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Ruthwell and Iona: The meeting of Saints Paul and Anthony revisited

by Éamonn Ó Carragáin

In scenes which represent the meeting of the Egyptian monks, Saint Paul of Thebes and Saint Anthony the Abbot, early insular sculptors found a variety of visual equivalents for St Jerome's literary symbol of harmony between the solitary eremitic life (personified in St Paul), and coenobitic communities (personified in Abbot Anthony). Jerome narrates that, when it was revealed to St Anthony that a greater monk than he lived as a hermit in the desert; he set off to find him. As he drew near his goal, the desert took on the harmony of Paradise: even beasts and monsters helped him on his way. He finally meets St Paul, the first hermit:

> [...] While they were talking they noticed a raven land on the branch of a tree: it then flew down gently and placed a whole loaf of bread in front of them as they watched in amazement. When it had flown away Paul said, 'Look, the Lord who is truly loving and truly merciful has sent us our supper. For the last sixty years I have always received half a loaf [cf. I Kings 17:4-6], but in honour of your arrival Christ has doubled his soldiers' rations.'
>
> When they had given thanks to the Lord, they both sat down at the edge of a spring as clear as glass. Here a dispute arose as to which of them should break the bread and they continued to argue until the day had almost turned to evening. Paul argued that it was the custom for the guest to do so, while Antony countered with the rights of age. At last it was decided that they should hold the bread at each end, and then if each one pulled towards himself, he would keep the bit left in his hands. Then they bent over the spring and drank a little of the water, and offering to God a sacrifice of praise, they passed the night in prayer.[1]

The joint act of breaking the loaf resolves a courteous debate: Paul the hermit had insisted on Anthony's right, as the guest, to break the bread; while Anthony the abbot insisted that Paul, as the senior, should have that honour instead. St Jerome's scene is not explicitly eucharistic; he describes neither Paul nor Anthony as ordained priests. The great achievement of insular sculptors was to make the eucharistic dimensions of Jerome's episode explicit.

In a paper in memory of Tom Delaney, I surveyed insular examples of the scene, with particular reference to its eucharistic contexts: Ann Hamlin read the paper in draft, made extremely useful suggestions, and secured good plates of Ulster monuments.[2] Since then, Peter Harbison's great work on the Irish High Crosses provided a complementary catalogue and discussion.[3] In a wide-ranging article, Isabel Henderson placed the Paul and Anthony panel on the Nigg slab in the context of the whole monument.[4] Kees Veelenturf showed that the iconography of the insular Paul and Anthony scenes was derived from the fourth-century Roman motif of the *concordia apostolorum*, in which Saints Peter and Paul stand side by side or sit facing each other. The circular christograms, or laurel wreaths. of the Roman scenes has been replaced in insular Paul and Anthony panels by the eucharistic loaf. Veelenturf suggests that 'a formal origin for the Irish Paul and Anthony reliefs can be found in early images of Sts. Peter and Paul from the centre of the Christian world."[5] If so, early insular sculptors developed the Roman image of *concordia apostolorum* to provide their own *concordia monachorum*: between monasticism's complementary impulses, towards the solitary life of the hermit and communal life under an abbot.

Insular sculptors regularly saw this new *concordia* as having eucharistic implications. Therefore, one might expect the new *concordia*-image to be inspired, in part at least, by eucharistic practice. In 1943, Fritz Saxl made just such a suggestion. He referred the earliest surviving Insular representation of Paul and Anthony breaking bread in the desert, on the Ruthwell Cross, to Book One, chapter 44 of Adomnán's *Life of St Columba* (published about 700 AD). There, Adomnán recounts that Bishop Crónán, a visitor from Munster,

> concealed his identity out of humility, for he did not want people to know he was a bishop. But such a thing could not be hidden from St Columba, for on the Lord's day, when he was bidden by the saint to perform the sacrament of the body of Christ, he called on the saint that as two priests they should together break the Lord's bread [*sanctum aduocat, ut simul quasi duo prespiteri dominicum panem frangerent*]. As Columba approached the altar, he suddenly saw into the man's face and spoke to him thus:
>
> 'Christ's blessing on you, my brother. Break this bread alone according to the rite of a bishop [*Hunc solus episcopali ritu frange panem*]. For now we know that is what you are. But to what end did you try to conceal your identity until now, so that you have not had from us the reverence due to you?'
>
> The humble pilgrim was much surprised by the saint's words, and reverenced Christ in him, while all present were struck with wonder and glorified God.[6]

Richard Sharpe, in a note to his Penguin translation, made an important contribution to our understanding of this episode:

> Warren, *Liturgy and ritual*, p. 128, on the basis of this passage erected a theory that 'a very singular custom existed in Iona of two or more priests being ordinarily united in the Eucharistic prayer and act of consecration; to consecrate singly being the prerogative of a bishop, or of individual priests specifically selected and empowered to consecrate on account of their sanctity or eminence'; [...] I think he is wrong on all counts: normally one priest would celebrate [...]; in the present story, however, St Columba proposes to concelebrate in order to do honour to the guest as a fellow priest. When the visitor is perceived to be a bishop, status demands that the host give place to the guest of superior grade; but if the bishop were the host, he would surely invite a visiting priest or bishop to join him in the celebration. Thus the unusual custom, which Warren treats as peculiar to Iona (p. 128) but later as 'peculiar to the Celtic rite' (p. 129) will be found to have no existence at all.[7]

Sharpe convincingly demolished Warren's theory that Adomnán was referring to a regular Celtic rite of *co-fractio*, performed at every Mass; instead, the Iona tableau in which 'duo prespiteri dominicum panem frangerent' took place only as part of the courteous reception of priest-visitors. Adomnán recounts the remarkable 'exception which proved the rule', demonstrating the logic behind the usual courteous tableau. The tableau was clearly understood as a liturgical re-enactment of Jerome's episode of meeting. St Columba, who recognizes Crónán to be a bishop, refuses to enact the tableau. This demonstrates his absolute fidelity to the tradition of monastic courtesy embodied in Jerome's story. St Columba gracefully won the contest in courtesy and humility first imagined by Jerome, finding an incontrovertible reason for giving his visitor the honour of breaking bread alone. St Columba transforms Jerome's tableau, yet affirms his values: and so the whole Iona community 'were struck with wonder and glorified God'.

The phrase just quoted proves that Adomnán intended his episode to be read in counterpoint to Chapters 11 and 12 of Jerome's *Vita Sancti Pauli*. Adomnán's punch-line, that 'the humble pilgrim was much surprised by the saint's words, and reverenced Christ in him [*Christum in sancto ueneratus est*], while all present were struck with wonder and glorified God [*glorificarunt deum*]' clearly transforms a sentence in Jerome's *Vita*: 'It was as if [St Anthony] saw Christ in Paul and so he worshipped God in his heart, but he dare make no further answer [***quasi** Christum in Paolo videns, et **in pectore** Deum venerans, ultra respondere nihil ausus est*]'.[8] It is important to note that this sentence is the climax, not of the courteous dispute between Paul and Anthony (chapter 11) but of the next chapter, when Paul, preparing for death, asks Anthony to return to his monastery in order to fetch the tunic that Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria had given him (*pallium quod tibi Athanasius episcopus dedit*), so as to wrap Paul's body in it for burial. Paul's insight makes Anthony 'almost see Christ in Paul' and reduces him to silence; for not only did Paul have miraculous knowledge of the gift the bishop had made to the abbot, but he requested to be buried in the bishop's gift. The reference to the death of Elijah (II Kings 2) is impossible to

miss; and when he returned to his monastery to fetch the cloak, Anthony told his monks 'I have seen Elijah, I have seen John [the Baptist] in the desert, indeed I have seen Paul in Paradise'.[9] The first hermit, not the abbot, is the true recipient of the bishop's tunic. Tunics embody charisma: thus when St Anthony had, with the aid of two lions, buried St Paul in the bishop's tunic, he brought home to his monastery 'the tunic that Paul had woven for himself [...] and on the feast days of Easter and Pentecost he always wore Paul's tunic.' [10] Jerome ends the *Vita* by saying that he himself 'would far rather choose Paul's tunic, together with his rewards, than the purple robes of kings, together with their punishments.' [11]

By combining, in the episode of Bishop Crónán, references both to chapter 11 and to chapter 12 of Jerome's *Vita Sancti Pauli*, Adomnán imagines St Columba as providing his community with an eloquent image of the dignity of bishops. Bishops were, strictly speaking, the only true liturgical celebrants; priests (including priest-abbots) received their power to celebrate Mass and the sacraments only when consecrated by a bishop. In the eighth century, Bede wrote of Iona that

> this island, moreover, is accustomed to have an abbot in priest's orders as its head, so that both the entire province and also the bishops themselves are required, by an unusual ordering of affairs, to be subject to his authority. This is in accordance with the example of Iona's first teacher, who was not a bishop but a priest and a monk.[12]

That the priest-abbot should give precedence to a bishop was of vital importance precisely at Iona. Columba publicly enacted a visual parable to encourage his monks to be as sensitive to the dignity of bishops as he, their founder, was.[13] Adomnán provided a significant counterpoint to Jerome's episode, to demonstrate that St Columba gave bishops absolute precedence in liturgical matters. This is why Adomnán intensifies Jerome, and makes the episode public, a matter for the whole Iona community. In Jerome, St Anthony had *almost* seen Christ in St Paul, and had *silently* praised God for Paul's insight; but in Adomnán Bishop Crónán 'reverenced Christ in Saint Columba, while all present were struck with wonder and glorified God'. By counterpointing his sentence against Jerome's, Adomnán showed his appreciation of St Anthony's motto that 'there is a time for silence and a time for speech'.[14] Adomnán understood the Iona liturgical tableau of welcome to have been practiced in St Columba's own lifetime. He thus implies that Columba himself, the founder, had used Jerome's episode to create Iona's tableau. Adomnán now imagines Columba as spontaneously 'deconstructing' his own liturgical tableau, in order to provide his community with an unforgettable image of the liturgical precedence that must be given a bishop.



Plate 1. The Ruthwell Cross: *Concordia Monachorum* ' Saints Paul and Anthony, hermits, broke bread in the desert'.
Photo Ross Trench-Jellicoe.

Although Jerome's life of St Paul was widely read throughout western Europe, it is only in Ireland, Pictland and western Bernicia, the area influenced by the Columban monasticism of Iona, that the meeting was from the eighth to the tenth centuries repeatedly represented on public monuments.[15] It is highly significant that from the earliest surviving examples, such as Ruthwell, the scene was regularly placed in eucharistic contexts. The most likely reason for the distribution of the early iconography is that in the period only Iona,



Plate 2. The Bewcastle Cross, west side.
Photo Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture.

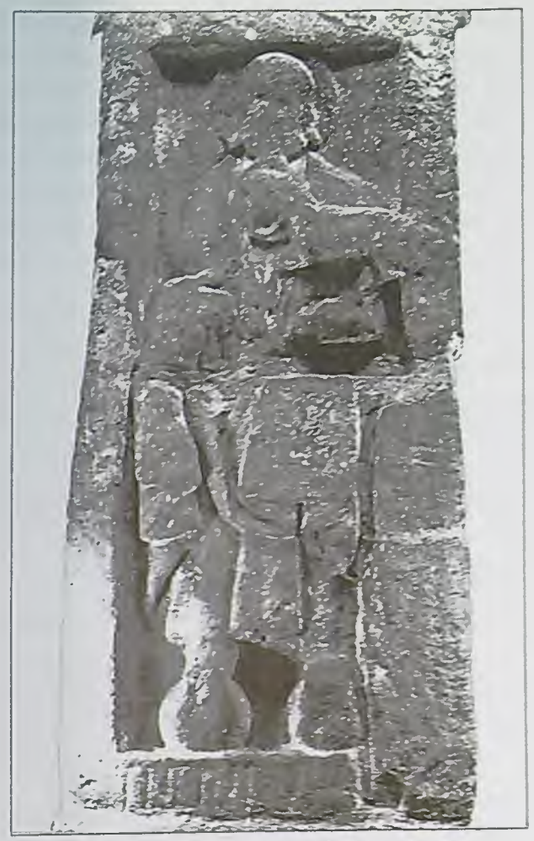


Plate 3. The Ruthwell cross: John the Baptist pointing to the *Agnus Dei*.
Photo Ross Trench-Jellicoe.

and monasteries influenced by Iona, imitated St Columba by turning Jerome's story into a public eucharistic symbol of monastic hospitality. While only priests could enact the tableau liturgically, at Mass, it had implications for a whole community: all should practice the fraternal hospitality symbolized by the scene.

In the Ruthwell panel (**Plate 1**) two men, clad in flowing ecclesiastical robes, break a large loaf of bread between them. The long robes, formal gestures, and standing male figures indicate that the sculptor conceived the scene primarily in liturgical terms. It is only the *titulus*, not the panel itself, which clearly refers to the first Egyptian monks: '+ SCS : PAVLVS : ET : ANT[onius eremitae] FREGERVNT : PANEM IN DESERTO :' ('St Paul and Anthony, hermits, broke bread in the desert'). Of all the surviving Paul and Anthony panels this is the only one to have a *titulus*: but then all the original panels on the Ruthwell Cross were from the beginning provided with *tituli*, including the vine-scrolls on the narrow sides. The phrase 'fregerunt panem' links the scene to the breaking of bread (*fractio panis*) at Mass.[16] Perhaps the Ruthwell community, when a priest came to them as guest, imitated the Iona tableau at a Mass celebrated by the guest.[17] The Ruthwell panel provides evidence of Ruthwell's courteous openness to what Columban monasticism had to teach Bernician monks on Solway Firth. In one important

detail, the Ruthwell panel is closer to the textual and liturgical sources in Jerome and Adomnán than almost all the later surviving examples. They all, with the exception of the small slab at Kirriemuir, fuse the breaking of bread with the detail of the raven bringing bread from heaven. As Richard Bailey has pointed out, at Ruthwell the absence of the raven is all the more striking, as almost every other panel on the second side of the cross contains an animal or a bird.[18] By not representing the raven, Ruthwell and Kirriemuir concentrate exclusively on the breaking of bread, and so on the eucharistic recognition of Christ's presence.[19] The Ruthwell designer thus established a close connection between the meeting of Paul and Anthony and the panel immediately above, where 'beasts and dragons recognized in the desert the Saviour of the World'.[20]

The best comparative material for the iconographic sequence on this side of the Ruthwell Cross is the upper two panels on the surviving shaft of the Bewcastle Cross (the head of that cross was removed in the early seventeenth century, perhaps by a storm, but perhaps by antiquarians) (**Plate 2**).[21] There, as at Ruthwell (**Plate 3**), a representation of 'St John the Baptist pointing to the Agnus Dei' occurs directly above 'Christ acclaimed by the Beasts'. At Bewcastle, as at Ruthwell, St John is portrayed in elaborate liturgical garments, including a broad pallium. In both panels, he functions 'in excelsis', on high, as part of the heavenly liturgy.[22] John the Baptist was of the tribe of Levi and the son of a high priest, Zachary; but he refused the temple-priesthood and became a hermit in order to proclaim Christ, the eternal high priest. Bede put the matter very clearly in one of his sermons:

> he preferred being a herald of the new priesthood rather than continuing as a successor and heir of the old. [...] He elected the long-lasting thirst and hunger of solitude in preference to the continual solemn sacrifical offerings [in the temple]. He esteemed the high priestly garment woven of gold cloth of less value than a garment made of camel's hair, girded with a leather belt. Why was this, my brothers? Was it not that he who, by reason of a more perfect justice, had received for himself authority to preach, might show, even by the neglect of his ancestral right to the high priesthood, how certainly he was the herald and precursor of a better high priesthood?[23]

Because of his renunciation of Old Testament priesthood, John is forever associated with Christ his cousin, when the Nativity of John the Baptist is celebrated each year at the Summer Christmas, near the Summer solstice, on 24 June.[24] Both at Bewcastle and at Ruthwell, John still acts as forerunner: in heaven, he still points to the glorified lamb. John's proclamation of Christ as 'Agnus Dei, qui tollit peccatum mundi' (John 1:29; cf. 1:36), had in the Roman liturgy recently been made the basis for a new chant, sung by clerics and people, to accompany the breaking of bread for communion.[25] But it was the breaking of bread for communion which Iona transformed into a ritual of welcome; and that liturgical tableau is represented in the Ruthwell Paul and Anthony panel below.

The Ruthwell designer expanded the Bewcastle sequence of two panels into a sequence of three, adding the Paul and Anthony panel below. He did so in order to balance the new Roman rite for the breaking of bread (the 'Agnus Dei' chant) with the Iona eucharistic rite for the reception of priest-visitors, a tableau modelled on the meeting of Paul and Anthony. If Adomnán was correct in attributing that liturgical tableau to St Columba (d. 597 A.D.), it had already been practiced for well over a century when the Ruthwell Cross was erected (ca 730-760 AD). Like John the Baptist, Paul and Anthony were not priests but monks. The Ruthwell designer emphasizes that hermits, who are not priests, can nevertheless share in the Eucharist. By implication, he is interested in how all the faithful can recognise Christ in the breaking of bread: just above, even the beasts and dragons recognise Christ in the desert, as in the recreated desert Paradise, imagined as near St Paul's hermitage, in Jerome's *Vita*. An important Bedan them was the priesthood of all the faithful: that the Mass was offered by the whole christian community, not merely by the priest who presided at the liturgy. We may presume that it was of equal importance for Bede's friend and bishop, Acca of Hexham, and Bede's correspondenent and informant, Bishop Pehthelm of Whithorn: and these two bishops who may well have played a part in commissioning, first the Bewcastle Cross, and then the Ruthwell Cross.[26] The unified sequence of panels on the second broad side of the Ruthwell Cross is, among other things, a moving and coherent expression of this

Bedan theme. The sequence sums up the cultural position of Ruthwell: between Rome and Iona, receptive to what both traditions had to offer. The Ruthwell Cross, which preserves the earliest surviving visual insular example of the *concordia* between Paul and Anthony, provides for that panel a context which emphasizes *concordia*, sustained by a shared Eucharist, between diverse Christian traditions: those traditions inspired by the *concordia apostolorum* between Saints Peter and Paul at Rome, and those traditions inspired by St Columba. Adomnán implies that that founder-abbot may have been the liturgist who, taking St Jerome's *Vita Sancti Pauli* as his model, first instituted at Iona a eucharistic tableau of welcome which enacted *concordia monachorum*.

Footnotes

[1] Jerome, *Vita Sancti Pauli Primi Eremitae*, PL 23:17-28, at col. 26C, trans. Carolinne White, *Early Christian Lives* (Harmondsworth, 1998), pp. 80-1.

[2] Ó Carragáin, 'The meeting of Saint Paul and Saint Anthony: visual and literary uses of a eucharistic motif', *Keimelia: studies in medieval archaeology and history in memory of Tom Delaney*, ed. Gearóid P. Mac Niocaill and Patrick F. Wallace (Galway, 1988), pp. 1-58 and Pls I-XII.

[3] Peter Harbison, *The high crosses of Ireland: an iconographical and photographic survey*, 3 vols (Bonn, 1992), I, pp. 304-5, and references.

[4] Isabel Henderson '"This wonderful monument": the Cross-slab at Nigg, Easter Ross, Scotland', in *New Offerings, ancient treasures: studies in medieval art for George Henderson*, ed. Paul Binski and William Noel (Thrupp, 2001), pp. 115-47.

[5] Kees Veelenturf, 'Irish high crosses and continental art: shades of iconographical ambiguity', pp. 83-101 in *From Ireland coming: Irish art from the early Christian to the late Gothic period and its European context*, ed. Colum Hourihane (Princeton, 2001), pp. 83-101 (at p. 93).

[6] Adomnán, *Vita Columbae*, I, ch. 44, trans. Richard Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St Columba* (Harmondsworth, 1995), p. 147; Latin quotations from *Adomnán's life of Columba*, ed. and trans. Alan Orr Anderson and Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson, revised by Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson (Oxford, 1991), p. 80.

[7] Sharpe, *Life*, p. 306, referring to Frederick Edward Warren, *Liturgy and ritual of the Celtic Church* (Oxford, 1881), reprinted with an introduction by Jane Stevenson (Woodbridge, 1987).

[8] PL 23:26B; White, *Early Christian lives*, p. 81.

[9] PL 23:26B. The reference also associates St Paul the Hermit with St Paul of Tarsus, who reached the seventh heaven: II Cor. 12:2-4.

[10] PL 23:28B; trans. White, p. 83.

[11] PL 23:28D; trans. White, p. 84.

[12] Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, III, iv; trans. and discussed in Thomas Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 241.

[13] The relative power and dignity of bishops and abbots was an important issue in early Irish society: see Colmán Etchingham, *Church Organization in Ireland A.D. 650 to 1000* (Maynooth, 1999), pp. 13-22 and *passim*; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 241-81.

[14] 'Tempus tacendi, et tempus loquendi' (cf. Ecclesiastes 3:7): Jerome, *Vita Sancti Pauli*, Chapter 13, PL 23:26D, trans. White, p. 82.

[15] On the textual tradition of the *Vita Pauli*, see William Oldfather (ed.) *Studies in the text tradition of St Jerome's* Vitae Patrum (Urbana, 1943); on the distribution of Paul and Anthony scenes, see Harbison, *High Crosses*, I, pp. 304-5.

[16] 'benedixit fregit dedit discipulis suis': canon of the Mass in the Old Gelasian sacramentary, par. 1249, ed. Leo Cunibert Mohlberg and others, *Liber Sacramentorum Romanae Aecclesiae Ordinis Anni Circuli (Cod. Vat. Reg. lat. 316 / Paris Bib. Nat. 7193, 41/56) (Sacramentarium Gelasianum)* (Rome, 1981), p. 185 line 12; see Matthew 26:26 and parallels. The eucharistic significance of the scene was first noted by Saxl 1943, pp. 3-4.

[17] See Ó Carragáin 'The meeting', p. 40.

[18] Richard N. Bailey, *England's earliest sculptors* (Toronto, 1996), p. 64. The single surviving exception is St Matthew and his angel, necessarily given human form, on the cross-head.

[19] On Kirriemuir, see John Romilly Allen and Joseph Anderson, *The early Christian monuments of Scotland*, 3 parts (Edinburgh, 1903) reprinted with an introduction by Isabel Henderson, 2 vols (Belgavies 1993, Part 3, vol. II, p. 226, fig. 239b; discussed by Isabel Henderson, '"This wonderful monument"', p. 121; on the significance of omitting the raven, see Ó Carragáin, 'The meeting', pp. 39-44.

[20] For a later Irish variant on Jerome's tableau, St Brendan's meeting with 'Paul the spiritual hermit' in Chapter 26 of the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*, see Ó Carragáin, 'The meeting', pp. 31-38.

[21] The best account of the Bewcastle Cross, and of its early history, is Richard N. Bailey and Rosemary Cramp, *Cumberland, Westmorland and Lancashire North-of-the-Sands* (Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture, 2) (Oxford, 1988), pp. 61-71.

[22] See Jane Hawkes and Éamonn Ó Carragáin, with Ross Trench-Jellicoe, 'John the Baptist and the Agnus Dei: Ruthwell (and Bewcastle) Revisited', *The Antiquaries' Journal*, 81 (2001), 131-53.

[23] Bede, *Homilies on the Gospels*, Book II, No. 19 (Vigil of the Nativity of John the Baptist), CCSL 122, pp. 318-19, trans. Lawrence T. Martin and David Hurst, *Bede: Homilies on the gospels* (Kalamazoo, 1991), II, pp. 189-90.

[24] On the association of Christ with 'the growing days' and his cousin John the Baptist with 'the lessening days', see Ó Carragáin, 'A liturgical interpretation of the Bewcastle Cross', in Myra Stokes and Tom Burton (ed.) *Medieval literature and antiquities: studies in honour of Basil Cottle* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 15-42.

[25] Ó Carragáin, 'Liturgical innovations associated with Pope Sergius and the iconography of the Ruthwell and Bewcastle Crosses', in *Bede and Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Robert T. Farrell (Oxford, 1978), pp. 131-47.

[26] See Gianni Caputa, 'La mediazione sacerdotale del Verbo Incarnato secondo Beda il Venerabile', *Ecclesia Orans*, 18 (2001), 73-103.