

NOTES ON SOME EARLY CRUCIFIXES.  
WITH EXAMPLES FROM RAYDON, COLCHESTER, IPSWICH  
AND MARLBOROUGH.<sup>1</sup>

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Before describing the small crucifixes illustrated in this paper, it may be as well to recall briefly the very gradual steps which led up to the adoption of this instrument as an aid to devotion.

Not until the seventh century did anything of the nature of a true crucifix exist,<sup>2</sup> though previously, on the ornamentation of holy vessels, mosaics, etc. evidence could be seen of a growing desire to break through the reserve which prohibited its use in earlier times.

The natural shrinking from anything approaching idolatry entertained by primitive christians is a matter of history, as we know that even pictures in churches were forbidden by the Council of Elvira, in the year 306, the reason assigned for this decision being "lest what is worshipped and adored should be painted on the walls." With two exceptions, one being a representation of a crucifixion in the church of St. Genesius, at Narbonne, and the other in a Syriac manuscript of the gospels, now in Florence, which is said to have been written at the end of the sixth century, not even in painting was the scene on Calvary depicted till the end of the seventh century. Even the cross was rarely used, except in monogram form, till the fifth century. After this it became a more general symbol, and considerably later we find the bust of Christ placed above it.<sup>3</sup>

Another stage is possibly marked by the placing of the bust in the centre of the cross, as at St. Apollinaris at Ravenna. Presently we find a representation of the Lamb standing below the cross with a chalice at its breast, or reposing at its foot, examples of which may still be

<sup>1</sup> Read before the Institute, 2nd June, 1909.

<sup>2</sup> This date is given by Raoul Rochette. Mr. W. R. Lethaby, in a paper read before the Society of Antiquaries, in 1908, claims a fourth-century origin for the representa-

tion of a crucifix on the panels of a casket in the British Museum. *Proc. Soc. Antiq.* xxii, 2nd ser. 232.

<sup>3</sup> *Traite d'Iconographie Chretienne*, Barbier de Montault, ii, 153.

seen in Rome.<sup>1</sup> These are devices of the early sixth century.

It was by order of the Quinsextan Council, at the close of the seventh century, that the figure of the Agnus Dei gave place to the figure of Christ. The decree ran as follows: "That the representation in human form of Christ our God, be henceforth set up and painted in place of the ancient Lamb."<sup>2</sup>

In our study of this subject, a complete sequence in the development of the representation is naturally sought, and if such existed it would greatly facilitate the dating of new types of the crucifix as they come to hand; but anyone who has examined a large number of examples will know that the evolutionary stages, if such they can with reverence be called, occasionally overlap one another, and that at times the individuality of the sculptor defied conventionality. At the best we can only recognise general rules, but these are extremely useful as a first guide before a minute examination of individual relics is resorted to.

Allowance being made for exceptions, the following order of types may be regarded as tolerably correct. The earliest representations depict the Saviour in an erect posture, clad in a sleeveless tunic which reaches from the neck to the feet, with eyes open, head crowned, and a serene countenance. There is no contortion of the limbs or appearance of either suffering or death. The arms are extended in the attitude of embracing the whole world, but are not fastened with nails, and the feet, also unnailed and uncrossed, rest upon the *suppedanium*. The cross is indeed there, but it is a mere background.

Considerable variation in the treatment of the subject is noticed in the eighth, ninth, and tenth centuries, such as the feet being bound or nailed, while the arms are still free, or this being reversed, the hands being fastened while the feet are free. A tendency to greater realism is recognised when an opening in the long robe reveals the wounded side. The head begins to droop gradually, while the limbs are contorted, and by the thirteenth and four-

<sup>1</sup> In the church of SS. Cosmo and Damiano at Rome. St. Paulinus of Nola thus describes another: "Sub cruce sanguinea riveo stat Christus in agno."

<sup>2</sup> *The Cross in Tradition, History and Art*, W. W. Seymour, 170.



NO. 1. BONE CRUCIFIX FROM RAYDON (SUFFOLK), IN THE POSSESSION OF MISS LAYARD.



NO. 2. WOODEN CRUCIFIX, NOW IN THE COLCHESTER MUSEUM ( $\frac{3}{4}$ ), BY PERMISSION OF DR. LAVER.



NO. 3. LEADEN CRUCIFIX FROM MARLBOROUGH, IN THE POSSESSION OF MISS LAYARD.



NO. 4. BRONZE FRAGMENT OF CRUCIFIX FROM IPSWICH, NOW IN THE CHRISTCHURCH MUSEUM, IPSWICH.

teenth centuries so complete a change has taken place, that a dead Christ is substituted for the living victorious figure of early Christian art.<sup>1</sup> It was the example of the Greek ecclesiastical painters that broke down the reverent reticence of centuries, and to them we owe the crude and painful representations which mark this period.

A not unnatural anxiety to emphasize the triumph of the Resurrection as a corollary of the Passion, is strikingly exemplified in the high crosses of Ireland, for although most of them bear on one face a representation of the crucifixion, Christ in glory is usually represented on the other face. These date from the tenth century.

In Scotland, as is well known, the crucifixion is very rarely to be found on the high crosses. One of the exceptions, however, is that of the Ruthwell cross, in Dumfriesshire.

In connection with this subject it may not be out of place to recall the striking inscription which is found on this cross. Whoever was the author of the poem, and I fear we can no longer regard it as the production of Caedmon, though it is certainly Anglo-Saxon, it breathes the desire amounting to passion to emphasize the God-like attributes of the victim and the voluntary sacrifice which He made. The verses inscribed upon it are taken from *The Dream of the Holy Rood*. They are in Ogham characters, and are thus freely translated. Describing the ascent of the cross, the poet says :

Then the young Hero prepared himself,  
That was Almighty God,  
Strong and firm of mood  
He mounted the lofty Cross  
Courageously in the sight of many.

From the beginning to end of the poem, of which we have a translation in full, the might and power of the Godhead are the key-notes of this ode of the Passion, any suggestion of helplessness on the part of Christ being carefully avoided.

Of the three small crucifixes which came into my possession about two years ago, and which are here illustrated, only one can be said to follow any stereotyped

<sup>1</sup> Seymour observes that the earliest example of Christ dead (in painting) occurs in a fresco in St. Urbino, above the valley of Egeria, date A.D. 1011.

rule. The crucifix which is carved on bone (plate 1, no. 1) was dug up in a field at Raydon, near Southwold, when the hamlet was being built. It was bought by a carpenter for a mere trifle from the man who found it, and from him I obtained it. Though very rudely carved, the relic is not devoid of character. Viewed from the back, the cross is extremely imperfect, the upper part of the post having been cut away after the figure was carved, so that it does not come into line with the lower portion. The arms of the cross are not of true Latin form, but are raised after the manner of the Y cross which appeared on early vestments,<sup>1</sup> but this probably was merely the sculptor's device to avoid the natural curve of the bone which would have shortened the arms of the cross unduly.

The design is a puzzling one, as it does not fit in with any accepted rules. I have shown it to several antiquaries, but no one has so far ventured a positive opinion upon it, though Dr. Laver, of Colchester, believes both this crucifix and the leaden one (plate 1, no. 3) to be of great antiquity.<sup>2</sup> It only remains therefore to see what evidence as to its possible date can be gathered from the treatment of the subject.

We notice first the upright position, the arms extended along the cross-beams, though these are raised to follow their upward curve, and the feet uncrossed. There are no nail or spear marks, and the feet rest on the *suppedanium*. These are all suggestive of an early period.

On the other hand, the head is uncrowned and the eyes are closed, while the clothing is a mere rolled loin-cloth, knotted on the left side. The features are very unusual, with the long, straight nose, low forehead and high cheek bones. Possibly the very prominent chin is intended to indicate a beard, though there is no detail to prove this. It is difficult to say what is intended by the cap-like arrangement surrounding the head, but it has perhaps more the suggestion of hair than that of a nimbus. I sought in vain for anything at all resembling this unusual design, till Mr. Wright, to whom I showed the relic, pointed out a small wooden crucifix, in the

<sup>1</sup> See Lee's *Glossary of Liturgical Terms*, 80, 81.

<sup>2</sup> Mr. G. C. Druce has since commented on the Norman appearance of the treatment of the head in plate 1, no. 2.

Colchester museum of which there is no account (plate 1, no. 2), corresponding strangely to the example from Raydon. Though of still rougher workmanship and not identical, it has much in common with the bone specimen. There is great similarity in the features, and in the modelling of the figure, though the feet appear to be crossed, and there is no *suppedanium*. From the general appearance of the Raydon specimen, it is difficult to assign to it a later date than that of the twelfth or thirteenth centuries, though it may possibly be later.

It has been suggested that these small crucifixes may have been executed in the fifteenth century, when many rough religious images were made, but if so, it is puzzling to know why this early treatment should have been resorted to. The very fact of finding two relics of the same design proves that they were not merely the product of the individual fancy of the sculptor, but were copies, however crude, of some such crucifixes at that time existing. We may perhaps, therefore, look upon them as a type, of which so far we have only two examples, and these both from East Anglia.

One of the most persistent rules I noticed in examining a large number of crucifixes of very early date is that when the arms follow the line of the arms of the cross, the feet are invariably uncrossed, and this may be regarded as almost universally followed, up to the eleventh century. Later there are occasional departures from this rule, but they are quite exceptional, mostly belonging to the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, though I have found one which is German of twelfth century date, where the feet are uncrossed, although the arms are in a hanging position. This example may be seen in the Mediaeval Room at the British Museum, case 37, no. 61. Judging, therefore, from this treatment alone, the bone crucifix might well be classed with some of the early examples.

Another rule, however, which appears to be, if anything, even more strictly adhered to, is that the longer robe accompanies the uncrossed feet: and I remember no exception to this rule. In this respect, therefore, it will be noticed that the Raydon example is at variance with others in our museums. It may be that this represents a transition stage which we should

expect to find about the thirteenth century, or it is just possible that it portrays a crucifixion designed by some early East Anglian christian, independent of stereotyped rules.

The small lead crucifix (plate 1, no. 3) has somewhat the appearance of a pilgrim's badge. It was found with human remains in the rectory garden at Marlborough, and was given to me by my sister, Mrs. Whytehead. At the back is a leaden ring for attachment. Here again the workmanship is exceedingly crude. The cross is hatched, with cable moulding round the margin. Although the figure of Christ is represented in a somewhat hanging posture, the arms do not drop below the cross-beams. At first the feet appear to be crossed, but comparing this with a crucifix on a textus cover of early twelfth century (no. 9, p. 101), I think it will be seen that this is not the case, but that the figure is resting upon a *suppedanium* with the feet extended outwards. In all cases where the feet are attached by a single nail, they are close together, and one is superimposed upon the other. The fact that the vesture is of the type commonly seen on crucifixes up to the twelfth century, and invariably accompanies this attitude, confirms this conclusion. The head, from which rays are emitted, though there is no actual nimbus, is inclined to the left, a very unusual position, which I do not remember to have noticed before. Possibly this was a mistake of the maker of the mould, who did not realise that the impression would be reversed. The eyes are open and looking upwards. Above the head a hand is seen extended, as though to receive or assist the Sufferer.

Didron, in his *Christian Iconography*, speaks of the Divine Hand having been employed by early sculptors and painters as a kind of monogram of Jehovah, for no portraits of God the Father were to be seen up to the twelfth century. Various meanings were attached to the position of the fingers. Sometimes the hand was seen in the act of blessing, or emitting rays, or surrounded by a nimbus. The earliest form, however, seems to have been without these accompaniments, and this is as we see it on the Marlborough crucifix.

In a Latin miniature of the ninth century it appears in this form, as also in the Catacombs, and in the most

ancient mosaics, though rare examples are known as late as the twelfth century. The Romsey abbey crucifix has an open hand above it. In our English museums I find very few examples. The Pierpont Morgan collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum contains one or two crucifixes showing a hand above them, but in each case it is in the act of blessing, that is to say, with the thumb and the two first fingers extended, while the third and little fingers remain closed. In two ivory plaques in the British Museum the same design may be seen.

At a somewhat later date the reserve which characterised these early indications of the presence of Jehovah was gradually done away with, and from a mere hand or arm "first the Face and then the Bust and then the entire Person" of God the Father appeared.<sup>1</sup>

Difficult as it is to assign any exact date to the bone crucifix, I think the evidence in regard to the lead example is convincingly in favour of a date not later than the eleventh or twelfth century, which would make the age of this venerable relic not far short of a thousand years.

The last example (plate 1, no. 4) is a figure from a crucifix which was found in Ipswich many years ago. It is probably early sixteenth century work, and is quite typical of that period. This is the type which is most familiar and which has persisted down to the present day. As will be seen in the illustration, while the arms bear the weight of the body, the feet are crossed and one nail attached them to the cross which is now missing.

A very complete study of the foregoing types may be made in the Mediaeval Room at the British Museum, in cases nos. 35 to 43.

Such a detailed examination of these relics of earlier days may appear to some superfluous, yet they reveal in no uncertain way the temper of the age in which they were executed. As we hold them in our hands we feel, as it were, the pulse of those primitive christians, and can more accurately gauge the trend of the religious feeling of the times.

It is to be hoped that the illustration of these small crucifixes may result in similar relics being forthcoming, and further light being thrown upon the subject.

<sup>1</sup> *Christian Iconography*, Didron, i, 201—206.