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CHAPTER 16

THE NECESSARY DISTANCE: *IMITATIO ROMAE* AND THE RUTHWELL CROSS

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This chapter examines a paradox. It is difficult to find, in the pre-Carolingian Europe of the 7th and 8th centuries, any parallel to the intellectual sophistication of the Ruthwell cross. Yet this monument was situated, not in a great centre of Northumbrian monastic culture, but in a border land. It is reasonable to suppose that it should be seen in some relationship to the Northumbrian expansion which in the 730s saw Pehthelm, a friend and correspondent of Bede, installed as the first Anglo-Saxon bishop of the ancient British monastery of *Candida Casa* or Whithorn (Cramp 1960, 12; 1995c; Mac Lean 1992, 70; Howlett 1992, 92). But why should a monument erected at the periphery of Northumbrian culture be the least provincial, the most urbane, of early English monuments? I shall argue that the quality of the monument may be bound up precisely with its apparent peripherality. Being at a distance from controversies and from great libraries, and preserving a salutary distance, appropriate to a religious community, from local Northumbrian politics, may have contributed to the contemplative quality, and hence the sophistication, of the Ruthwell cross.

It is remarkable that the Ruthwell cross can be read as a para-liturgical document. Its iconography and inscriptions are alike closely related to liturgical practices. The liturgy of the 8th century was changing fast, and this may provide some additional evidence for dating the cross. In the course of a short chapter, I shall restrict myself to listing four of the principal ways in which the 8th-century Roman liturgy is relevant to the Ruthwell cross:

(a) Both the Ruthwell and the neighbouring Bewcastle crosses have prominent *Agnus Dei* panels. At Bewcastle, a standing John the Baptist points with his right

hand at the *Agnus Dei*, which he cradles in his left arm; the existence of his pointing finger was confirmed in July 1996, on an excursion during the conference on the Golden Age of Northumbria, by Jane Hawkes, Catherine Karkov and Jim Higgins. The weathering of the Bewcastle cross renders it impossible to rely on photographic evidence about such details, but these three scholars confirmed John's pointing finger by close visual examination and by touch: by carefully exploring that part of the panel with their own fingers. At Ruthwell, John the Baptist again points across his body at the *Agnus Dei*, which he cradles in his left arm. The existence of the pointing finger (now broken off at the upper knuckle) was confirmed in a close examination of the panel by Jane Hawkes, Ross Trench-Jellicoe, and the present author in July 1997 (our conclusions will be fully presented in a forthcoming joint article). At Ruthwell, there is a clear continuity between the folds of John's broad pallium visible just above and just below the pointing hand. Therefore it was clear that John was cradling no other object above his pointing hand. In neither the Bewcastle nor the Ruthwell panel could any of these scholars discern any trace of a book (as proposed by Meyvaert 1982; reiterated in Meyvaert 1992, 112–25). At Ruthwell, the *Agnus Dei* scene is placed firmly in a Eucharistic context: just above the recognition of Christ in the desert by the beasts, and the scene in which Saints Paul and Anthony 'broke bread in the desert'. To give an *Agnus Dei* image such prominence, and such a Eucharistic context, suggests that it was particularly important to whatever small clerical or monastic communities lived at Ruthwell and Bewcastle. The most likely context for such familiarity is that these communities sang the chant, '*Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis*' at the Mass. As this chant was only introduced into the Roman liturgy at the very end of the 7th century, the recurrence of prominent *Agnus Dei* images on both monuments suggests that these monuments were erected in the 8th century (see Ó Carragáin 1978).

(b) At Ruthwell, a central image in the Eucharistic sequence is the adoration of Christ by the beasts (Figs 16.1 and 16.2). At Ruthwell as at Bewcastle this panel was placed directly below the *Agnus Dei* scene. In the Old Roman liturgy, two responsory chants, each familiar from separate daily or weekly use, were sung together at one crucial moment: the ceremony of readings which at the ninth hour on Good Friday commemorated the death of Christ. The first of these chants was the Old Latin Canticle of Habbakuk. The canticle would have been familiar to any conscientious cleric, who should have sung it every week on Friday at Lauds. On Good Friday, as well as being sung in the morning at Lauds, the opening verses were sung, to a much more complex musical setting, at the ninth hour, as a responsory after the first Old Testament reading. These opening verses included the words 'You will be known in the midst of two animals'. The second of these chants was Psalm 90 (Vulgate numbering), '*Qui habitat*'. Our hypothetical conscientious cleric would have been even more familiar with this psalm, as he should have sung it every night just before going to bed; in the Roman liturgy it was always sung at compline. At the Good Friday Adoration of



Fig 16.1. Detail of panel depicting Christ Adored by the Beasts. Ruthwell cross. (Photograph: Ross Trench-Jellicoe)



Fig 16.2. Detail of inscription accompanying panel depicting Christ Adored by the Beasts. Ruthwell cross. (Photograph: Ross Trench-Jellicoe)

the Cross in the Old Roman liturgy, Psalm 90 was sung as a responsory after the second Old Testament reading. It included the words, 'You will walk on the asp and the basilisk, and tread down the lion and the dragon' (Psalm 90.13). At both Ruthwell and Bewcastle, the sculptors have referred to the iconography which traditionally represented this verse. But they avoided representing lions or dragons and they converted their anonymous beasts from evil to good. By transforming the traditional iconography, the sculptors were able to refer also to the Canticle of Habbakuk. At Ruthwell Christ is presented as recognized by, and between, the two animals. They cross their inner paws between their bodies in a clear visual reference to the *Chi* symbol, the first Greek letter of his Messianic title, Christ (Fig 16.1). The details of the crossed paws were carefully presented by the sculptors. The paw of the animal on the left crosses over the paw of the animal on the right. Each paw is equipped with three pads: they are animal paws, not human fingers. These paws can be closely observed (and felt) by the onlooker. As the cross now stands, they come some 5 ft above ground level: perhaps, eye-level for a medieval audience. The Ruthwell community encouraged literate onlookers to recognize in the animals' crossed paws a visual pun.

The extensive inscription to the panel consists not of one sentence but two. These two sentences are spatially distinguished from each other in an epigraphic equivalent of the manuscript practice of layout *per cola et commata*: distinguishing between sentences by laying out each new sentence on a new line (Parkes 1993, 14–15; Fig 16.2). The first sentence runs across the top margin of the panel, and continues down the right side. The second begins at the top of the left side of the panel, runs down that side, and is completed on the right side, after the end of the first sentence. The first sentence consists of two two-stress phrases, linked together by alliteration. This sentence links the *nomen sacrum* to a Latin formula composed from the vocabulary of the psalms (cf Vulgate Ps 9.9; 66.5; 95.13 etc), in order to form a single acclamation, the metrical equivalent of a line of Old English verse:

IHS XPS IVDEX AEQVITATIS

The Ruthwell community may well have found this metrical *sententia* suitable for chanting, communally or in solo, as an acclamation. As its *incipit* (the *nomen sacrum*) has pride of place on the top margin of the panel, the sacred name functions as a *titulus*, directing our attention to the crossed paws below where the *Chi* of the *nomen sacrum* is wittily imitated by dumb beasts in the desert. In this way the prophecy is fulfilled: Christ's Messianic title is acknowledged, precisely, between their bodies: '*in medio duorum animalium*'. It is likely that a similar visual pun existed at Bewcastle. Although thirteen centuries of rain have practically washed away the crossed paws, there was space for them, and traces of them remain. At Bewcastle this visual reminiscence of the *nomen sacrum* was encouraged by the runic name '+ *gessus kristtus*' inscribed above the panel (Ó Carragáin 1987b, 16–17).

Psalm 90 was sung at the ninth hour on Good Friday only in the Old Roman liturgy. In Romano-Frankish use it was gradually replaced, from the late 8th century, by Psalm 139, '*Eripe me*' (Hesbert 1935, no 78a, lix n 4). Thus it is clear that the extremely original panels at Ruthwell and Bewcastle would have made most sense in the context of the Old Roman liturgy. Here, the liturgy may suggest a *terminus ad quem*, however tentative, for both the Ruthwell and Bewcastle monuments: perhaps before the end of the 8th century, and certainly before Carolingian liturgical chant reached Northumbria.

(c) The relation of the Anglo-Saxon poem at Ruthwell to the iconography of that monument also suggests a date in the 8th century. In the third column of runes (across the top and down the right hand side of the vine-scroll) the followers of Christ gather at the Cross on Calvary ('eager ones came thither from afar, the noble ones [came] together'). It is reasonable to suggest that this may be a reference to the way in which, at Rome for the ninth hour on Good Friday, the papal liturgy involved a solemn procession to the Basilica of Holy Cross in Jerusalem to adore a relic of the True Cross. This symbolic papal pilgrimage to the Roman equivalent of Calvary was imitated throughout Europe in the 8th century. One of the most original features of the Ruthwell poem is the way it describes the Cross as bowing, presumably to present the body of Christ to his followers (if we accept the close parallel between this line of the Ruthwell poem and line 59 of *The Dream of the Rood* in the Vercelli Book, 'I bowed [to the hands of the men]'). The likelihood that this detail once existed in the Ruthwell poem is confirmed by the final column of runes (on the left hand side of the vine-scroll). This fourth column describes those followers as contemplating Christ's body ('Wounded with arrows, they laid him down, limb-weary. . . . There they looked on [the Lord of Heaven]'). The poem (apart from a brief *incipit* at the top of the lower stone above the vine-scroll on each of the narrow sides) is inscribed in four great columns of runic script. The order in which these unique columns must be read directs the reader around the cross, clockwise or sunwise (see Ó Carragáin 1988b, 11–12, 50–2). It is natural, then, to expect a relationship between the final sentence of the poem (the fourth column of runes), and the second half of the iconography, on the broad side just to the left of that fourth column. This broad side contains the series of images we have already discussed, connected with the recognition of Christ in the Eucharist (Paul and Anthony, Christ acclaimed by the beasts, the *Agnus Dei*). As we have seen, one of these Eucharistic images, Christ acclaimed by the beasts, in addition refers to the two chants which were sung, in the Old Roman liturgy of the early 8th century, at the Adoration of the Cross on Good Friday.

The Good Friday ceremony of readings was subject to much experiment during the 8th century. Should the readings and chants accompany the Adoration of the Cross, as in the papal liturgy at Rome (Andrieu 1931, 3, 271–3, *Ordo XXIII*, pars 12–22), or should the readings come first and the adoration follow (op. cit. 3, 291–4, *Ordo XXIV*, pars 22–37)? Should the ceremony take place in the chief

church of a town, or in a special church at which the people should gather, in imitation of the papal synaxis at Santa Croce in Gerusalemme in Rome (op. cit. 3, 291–2, *Ordo XXIV*, par 22)? Above all, it is clear that, in the 8th century, clerics working within the Roman tradition tried to combine the Adoration of the Cross as closely as possible with the reception of the Eucharist. To receive Communion directly after the Adoration of the Cross was a recent innovation of the late 7th century, inspired by Eastern devotion. At Rome it was a feature of the presbyteral basilicas (such as St Peter's or Sta Maria Maggiore), not of the conservative papal liturgy in the Lateran; it thus appears in the earliest Gelasian sacramentaries (Mohlberg 1960, 64–7). The fact that on the Ruthwell cross a vernacular poem describes the Cross handing the body of Christ to his followers may provide us with a precious piece of evidence about the Good Friday liturgy at Ruthwell. This totally original narrative detail would make sense if we assume that Christians at Ruthwell in some way 'received' the body of Christ at the end of their Good Friday ceremony of the Adoration of the Cross, perhaps as prescribed in the early Gelasian sacramentaries. The design of the lower stone made it natural for the viewer to move from the fourth column of the poem to the adjoining Eucharistic iconography; and poem and iconography, seen in relation to each other, suggest that for the Ruthwell community the Good Friday Adoration of the Cross was related to and completed by the reception of the Eucharist. This liturgy suggests a date. In the 8th century, the unique design of the Ruthwell monument would have made perfect sense, as a particular expression of the general clerical interest, throughout western Europe, in how the Adoration of the Cross on Good Friday should be closely combined with reception of the Eucharist.

(d) We have considerable evidence on the Ruthwell cross that the Ruthwell community celebrated the new Marian feasts which gradually came into the Roman liturgy from the East in the latter half of the 7th century. One of these was the Annunciation, which was celebrated on 25 March, the spring equinox in the Julian calendar. At Ruthwell, the Annunciation panel is inscribed precisely with the verse from Luke's gospel which was most used, in various forms, as the basis for antiphons for the new feast of the Annunciation (Luke 1.28; cf Hesbert 1935, no 33, 42–5; Ó Carragáin 1995, 631, n 3). Another of these new feasts was the Nativity of the Virgin, on 8 September. Only in the Roman liturgy, and only in the late 7th and early 8th centuries, was the Visitation story read at Mass on the Nativity of the Virgin. In the course of the 8th century, the Visitation lection was gradually replaced by a more appropriate Mass lection, the genealogy of Christ from Matthew's gospel. The greatest of the new Marian feasts was the Dormition or Assumption of the Virgin on 15 August. The lection for this great feast was the story of Martha and Mary from Luke's gospel. Thus, if indeed the name Martha does appear on the Ruthwell Visitation panel, it by no means indicates, as Howlett (1974) and Meyvaert (1992, 138) have argued, that that panel does not represent the Visitation. Instead a reference to Martha of Bethany

on a Visitation panel would insert that panel more firmly than ever within the early 8th-century way of celebrating the new Marian feasts (see Ó Carragáin 1994a, 34–6). A 'Martha' reference on the Visitation panel would, for 8th-century clerics, make that panel more Marian, not less. The panel would then refer to two new Marian feasts which fell less than three weeks apart each autumn. With a reference to 'Martha', the panel would also have become an epitome of Mary's historical importance, uniting the gospel lection read on her Nativity and which included her great canticle the Magnificat (which she sang at the Visitation; Luke 1.39–47) with the gospel read on the celebration of her Dormition (Luke 10.38–42). The four Marian feasts (Candlemass, 2 February; Annunciation of the Lord, 25 March; Dormition of the Virgin, 15 August; and Nativity of the Virgin, 8 September) were made into a special set or cycle by Pope Sergius I, at the very end of the 7th century, with solemn processions from the Forum to Sta Maria Maggiore. Sergius's action was known to Bede in the first decades of the 8th century. On the first side of the Ruthwell iconography, we seem to have references to three of the new Marian feasts: the Annunciation, the Nativity of the Virgin (through the Visitation scene) and her Dormition (through the possible Martha reference). Again, the liturgy directs our attention to the first half or middle of the 8th century, when these feasts were recent innovations, and when just these three lections were used at Rome for three of the new Marian feasts (for the early history of the feasts in England, see Clayton 1990, 30–40).

All four pieces of evidence adduced in this brief and partial survey suggest that the monument was erected after the beginning of the 8th century and probably before the end of that century. But it is advisable to be tentative about dating the cross by the liturgy; I put forward these four examples as suggestive, not as conclusive, evidence for dating. Liturgical evidence may occasionally provide a reasonably firm *terminus a quo* (as in the case of the *Agnus Dei* panels, discussed above). However, we can be much less sure about any *terminus ad quem*: in an isolated *monasteriolum* there was little to prevent the community from hanging on to the chants it had always sung, long after these chants had been superseded at great monastic centres. I do not wish to propose the liturgy as a solution to the problem of dating the Ruthwell cross. It does no more than provide confirmatory evidence to back up indications from other disciplines.

The hypothesis of a liturgical context for the Ruthwell cross is more important than any help it may offer in the question of dating. It encourages us to think in a more realistic manner than previously possible about the likely commissioners and early audiences of the Ruthwell cross and the associated Bewcastle cross. The liturgy was a series of actions, performed communally, at set times (daily, weekly or yearly), and to set music. To perform these actions correctly, a clerical community above all had to cultivate the art of memory. The library of necessary books would have been very small, certainly fewer than a dozen. These books must have been used primarily as aids to memory, as works of occasional reference out of which the song and actions of a living liturgy had to be recreated

by the community itself. As there was in this period no way of writing music down, the chants accompanying the liturgical actions all had to be preserved in the memory. In such a situation, the relations between word and music would have been far more intimate than anything we are used to. The easiest way to recall a liturgical chant must have been to remember the relevant *incipit* (opening phrase: '*Kyrie*'; '*Gloria*'; '*Credo*'; '*Agnus Dei*') or other phrases from the text. Conversely, a convenient way to recall the words of a liturgical text must often have been to recall the music to which the text was chanted (see Ó Carragáin 1994a, 24–5).

Liturgical performance provides a context within which we can imagine deep and rich learning without our having to imagine a large and rich library. Depth and richness would have come above all from the way in which the liturgy must have shaped each day, each week, and each year for any group of conscientious clerics, monks or nuns. We must try to imagine ourselves within a world of experience in which a phrase like '*in medio duorum animalium innotesceris*' recalled, not a page reference in a Bible (the Old Latin text of Habbakuk 3.3), but a particular time each week (Friday, at sunrise), and a particular piece of music (the tone to which the canticle was chanted). In the same world of experience that phrase would (at any time of the year) carry, latent within it, a memory of the special day (Good Friday, at the ninth hour) when it was sung to particularly elaborate music, and when it was associated with the other great text, sung every single night but also, on Good Friday, solemnly sung just after '*in medio duorum animalium*': '*Super aspidem et basiliscum ambulabis; et conculcabis leonem et draconem*' (Ps 90.13).

The liturgy was of necessity a do-it-yourself art. Ceremonies had to be adapted to the needs of the local community, however remote or small that community was. You learned about how to do the liturgy by listening, if possible, to someone who had been there (either Rome, or some great centre such as York or Wearmouth-Jarrow or Hexham). Even when such oral traditions were written down and have survived, they have come down to us in informal, makeshift documents (the classic analysis is Andrieu 1931, 2, xvii–xlix). Any group who wished to enact the liturgy had to make their own decisions about how to adapt details to the local situation. Thus a basic principle about early medieval liturgical action is that in it, imitation of the model also involved its profound adaptation and, therefore, a considerable amount of independence from it. Local communities must often have had to imagine what their models were like, even though they had never seen the models themselves. We may possibly have an example of this in the Bewcastle cross. It is clear that one of its central functions is to commemorate aristocratic patrons. The runic text which fills one of the large panels of its west side seems to have begun with some such words as 'this victory sign was set up by . . .' and to have ended with some formula like 'pray for their souls' (Page 1973, 148). I have suggested elsewhere that this panel of runes may have been put to liturgical use. The text on the panel was clearly not designed to

be read out at Mass: the inscription was in English, after all, not in Latin, and in runes (with their associations of secrecy and mystery), not in Roman letters. But precisely in the Roman liturgy, the names of the living and dead to be commemorated were not read out aloud. Instead of this, the priest usually commemorated them implicitly, by pausing at the appropriate points of the Mass for a moment of mental prayer while gazing at a diptych or at a *liber vitae*. If Mass were ever celebrated within sight of the west side of the Bewcastle cross, the priest and congregation could make an implicit commemoration of all their benefactors (not just those actually listed on the cross) by simply glancing at the cross for a moment of silent prayer at the appropriate moments of the Mass. The very inaccessibility of runic script could have contributed to its symbolic value. The runic panel may have been valued not simply because it preserved the names of certain powerful patrons, but also because it suggested the deeper mystery of the *liber vitae*, a mystery also suggested by the closed scroll in Christ's left hand in the panel just above. There, Christ significantly blesses the scroll (and perhaps also the audience) with his raised right hand (Ó Carragáin 1987b, 38).

In the early medieval Mass, the liturgical commemorations of the living and the dead were often actually known as 'the diptychs'. This was because, ideally, the names of those to be commemorated were recorded on two leaves of material, which folded to form an elementary book. On occasion, ancient ivory diptychs, originally distributed by imperial consuls to their friends and clients at the beginning of their term of office, were reused as liturgical diptychs (for a list of surviving examples, see Vezin 1971, 34–5). Because these ivory diptychs were of great value, some of them have been preserved and have come down to us, often with early medieval lists of those to be commemorated inscribed on the inner, undecorated leaves (for a good illustration of one such reused diptych, that of Boethius at Brescia, see Hubert et al. 1969, 134–5).

Let us assume for a moment that the Bewcastle community, of whatever kind it was, had never seen an ivory diptych. Even so, it is very likely that they would have known the liturgical term 'the diptychs', and heard about the objects which this phrase signified (for references to diptychs on the Rothbury cross, see Hawkes 1997, 34–9). They may even have heard that on diptychs secular as well as sacred iconography was to be found. Those possibilities provide us with a context in which it would have been natural to associate a list of those to be remembered with a series of iconographic panels. There is a close connection between the two 'inner panels' of the sequence of four on the west face at Bewcastle: Christ's blessing hand, and the scroll he holds in his left hand, form a perfect visual complement to the runic request for prayers for the souls of local aristocrats, which fills the panel immediately below (Ó Carragáin 1987b, 38–9). The identification of the two 'outer' panels, above and below, has been much disputed. The recent examination of the panel, on the occasion of the Golden Age of Northumbria conference in 1996, has made it once more seem likely that it is John the Baptist who holds the *Agnus Dei* (in the panel above). But who bears

the eagle or falcon in the lowest panel: John the Evangelist or a local aristocratic donor? The tradition of diptychs can provide parallels for either possibility, for both religious and secular portraits. Indeed, the whole tradition of diptychs involved the adaptation of secular iconography for religious purposes (which could have happened at Bewcastle if secular iconography were adapted to represent John the Evangelist). Whatever the interpretation of this panel, if the Bewcastle community provided for its secular patrons a sort of diptych in stone, it exercised just that freedom and creativity which the early medieval liturgy normally demanded: to learn (perhaps at second- or third-hand) what was done at a great centre, and then to make your own version of what you had heard about, from local materials and in terms that made sense to your own community.

It is exciting to study the ways in which in the 7th and 8th centuries the Roman liturgy was changing fast, and how these changes were originally linked to theological and political developments at Rome and Byzantium. But the Ruthwell community was remote from such great events. This remoteness gave them a great opportunity. In their isolation, they could use images, which had their origins in controversy, in new ways for contemplative purposes. If at Ruthwell they heard at all about the threat posed by iconoclasm to the western church in the late 720s and in the 730s, the threat must to them have seemed remote. In Jarrow Bede knew of the threat before 730, and in his *De Templo* penned a page against iconoclasm (Meyvaert 1979, 38–9). But clerics at Ruthwell may simply have known that images were, since iconoclasm, increasingly valued as a way of expressing, in fidelity to ancient Christian tradition, the physical reality of the incarnation of the invisible God in human flesh and in human history. They used images to make close and deep connections between the historical facts of Good Friday (described in original and dramatic terms in their vernacular Crucifixion poem), and their own liturgical participation in these historical events (reflected in various ways in the iconography and inscriptions of their cross).

There are, as we have seen, remarkable similarities between the Ruthwell and Bewcastle crosses: but they are very different monuments. The Bewcastle cross acts as a memorial for a set of English people, whose names we can no longer know with certainty, but who are likely to have been lay aristocratic patrons. It is striking that the Ruthwell monument completely avoids any such commemoration of the surrounding secular society. Instead, it provides a remarkably coherent paradigm of the central themes of Christianity. This paradigm is organized around the classic sequence of the Christian rites of initiation. In the first half of the iconography images of conversion and repentance (the blind man and the woman who was a sinner) are fittingly placed between images of Christ's growth to birth in Mary's womb (Annunciation and Visitation). We have seen that the second half of the iconography is centred on images of the Eucharist, the climax towards which Christian initiation was directed.

The complex unity of the Ruthwell cross would have gradually come to make sense to any clerics who, in the course of a lifetime spent in its vicinity, performed the major liturgical ceremonies at the proper times during each liturgical year. They would not have needed any book-reading to supplement the knowledge which would have come to them naturally from their public communal actions. I do not believe, however, that the full unity of the cross could have meant much to the illiterate laity of the surrounding area. It was not merely that there are two languages on the cross, Latin and English, and two scripts. It is more that, without actually participating in the liturgy, appreciation of the way in which the monument reacts with that symbolic system would have remained abstract and unreal. I am therefore quite sceptical about efforts to explain the whole cross in terms of preaching or instruction of the laity. Individual panels, or groups of panels, might on occasion have been useful for preaching. The vernacular poem may have been widely sung, in various versions (such as the version that crops up centuries later in the Vercelli Book as *The Dream of the Rood*. That version is equipped with a dream-vision frame, of which there is no trace at Ruthwell). But such partial or occasional use is rather different from a deep appreciation of the unity of the monument. That could only come from long acquaintance. I suspect that the Ruthwell cross was, like the liturgy itself, designed to be lived or lived with, rather than to be talked about.

I am even less convinced that we should see the monument primarily in political terms, as though it was intended to blazon the recent Anglo-Saxon control of the area. Instead, it seems to me likely that the monument is symbolically so rich and confident because of another necessary distance: the distance which, Benedict Biscop believed, should be kept between the life of a monastic community and that of the local aristocratic lay society, so that a monastery could be sufficiently detached from local traditions of aristocratic heredity (Wormald 1976). Only in this way would the community be free, when appointing its abbot and priors, to follow its own independent judgement about an individual's holiness and talent, without reference to the accident of aristocratic birth. Monks in the Wearmouth-Jarrow tradition saw that aristocracy was bound up with values of a world that was transient and evanescent; they saw the monastery, on the other hand, as providing a foretaste of the better society of the kingdom of God (Mayr-Harting 1976). How vital this principle was to the Wearmouth-Jarrow tradition, and how much it was under threat from aristocratic interference by the end of Bede's life, we can learn from Bede's letter to Ecgberht of York (Plummer 1896, 1, 403–23). The close links which Rosemary Cramp (1965, 10–12) established between Ruthwell and Wearmouth-Jarrow may extend, not simply to a style of sculpture, but also to a style of monastic life and liturgy. Ruthwell, with its synthesis of Roman and Celtic ideals, is the embodiment in stone of the Gregorian ideal of diversity within unity, an ideal which we know of through Bede and which, Bede records, was vitally important to Benedict Biscop and his community (Ó Carragáin 1994a, 26–7). Ruthwell is

also an eschatological monument, and stands as a silent but eloquent criticism of all man-made power-structures, racial divisions and especially (with such scenes as the man blind from birth and the woman who was a sinner) of the importance of aristocratic birth. The Ruthwell and Bewcastle animals who acclaim Christ with their crossed paws have been converted from evil to good, but also to anonymity. In order to acclaim Christ in the desert, they have given up long iconographic lineages, not to say promising iconographic careers, as asps, basilisks, lions or dragons. Their crossed paws, which form the Messianic title (Christ, the anointed one), provide a witty warning: with the advent of '*Iesus Christus, iudex aequitatis*' the dynastic dreams of lesser kings would wither away.

Central to the vision of the Ruthwell cross is an element of what Henry Mayr-Harting has called 'monastic classlessness'. The nobility which the cross explores and celebrates is entirely dependent on a spiritual and sacramental relationship to Christ. In the Ruthwell cross there is no room for any other kind of aristocracy. It is reasonable to see in the Ruthwell cross, with all its sacramental references, the classic sculptural expression in pre-Carolingian Europe of that 'clericalism' which Mayr-Harting (1976, 15–18) has carefully defined as central to Gregory the Great and Bede.

I do not wish to deny that politics may have been an important external factor in the commissioning of the Ruthwell cross. It is likely to be because of politics that Anglo-Saxon clerics or monks were there in the first place, and that they had money to commission such a fine piece of sculpture. But if politics is reflected in that iconography, it is a highly subversive kind of politics, which ignores and circumvents racial, dynastic and ecclesiastical dividing lines. It is highly significant that a number of scholars, following Meyer Schapiro (1944), have convincingly shown that the Ruthwell cross, far from celebrating an Anglo-Saxon triumph or simple propaganda for the Roman *ordo*, includes important Irish, non-Roman elements (Neuman de Vegvar 1987, 203–27; Mac Lean 1992, 68–70). The Ruthwell cross at many points reflects the Old Roman liturgy; but it cannot be accused of making simplistic pro-Roman liturgical statements. The monument is remarkably eirenic, and forms the classic example of friendly contact between Roman and Irish liturgical traditions (Ó Carragáin 1978, 137; 1988b, 51–4; Cramp 1995c sees Ruthwell as being possibly 'a monument to the reconciliation of the British and Irish churches with the Anglo-Saxon'). The most outstanding aspect of the monument's originality, an aspect that unites poem and iconography, is the intimate relationship it establishes between Christ's incarnation and his Passion. Both Irish and Roman monastic scholars, even when they disagreed about how to calculate the next Good Friday, always agreed that the first Good Friday fell on 25 March, the anniversary of Christ's incarnation. Here, as in the Paul and Anthony panel, Ruthwell emphasizes the great symbolic riches that united the Roman and Celtic clerical traditions, not the scholarly computistics that caused tension between them. Preaching and polemic lead to simplification, and simplification is not something one can easily associate with the Ruthwell cross.

Preserving a necessary distance enabled the Ruthwell *monasteriolum*, whatever sort of clerical community it may have been, to avoid provincialism, and get its sculptors to create a monument that is European and universal in its scope. In such range and scope, the monument faithfully reflects the developing art of communal liturgical worship, the great achievement of Christian culture in the early Middle Ages. Worship in that period was intensely local, in that every community had in the end to work out its way of doing things. But at its best the liturgy combined intense local creativity with profound universality: central to it was an objective sense of the communion of the church in East and West, on earth and in heaven. This communion naturally embraced the Irish churches to the west and north. The Ruthwell community emphasized the ideals it, as a clerical community, held in common with the Irish monks: the importance of withdrawing *in deserto* the better to recognize Christ in the breaking of bread, like Paul and Anthony, the Egyptian prototypes of this vocation.

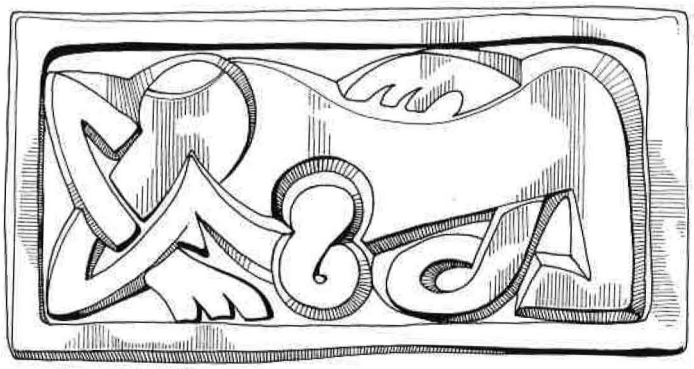
No cultural discourse could subvert the distinction between cultural centre and cultural periphery more surely than the liturgy, precisely because the liturgy offered all its participants, equally, membership in the communion of saints. Any small clerical community at Ruthwell would have known that it could participate sacramentally, with all Christians living and dead, in the fruits of the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ – participate as fully as the Pope himself. Their monument suggests that ecclesiastical controversy at Rome and secular power-politics in Northumbria were of little account to them, compared to the patterns of their communal sacramental worship, of which they provided such a memorable synthesis. By preserving a necessary distance from the strident simplifications of preaching and politics, by concentrating on their monastic and liturgical vocations, the members of the Ruthwell *monasteriolum* created for themselves a great contemplative monument, of European and universal significance.

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NORTHUMBRIA'S GOLDEN AGE

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