Notes on “The Dream of the Rood”

Outline

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(The following commentary was written by Alexander Bruce of Florida Southern University)
The Poem: Commentary

“The Dream of the Rood”—the oldest dream vision poem in English—powerfully describes Christ’s Passion through the language of the Germanic heroic code, with the added dimension of the Rood itself as the central speaker of the poem.

Having an inanimate object speak is a hallmark of the Anglo-Saxon riddles, and in fact the passages where the Rood speaks strike some as being riddle-like.

The poem tells the story of Christ on the Cross.

After a brief (lines 1-3) opening by the man, announcing the general topic of the poem (a dream of the Rood), the vision itself begins. Rood = cross.

In lines 4-27, the man describes the Rood. It is a paradox, in a way, for he notes that it alternates between being covered with gold and gems and attended by angels (as the Tree of Victory should be) and being covered with blood (as it was an instrument of torture and death). The man more readily identifies with this latter image of the Rood, for he too feels covered in shame and sin. But the blood not only flows over the cross but also out of it, for the Rood itself feels wounded.

Then the Rood speaks from 28-121, though there is a decided shift in tone after line 77. In lines 28-77 the Rood tells the story of Christ’s Passion from its perspective. It first describes being cut out of the forest by “foes” and “warriors” and being raised up as a gallows.

As Christ approaches in line 33 [note number and Christ’s age], the Rood realizes its purpose and the most difficult situation it could face. The Rood considers itself, in the mode of the Germanic heroic code, the retainer of Christ, as all living things should serve God. Yet the Rood is about to assist in the death of his liege-lord, Christ; no Germanic warrior would ever willingly help in such an act. But the Rood recognizes that it is its duty to stand firm, to be the gallows of Christ, because only by doing so will it be obeying the wishes of its Lord. Christ, himself very much described as a Germanic hero, wants to enter that battle, and He eagerly climbs upon the Rood.

The Rood trembles but accepts its role in the Crucifixion, doing what is demanded of it despite its inner agony. It speaks of the pain it felt from the nails driven into it, and of the mocking both it and Christ received. Then Christ dies, though the Rood recognizes that He only “rested there”; the Rood knows Christ will conquer death.

The Rood is torn down in line 73 and buried, only to be found soon by the followers of Christ who adorned it with gold and silver, beginning the tradition of the adoration of the Cross.
It is to an explanation of that adoration that the Rood now turns in lines 78-121. The Rood identifies the situation that must have bothered any recent converts to Christianity: it explains that it should be seen as a victory-sign not because Christ was crucified on it but rather because of what Christ accomplished through His crucifixion. In doing so the Rood emphasizes that for Christ death did not mean defeat, a concept probably very difficult for the Anglo-Saxons, steeped in their warrior traditions, to accept. Christ was described as a Germanic warrior so that the audience would identify with him; and now the Rood tries to explain that Christ’s victory over death can likewise be theirs if they will heed the words of the Rood and of Christ.

At line 122 the man, who had been passive, the audience for the speaking Rood, now speaks as his vision fades. He tells how, his voice nearly becoming that of the preacher exhorting the masses, he prayed to the Rood. He recognizes now that though he may have few friends on earth—“small company”—he has the hope of something eternal.

**Ruthwell Cross, Ruthwell Church, Dumfries, Scotland**

![Image of Ruthwell Cross, Ruthwell Church, Dumfries, Scotland]

**Introduction**

The Ruthwell Cross stands in a small church in the town of Ruthwell, just south of Dumfries, in south-west Scotland.
The Cross is 17 feet 4 inches tall and must sit in a well 4 feet deep to serve as the high cross for the church. “With the comparable cross at Bewcastle it is undoubtedly the most important sculptural survival from Anglo-Saxon Britain and arguably from early medieval Europe” (Cassidy 3).
What makes the Cross so valuable as an artifact is its blend of elaborate ornamentation and inscriptions in both Latin letters and Anglo-Saxon runes; as well, the Cross preserves in those runes lines from “The Dream of the Rood.”

Age

Scholars, focusing on particular aspects of the Cross, have argued for a variety of dates. Looking at particular aspects of the Cross (such as the runic inscriptions and vine-scrolls), especially in comparison to the Bewcastle Cross, has led some to argue for dates from the end of the 7th century to the middle of the 8th (MacLean 49-53). The linguistic evidence of the runic inscriptions encouraged R. I. Page to place the Cross anywhere from 650 to 850.

Historians point out that since southern Scotland was clearly under Celtic control until the end of the 7th century, it is “unlikely that so conspicuously Anglian a monument was erected much before 682” (MacLean 68). Evidence drawn from examining the designs found in the Northumbrian monasteries of Jarrow and Monkwearmouth suggests a mid-8th
-century date. MacLean concludes that the Cross probably dates from AD 750 (at about the same time of the construction of the Bewcastle Cross).

**Physical State**

The Ruthwell Cross has had a painful history. It is not now what it originally was. It was originally set up outside as a “preaching cross.”

Certainly the weather played a part in the eroding of its physical shape (before, of course, the Cross was moved into the church building), but the real damage came in the seventeenth century when “efficient and dedicated iconoclasts” pulled the Cross over (Farrell 34, 39-40). The Cross fractured at the cross-arm (transom); the cross-head and arms broke into fragments; parts of the lower body were cut away.
In the 18th century, pieces of the Cross were moved into the church. In the early 19th century the process of reconstruction began under the direction of Dr. Duncan (priest at Ruthwell, 1799-1843).

But in the process, some mistakes were made. Due to some injudicious placements of pieces, gaps were created and subsequently filled in with mortar. Some figures, then, were “elongated.” The result is an unpolished work. Also, the original transom was never found; one was thus constructed for the Cross (pictures show how sharp and less-weathered the cross-beam appears now). Obviously, this “interpreted” cross-beam cannot have the same images the original had and thus throws off the symbolic unity of the Cross. As well, the very top piece, which was found, was put on backwards; what faces south should face north. Actually, the whole cross has been turned in its placement (for example, the South Face probably originally faced east); based on comparisons to the Bewcastle Cross, the panel that should be presented to the congregation should be Christ in Majesty; yet this panel faces North, away from the congregation and visible only if one walks around the altar to the back of the Cross (Farrell 36-7).
THE FOUR FACES OF RUTHWELL CROSS
identifying the Biblical scenes depicted by the unknown 7th century sculptor.

South Face
- The Archer
- The Visitation
- Mary Magdalene Washes the Master's Feet
- Healing the Man Born Blind
- The Annunciation
- Crucifixion

North Face
- The Two Evangelists
- John the Baptist with the Angel
- Christ Glorified
- Breaking Bread in the Desert
- The Flight into Egypt

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