbal icon, a souvenir that recalls the significance of the object that they once saw with their eyes. The transcript below, based on Bertelli's work, provides word divisions

46. Bertelli, *La Madonna di Santa Maria in Trastevere;* Belting, *Likeness and Presence,* pp. 126–27 and color plate II.

47. Bertelli, *La Madonna di Santa Maria in Trastevere,* argues for the late dating; this is accepted by Belting, *Likeness and Presence,* p. 126; the early dating was proposed by Andaloro, "La datazione della tavola di S. Maria in Trastevere."

but still divides the verse according to its layout around the icon. It thus corresponds to the second stage of the process of *praelectio* as we reenacted it for the reliquary Cross of Justin II. The reader can follow the original layout from figure 5:

TOP BORDER: + ASTANT STYPENTES ANGELORYM PR
RIGHT BORDER: INCIPES GESTARE NATYM . . . A . . .
LEFT BORDER: DS QYOD IPSE FACTYS EST Y. . . ER . . .

To complete the act of *praelectio,* educated pilgrims would have had to divide the text into three verses. That is, they would have had to use their aural imaginations to free the *titulus* from its layout. Holding the *titulus* in their memory, but referring where necessary to the written text on the icon, they would have "edited" it into three lines of poetry. The end result might have looked something like the following (the second half of the second line is so badly damaged that Bertelli did not try to restore it):

+ ASTANT STYPENTES ANGELORYM PRINCIPES
GESTARE NATYM . . . A . . . DS
QYOD IPSE FACTYS EST (y)T(t)ER(o tvo).

(+ The princes of the angels [ANGELORYM PRINCIPES] stand wondering; [they see you] bearing Him who was Born [GESTARE NATYM]; because [QYOD] God [DS] has made himself in/of your womb.)

Modern epigraphers, in order to advance our knowledge, have had to develop a technique of reading that is silent, solitary, and skeptical. Silent, because they need to get every last letter, every last rune, faithfully copied and carefully drawn into their notebooks: one can hardly imagine scientific epigraphers chanting the verse as they transcribe it. Solitary, because they must not be distracted by suggestions from others of what might be there. Above all skeptical, because the whole point of publishing a new epigraphic study of a monument is to improve on earlier studies: in effect, modern epigraphers must always hope to prove their predecessors wrong, if only in minutiae.

Those necessary scholarly requirements have resulted in a quite different form of reading from anything we may imagine taking place in the eighth century. The eighth-century readers were hardly solitary when (as in the case of Ruthwell) the inscription was on an ecclesiastical site.[48] There was no reason for them to cultivate the skeptical attitude of the modern epigrapher: they can have had no inhibitions in getting advice from mem-

48. For the archaeological evidence that there was an ecclesiastical site at Ruthwell in the early Middle Ages, see Crowe, "Excavations at Ruthwell."

bers of the community or friends.[49] Unlike modern epigraphers, they did not have to copy every last rune accurately into a notebook. Once monastic readers had become reasonably familiar with the text, it is likely that their eyes no longer needed to swivel from left to right along each short line of the runic columns, as a modern epigrapher's must do in order to make a minutely accurate written transcript. Because of the relative narrowness of the short lines (from two to four runes per group), the eyes of eighth-century readers could move smoothly downward along the familiar text of the vernacular song, while they recalled the text by chanting it.[50] In order to transcribe the Ruthwell runic verse *tituli,* modern epigraphers have to perform an exquisitely frustrating task: they have to interrupt the act of reading continually in order to draw individual runes, and then find their place once more in a *titulus* designed to be seamless. Influenced by his frustrating experience of transcribing the Ruthwell verse *tituli* rune-by-rune, perhaps on more than one occasion, Page naturally saw this seamlessness as a frustrating problem. He failed to realize that for the Ruthwell editor-designer it had been an opportunity to show the unity and coherence of his two runic verse *tituli.* The designer gave each *titulus* an easy-to-read incipit, which ran in a continuous line from left to right. He or she placed the incipits, not on the upper stone, but at the top of the lower stone: this ensured that they would be well within the visual range of any reader with reasonable eyesight. Each *titulus* has two *sententiae,* and each of these is completed in a single long and seamless column. Their layout recalls the *per cola et commata* system: it displays each sentence as a separate unity. This is an epigraphic analogue for the way St. Jerome had recommended that sentences of scripture should be separately displayed.[51] In contrast, Page divided his cryptic prose message into nine neat short columns, none of which makes sense on its own. The resulting joke shows no appreciation of the subtlety with which the four *sententiae* of the Ruthwell poem were edited and thematically balanced against each other.[52]

Because modern epigraphy is deservedly prestigious, the epigrapher's specialized "scientific" form of reading has been projected onto the very different cultural conditions of an early medieval ecclesiastical commu-

49. John Higgitt has written two important studies of how monuments may have been actively explained in the Middle Ages: "Words and Crosses" and "Early Medieval Inscriptions in Britain and Ireland."

50. The discussion of the reader's eye movements while reading texts in *scriptura continua,* in Saenger, *Space between Words,* pp. 1–13, is relevant to this process.

51. See Parkes, *Pause and Effect,* pp. 14–15; Saenger, *Space between Words,* p. 16 and fig. 2.

52. On the ways in which the themes of the first *titulus* are recalled and sometimes reversed by the second, see Ó Carragáin, "Ruthwell Crucifixion Poem," pp. 15–29, 36–38.

nity. This projection has led to the unconscious assumption that because freer forms of reading are unscholarly by modern "scientific" standards they are without value in understanding eighth-century monasticism. As a result, a curious idea has grown up that no one could have read the Ruthwell poem in the early Middle Ages.[53] But early medieval monks saw epigraphy, not as a specialized antiquarian discipline, but as a living poetic form, taught as such in monastic schools like Wearmouth and Jarrow. Michael Lapidge has demonstrated that Bede was an accomplished and original epigraphic poet.[54] We owe the earliest and most influential syllogae of Roman inscriptions to Insular monks, who made their compilations toward the middle of the seventh century, the period when Benedict Biscop and Wilfrid first reached Rome. Irish monks, who had got to Rome at least a generation earlier, may already have initiated such collections.[55] Monks had three good reasons for compiling these syllogae. First of all, they wanted to teach, in their monastic schools, the ancient and living genre of epigraphic verse; such a skill might enable poets to compose new *tituli* for northern churches and ecclesiastical objects such as reliquaries.[56] Second, proper performance of and participation in the Roman liturgy encouraged an informed interest in the religious topography of the *caput urbium;* to memorize verse inscriptions from particular basilicas was a practical way to deepen this interest. The third reason followed from this: to commit to memory some of the most important Roman Christian inscriptions was to anticipate Rome pilgrimage. By imagining the basilicas of Rome through their inscriptions, a monk or nun could make an imaginary pilgrimage to Rome, as preparation for an actual pilgrimage there.

It is unlikely that eighth-century readers were silent while making out the Ruthwell verse *tituli.* All the surviving accounts of how Anglo-Saxon poetry was performed refer to it as sung: from Bede's account of the poet Cædmon, to *Beowulf* and *Widsith,* and even to Cynewulf, certainly a literate poet.[57] Surviving accounts of early medieval reading imply that people normally used their voices and articulated the letters and syllables when

53. An idea explicitly developed by Okasha, "Literacy in Anglo-Saxon England."

54. On the genre, see Bernt, *Das lateinische Epigramm in Übergang von der Spätantike zum frühen Mittelalter,* pp. 42–149. On Bede as an epigraphic poet, see Lapidge, *Bede the Poet,* pp. 1–5. On Bede's sense of the continuity between past and present, see George H. Brown's essay in this volume.

55. See Silvagni, "Nuovo ordinamento delle sillogi epigraphiche di Roma anteriori al secolo XI"; Silvagni, "La silloge epigrafica di Cambridge." St. Columbanus had founded Bobbio in 612; on early Irish pilgrims to Rome, see Ó Carragáin, *City of Rome,* pp. 1–5.

56. See Bede's *titulus* for the apse of the basilica built by Bishop Cyneberht of Lindsey (d. 731), collected in the sylloge of Bishop Milred of Worcester (745–75); it is quoted and discussed by Lapidge, *Bede the Poet,* p. 2.

57. See O'Brien O'Keeffe, *Visible Song.*

making them out. But it is in the nature of music and chant that, once singers have recalled the beginning or an important phrase in the chant, they can recall the whole chant. Anyone with an elementary interest in music knows that the incipit of a song or chant helps to recall a lot more of the song: examples, from the Latin Mass, are "Kyrie," "Gloria," "Credo," "Benedictus," and "Agnus Dei." The same is true for secular music: for example, "Rule Britannia," or "Oh say can you see." It is significant, therefore, that the incipit of each *titulus* runs from left to right transversely through the vine scroll, along the top border of the lower stone. This arrangement ensured that, when the cross was erected, each runic incipit would be easily legible, as well as being within easy visual range. Further, it ensured that text and image were perceived as one. The incipit of each *titulus* is by no means maddeningly difficult to read, and the present writer finds no reason to abandon his conclusions of 1987:

> The kind of reader who might not have found the text maddeningly difficult, in short, is precisely the kind of reader for whom the text is likely to have been intended: a permanent member of a community at Ruthwell who knew the monument from years of use, and who probably knew the poem off by heart from hearing it from other members of the community, from hearing it sung, or from reading some version of the poem in a manuscript. The primary function of the runes would therefore have been mnemonic. A cleric at Ruthwell might, at one period in his or her monastic life, have given time to puzzle them out, or have got one of the community to explain them. Ever after, the whole text, or a whole *sententia* from the text, could have been called to mind by nine or ten runes read in sequence.[58]

The Ruthwell Cross demands to be seen in the context of the diocese of Hexham, or of the diocese of Whithorn that had been recently founded (731), with the cooperation of Bishop Acca of Hexham. Hexham had a special devotion to the cult of the cross and that of the Virgin Mary. The Hexham devotion to the cross was based on the Hexham monks' yearly commemoration of King Oswald at the site of his victory, in the sign of the cross, at Heavenfield. In his *Historia ecclesiastica,* Bede records that this cult had been in existence for a long time (*multo iam tempore*), but that as part of its recent development, a chapel had recently (*nuper*) been built at the site.[59] Acca himself probably commissioned that new chapel, perhaps in the late 720s. We know how the particular Hexham devotion to the Virgin Mary began. Returning from Rome in early 705, the seriously

58. Ó Carragáin, "Ruthwell Crucifixion Poem," p. 10.
59. Bede, *Hist. eccles.* 3.2, pp. 214–18.

ill Wilfrid had a vision of St. Michael the archangel at Meaux in Francia. In the vision, St. Michael told Wilfrid that the Virgin Mary had successfully interceded with God to grant Wilfrid some extra years of life, so that Wilfrid would have time to build a church in her honor. After the vision, Wilfrid's first act was to call out for Acca, his companion and chaplain, to tell him what he had seen and heard.[60] Wilfrid's angelic vision is best understood in the context of the election of Pope John VII on 1 March 705 (that is, either shortly before Wilfrid received his visionary message or shortly after it). John VII proclaimed himself, in Latin and Greek inscriptions, to be *servus Mariae,* "the slave of Mary"; evidence of his devotion to the Virgin survives in his frescoes in Santa Maria Antiqua in the Roman Forum (where he placed the bilingual inscriptions just mentioned) and in the surviving fragments of his funerary chapel in honor of Mary at St. Peter's basilica. These commissions were recorded in his official biography, known to and used by Bede.[61] In effect, St. Michael the archangel inspired St. Wilfrid to reproduce at Hexham the very latest Roman devotion. In this, Hexham may have been more up-to-date than the rest of Northumbria, with the possible exceptions of Wearmouth and Jarrow and Whithorn. The Hexham cults of the cross and the Virgin Mary, as developed by Bishop Acca after Wilfrid's death, provide a relevant intellectual background for the Ruthwell Cross: it combines devotion to the cross with a uniquely rich sequence of scenes celebrating Mary. The *titulus* for the Annunciation panel, on the first side of the lower stone, proclaims that Mary is "blessed among women."[62] The now fragmentary runic *titulus* for the Visitation panel, on the first side of the upper stone, develops the theme that Mary is "blessed among women" by relating her to other "ladies" including "marþa" of Bethany.[63] Mary is represented a third time on the Return from Egypt panel, on the second side of the lower stone.[64]

60. Eddius Stephanus, *Life of Bishop Wilfrid,* pp. 122–23.
61. Nordhagen, "Mosaics of John VII"; Nordhagen, "John VII's Adoration of the Cross in S. Maria Antiqua"; Nordhagen, *Frescoes of John VII.* On the possible influence of John VII's artistic commissions on contemporary Northumbrian art, see Nordhagen, "Carved Marble Pilaster in the Vatican Grottoes"; Nordhagen, "Italo-Byzantine Painter at the Scriptorium of Ceolfrith"; Nordhagen, *Codex Amiatinus and the Byzantine Element.*
62. To the left of the figure of Gabriel the letters "T[E] . . . B[E]" can be read. Thus, with reference to Luke 1:28, the *titulus* for the Annunciation panel can be reconstructed as: "[top margin]: [+] INGRESSUS ANG[EL]us / [right margin:] ad eam dixit ave gratia plena dominus / [Left Margin:] T[E]cum B[E]nedicta tu in mulieribus."
63. The inspiration for this link between the Virgin and Martha and Mary of Bethany is clearly the Mass for the Dormition of the Virgin on 15 August, where Luke 10:38–42, the episode of Martha and Mary, was read to celebrate Mary's entry into heaven: "Mary has chosen the better part, and it shall not be taken from her" (Luke 10:42): see Ó Carragáin, *City of Rome,* p. 35.
64. See Ó Carragáin, "Necessary Distance," pp. 196–97.

Such close association between devotion to the Virgin and devotion to the cross is consistent with what we know of Hexham in the time of Bishop Acca (709–31). Even if the Ruthwell Cross were to be assigned to a slightly later date, important local cults inspired by St. Wilfrid and developed by Bishop Acca are unlikely to have ceased abruptly when Acca was deposed in or about 731. One is tempted to ask where Acca may have gone between his expulsion from Hexham and his death (and burial at Hexham) about 740. Perhaps to the shrine of St. Ninian, whose cult was recently developed at Whithorn by Bishop Pehthelm, another member of Bede's scholarly circle?[65] Or to the large monastery at Hoddom with its many standing crosses?[66] Or to a smaller monastery such as Ruthwell, near Hoddom and perhaps dependent on it, with its single great cross?[67]

It is likely that at Ruthwell the liturgical *cantatores* (cantors), at least, were in touch with Hexham. Bishop Acca was described by Bede as "a most expert cantor, very learned in sacred writings" ("cantator peritissimus, in litteris sanctis doctissimus"); he was assisted by Maban, whom Bede described as "a really outstanding cantor" ("cantatorem . . . egregium").[68] Bede tells us that Maban had been instructed in methods of singing by the successors of the disciples of St. Gregory in Kent, and that Acca brought him to Hexham to teach him and his people. Acca kept Maban at Hexham for twelve years (perhaps 719–31?) teaching them such music as they did not know, while the music that they once knew and that had begun to deteriorate by long use or by neglect was restored to its original form.[69] This description reminds us that liturgical chant was in this period an oral tradition, like the separate vernacular oral tradition that gave us the Ruthwell runic poem: there was as yet no way of writing down music. Acca and Maban were familiar with Roman traditions and considered them important. To understand the Ruthwell Cross we must try to appreciate the ways in which the text of a song would have been read by a cantor like Maban, a man to whom song and chant were natural everyday forms of expression. The ideal eighth-century reader of the Ruthwell poem, and indeed the ideal editor for all the *tituli* of the monument, is perhaps the *cantator* of whatever small ecclesiastical community then inhabited the Ruthwell settlement: some mute inglorious Maban there may rest.

65. On the cult of St. Ninian, see P. Hill, *Whithorn and St Ninian.*

66. Pending the publication of the definitive report on Hoddom some ten miles from Ruthwell, see Lowe, "New Light on the Anglian 'Minster' at Hoddom"; Lowe, *Angels, Fools and Tyrants.*

67. The life of Acca is conveniently summarized in Bede, *Venerabilis Baedae opera historica,* 2:329–30.

68. Bede, *Hist. eccles.* 5.20, pp. 530–33.

69. Bede, *Hist. eccles.* 5.20, pp. 530–33.

In monastic culture reading was often seen as serving a deeper process by which texts, and even more so chants and songs, were assimilated. We can find visual evidence of this in the gradual elaboration of important texts in the Gospels, from the Book of Durrow to the Book of Kells. In the Insular tradition Gospel texts were progressively elaborated, not in the direction of legibility, but rather in the direction of symbolism and mystery. The Gospel incipits in Durrow are all easy to read, but those of Kells assume that a monastic reader already knows the text and wishes, not to read it for information, but to be reminded of the immense implications of each Gospel. Similarly, the "XPI autem generatio" text (Matthew 1:18) was elaborated from the modest clarity of Durrow to the cosmic mystery of Kells.[70] Monastic artists could rely on educated members of their community having the major scriptural and liturgical texts by heart.[71]

The eighth-century Sacramentary of Gellone provides a good example of such reliance. In the Roman liturgy, the preface to the Canon of the Mass was (and is) the classical expression of the idea that, as the liturgy is a sharing in Christ's own prayer to the Father, each liturgical celebration on earth participates in the liturgy of heaven.[72] The Gellone scribe wrote the opening sentences of the second part of the preface in normal Latin script, using the word divisions propagated by Insular monks. The last sentence in Latin script is the request that our voices should be joined with the songs of the angels in the heavenly liturgy. But when that song begins, when he comes to the Hebrew word "Sabaoth," the scribe begins to write his Latin text in Greek characters. The reason is decidedly not that he expects his text to be read only by a celestial or "divine audience."[73] The reverse is true. By this stage of the Mass, the celebrant using the sacramentary is singing a solemn and invariable chant. As he knows the chant by heart, Greek letters would provide the celebrant with ample cues. Confident that this would be so, the scribe felt free to symbolize the antiq-

70. See G. Henderson, *From Durrow to Kells,* pp. 70–71, 104–05, 124, 159–61.

71. The classic account of monastic memory is Leclercq, *Love of Learning,* pp. 76–93.

72. The standard discussions include Peterson, *Angels and the Liturgy;* Emery, *Communion of Saints,* pp. 14–31, 65–75, 184–227; Markus, *End of Ancient Christianity,* pp. 21–26.

73. Elisabeth Okasha suggested that Ruthwell was intended to be read not by men but by "a divine audience": "Literacy in Anglo-Saxon England," p. 88 (repr., pp. 73–74). But liturgical celebration was based on precisely the opposite idea: that since the Incarnation (and precisely since the "Gloria in excelsis" was sung on Christmas Night, Luke 2:8–14) men and angels had praised God together. The idea that the Ruthwell Cross inscriptions were intended, not for an audience of living human beings, but for a divine audience was first suggested by P. Wormald, "Uses of Literacy in Anglo-Saxon England," p. 96. Wormald argues that the Ruthwell poem "might just as well have been addressed to the Redeemer himself," a suggestion trenchantly and convincingly dismissed by Ray Page: "In no way is it addressed to the Deity: it implies a human readership" (*Runes and Runic Inscriptions,* p. 297).

uity and solemnity of the Latin chant by writing it out in the ancient and graceful Greek alphabet, while the artist adorned the sung text with two angels: the cherubim or seraphim to whom the chant refers. Their figures link the "Sanctus" chant to the figure of Christ on the cross. Christ dying on the cross performed the fundamental act of prayer in which Christians participated by means of the liturgy. To symbolize this, representations of the Crucifixion always showed Christ's hands outstretched in prayer, in the *orans* posture. At this point of the Mass, the celebrant's hands would also be outstretched in the *orans* gesture, as he chanted:

> Caeli caelorumque virtutis ac beata seraphyn socia exultatione concaelebrant, cum quibus et nostras uoces ut admitti iubeas deprecamur, supplici confessione dicentes:
> Sanctus sanctus sanctus, dominus deus SABAOTH PLENI SUNT KELI ET TERRA KLORIA TVA. HOSANNA IN EXKELSIS. BENEDIKTUS QUI UENIT IN NOM DNI. HOSANNA IN EXKELSIS.[74]
>
> (The heavens and the Virtues of the heavens and the blessed Seraphim cocelebrate with a joy united to our own: we beg that you would allow our voices to be joined to theirs, saying in prayerful confession:
> Holy holy holy, Lord God SABAOTH; HEAVEN AND EARTH ARE FILLED WITH YOUR GLORY. HOSANNA IN THE HIGHEST. BLESSED IS HE THAT COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD. HOSANNA IN THE HIGHEST.)

The Ruthwell verse *tituli* are similarly symbolic. They surround the vine scrolls, the most important symbol on the cross, with a song that brings out what the vine scroll implies: that Christ long ago poured forth his blood on the tree of the cross in a uniquely heroic action that restored Paradise for humankind. This restored happiness is symbolized by the birds and animals feasting on the vine scrolls. The designer knew that any small group of runes read in sequence would act as a musical cue, reminding literate monks or nuns of oral versions of the song they knew. Once they identified where, in the song, a particular word or phrase came, it would have been easy for them to make out the rest of the inscription by chanting their version of the song and seeing where it was reflected in the newly edited runic *tituli.* Monastic readers are likely to have been particularly intrigued by any phrases in the edited runes that did not correspond to the oral versions of the song they were used to singing. Any

74. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS lat. 12048, fol. 143v, ed. Dumas, *Liber Sacramentorum Gellonensis,* 1:253 (where the Greek letters are transcribed in Greek capitals); see also vol. 2, fig. 99.

such phrases would have required, and perhaps received, a particularly attentive *praelectio.*

Monastic reliance on liturgical reminiscence can be seen, not only in elaborate texts like Gellone, but in the simplest and briefest inscriptions. In the pillar with an inscribed cross at Reask (Co. Kerry) the cross is provided with a laconic *titulus,* "dne": an invocation to Christ (fig. 6).[75] With perfect economy, the *titulus* identifies the cross as the symbol of Christ, the sign that will appear in the heavens before the Last Day to announce his Second Coming. As the vocative "Domine" provided the *incipit* of many liturgical prayers, the three inscribed letters would have reminded educated monastic readers of whatever sacramentary they used at Reask. The reminder encouraged them to pray, either in Latin or in the Irish vernacular. The word "dne," which also encouraged them to identify the eschatological symbol of the cross with Christ himself, suggested the mode of their prayer: to Christ through his symbol the cross.

When they discussed the *tituli* to the vine scrolls at Ruthwell, those scholars who found their layout absurd mistook the nature of what they had before them. As philologists and epigraphers, they were trained to look at, and decipher, inscriptions, but the Ruthwell poem is not primarily an inscription, to be read in isolation. Instead, it is primarily a *titulus,* a caption designed to complement, indeed, perhaps even to be a part of, the two great inhabited vine scrolls or trees of life that cover the narrow faces of the lower stone. Page, Stanley, and Meyvaert never asked why the uniquely original crucifixion narrative of the *tituli* should have been inscribed around vine scrolls and wrote as if the vine scrolls were merely decorative: if not quite invisible, at least an irrelevance to "the runic verses" that happen to surround them. But this was to misunderstand fundamentally the design of the narrow sides of the Ruthwell Cross, and to fail to understand the significance of the pioneering study by Franz Dietrich, who already in 1865 had written eloquently on the symbolism of the vine scrolls and saw their relevance to the poem inscribed around them.[76] There is a meaningful contrast between the layout of the poem and the vine scrolls for which it provides *tituli:* while the poem reads downward and describes a heroic death, each image of the tree of life, inhabited by feeding animals and birds, attracts the eyes of the audience upward. In this way the heroic narrative of each *titulus* is balanced, immediately and consistently, by images of sustenance and life. The two runic *tituli* of the foliage scrolls fulfill the normal function of early medieval verse *tituli.*

75. See Okasha and Forsyth, *Early Christian Inscriptions of Munster,* pp. 23–24, where various uses of the word "dominus" in Munster inscriptions are listed.

76. Dietrich, *De Cruce Ruthwellensi,* pp. 5–7.

They do not act simply as identifying labels: their narrative expands the significance of the iconographic image of which they form an essential element. The narrative provides supplementary considerations that the onlooker, having memorized the *tituli* or reminded himself of them, can carry away in his memory as part of the image itself.[77] They supplement the central visual icon of the vine scrolls with a verbal icon (itself visually pleasing), a prosopopoeia that makes the whole Ruthwell monument, upper and lower stones, identify itself with what it was always designed to represent, the Holy Cross. In short, the narrow sides of the Ruthwell Cross provide a unified symbol, at once verbal and visual, of the unity of the Easter triduum (from Good Friday to Easter Sunday): the Passover in which Christ died, was buried, defeated the powers of darkness, and rose again from the dead to bring life to the world. For the Ruthwell community of the eighth century, this life was mediated through the *sacramenta* of baptism, penance, and Eucharist: and these communal rituals provide the key to the iconographic programs of the broad sides.[78] The Ruthwell Cross primarily represents a life-giving tree, at once world tree and *lignum Domini*.[79] If so, the vine scrolls and their runic *tituli* were designed to be its heart, and without them the cross cannot be understood in its entirety. They symbolize the progression from death to life, the *Paschale sacramentum* at the heart of the symbolic variety of the broad sides that, in their turn, represent the sacramental means of entering into the paschal mystery.[80]

To conclude: arguments that separate the poem from its iconographic context or that view its layout as absurd provide no evidence whatever that at Ruthwell the runic *tituli* to the vine scrolls were added later, nor that the lower stone was already erected when the *tituli* were inscribed. They may with confidence be consigned to the lumber room of superseded Ruthwell scholarship. Two scholars, Rosemary Cramp and Ute Schwab, each a *mulier fortis,* provide far more reliable guides to the intentions and achievement of the Ruthwell designer. To lay out the *tituli* in columns of

77. This function of ancient and early medieval verse *tituli* is amply demonstrated by Arnulf, *Versus ad Picturas*. He has a good discussion of the theoretical issues raised by this verse genre, pp. 9–29. As Arnulf puts it, the relation of verse *tituli* to the images they accompany can be not merely explanatory, but also expository and allusive ("der erklärend, auslegend oder hinweisend sein mag," p. 20).

78. See Ó Carragáin, "Necessary Distance."

79. See the excellent discussion of the non-Christian religious significance of trees in ancient Northumbria by North, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature*, pp. 273–96.

80. For the phrase "paschale sacramentum," see the Easter Vigil prayers in the Old Gelasian sacramentary, ed. Mohlberg, *Liber Sacramentorum Romanae Aeclesiae Ordinis Anni Circuli*, par. 434, p. 70: "[per] paschale sacramentum Abraham puerum tuum uniuersarum, sicut iurasti, gencium efficis patrem."



Figure 1. The Bewcastle Cross, detail. University of Durham, Department of Archaeology. Photograph: Tom Middlemass.



Figure 2. The Ruthwell Cross, detail. University of Durham, Department of Archaeology. Photograph: Tom Middlemass.

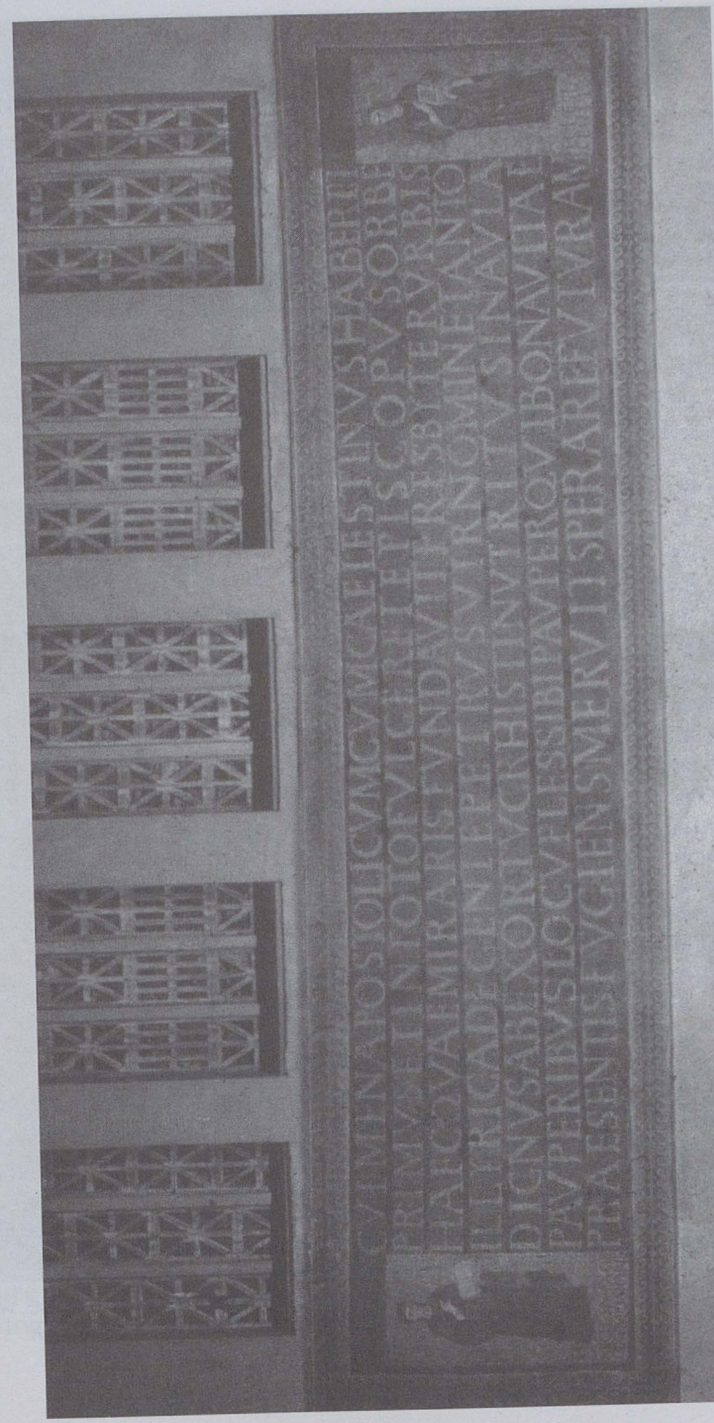


Figure 3. Rome, Santa Sabina, Dedicatory Inscription. Photograph: Santa Sabina, Dominican Community.



Figure 4. St. Peter's, Vatican. Reliquary Cross of Justin II, reverse with inscription. Photograph: Fabbrica di San Pietro, Rome.



Figure 5. Rome, Santa Maria in Trastevere, Madonna della Clemenza. Photograph: Soprintendenza archeologica di Roma.



Figure 6. Reask (Co. Kerry) inscribed cross-slab. Photograph: Archaeology Department, National University of Ireland Cork.

runes in *scriptura continua* made sense within the Byzantine and Roman traditions identified by Ute Schwab. The layout was consonant with the many other reminiscences of the liturgy on the cross. The layout was also eminently practical. It ensured that later, when the lower stone was erected, the runes would be the right way up. It coped excellently with the problem that the borders of the lower stone grew broader from top to bottom. It made sense within an early medieval monastic context, in which texts were regularly chanted, and interpreted with reference to communal liturgical actions regularly performed, and thus familiar to all members of the community. The Ruthwell designer provided all the major panels with *tituli* that recalled intoned lections and well-known chants, in Latin and in English. Scholars may proceed with confidence on the sensible hypothesis to which Rosemary Cramp has always held: that the vine scrolls and their runic verse *tituli* formed from the beginning the central element in the design of the Ruthwell Cross, the symbolic heart of the monument.