

RUTHWELL CROSS, FROM A DRAWING MADE ABOUT 1840.

A, NORTH SIDE (ORIGINALLY); B, WEST; C, SOUTH; D, EAST.

For the subjects represented see page 145, note 2.

## IS RUTHWELL CROSS AN ANGLO-CELTIC WORK?

By W. R. LETHABY, F.S.A.

The Ruthwell and Bewcastle crosses belong to the small group of English monuments which are of international importance. Any list of our monuments which are famous in a European sense would, one may suppose, include Stonehenge, the Bayeux "tapestry," Durham cathedral church, and the two northern crosses. In two or three former attempts to understand these two remarkable crosses I have shown,<sup>1</sup> to my own satisfaction at least, that the Bewcastle cross is indeed a memorial set up to king Alcfrid about the year 670, and that the still finer cross at Ruthwell (plate 1)<sup>2</sup> was a slightly earlier work. Two critics, Commendatore Rivoira<sup>3</sup> and Professor Cook of Yale,<sup>4</sup> have contended that our two crosses are as late as the middle of the twelfth century, but most of the English writers who have recently dealt with the subject agree as to the Bewcastle cross having been erected about the year 670, which seems to be indicated by its much-decayed runic inscription. These writers are Dr. Hodgkin, Mr. Dalton, Professors Prior<sup>5</sup> and Collingwood,<sup>6</sup> Sir Martin Conway<sup>7</sup> and Mr. Champneys. Professor Baldwin Brown, while allowing that he is almost persuaded, thinks that the crosses are later than this time, without clearly saying how much

<sup>1</sup> *Burlington Magazine*, June, 1912; *Architectural Review*, Aug. 1912.

<sup>2</sup> This illustration of the cross is taken from the original drawing by Dr. Duncan, made about 1840, which was engraved for the work mentioned in note 2, p. 146. I bought it in London about 1900 for the L.C.C. Central School of Arts and Crafts.

The subjects of the sculpture, with which I am not here concerned, are: 1, the Nativity(?); 2, the Flight to Egypt; 3, St. Paul and St. Anthony in the desert; 4, Christ treading on dragons; 5, St. John Baptist; 6 and 14, Symbols of the Evangelists; 7, Eagle on tree, which is wrongly set on and should be reversed; 8, the Crucifixion with two soldiers; 9, the Annun-

ciation; 10, Healing the blind man; 11, Christ and Mary Magdalene; 12, the Visitation; 13, Archer aiming at the eagle (no. 7). I hope to return to the question of these sculptures.

<sup>3</sup> *Lombardic Architecture* (1910), ii, 143; *Burlington Mag.* April, 1912.

<sup>4</sup> *The Date of the Ruthwell and Bewcastle Crosses*, in the *Trans. Connecticut Acad. of Arts and Sciences*, Dec. 1912, in which both crosses are fully illustrated.

<sup>5</sup> *Architectural Rev.* xii, 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Early Sculptured Crosses*, 47; *V.C.H. Cumberland*, i, 256.

<sup>7</sup> See *Burlington Mag.* Nov. 1913, for the last word on the subject.

later, or attempting to give any complete theory which would explain them.<sup>1</sup>

The idea that the two runic crosses were very ancient does not seem to have arisen from any patriotic bias. In Dr. Duncan's account of the Ruthwell cross<sup>2</sup> he says : "The runes are not Danish, but Anglo-Saxon, a discovery which seems first to have been made by Grimm, which establishes that the date must be sought for during the Heptarchy. . . . Repp has discovered that the runic alphabet is widely different from that employed by the Danes."



FIG. 1. PARTS OF THE LATIN INSCRIPTION OF THE RUTHWELL CROSS.

I shall for the moment take it for granted here that the Bewcastle cross was set up about the year 670 as a memorial to Alcfrid, son of king Oswy of Northumbria. In the discursive notes which follow, some evidence on this question will be brought forward. The following points, to my mind, are evidence that the Ruthwell cross is an early work and the earlier of the two monuments :

(1) It contains a complete cycle of sculptures, while the Bewcastle cross repeats two of them. We can understand two subjects being taken from a group much better than that copies of two pre-existing sculptures should be incorporated in an important series.

<sup>1</sup> *Burlington Mag.* April, 1913.

<sup>2</sup> In *The New Statistical Account of Scotland*, 1845.

(2) There are features on the Bewcastle cross, like beaded angles, rounded heads to the panels, and much braided work, which put it into relation with many other crosses. Ruthwell cross stands alone in the profusion of its figure-sculpture placed in a simple setting.

(3) The fine alphabet in which the Latin inscriptions are written is in an Irish form of script.<sup>1</sup> Our inscription resembles those on the early grave-slabs found at Hartlepool, and is of an entirely different character to the inscribed dedication stone of the church at Jarrow, a work of the Roman school. The Ruthwell inscription (fig. 1) is certainly in the Celtic tradition.

(4) The sculptures on the Ruthwell cross all relate to the life and miracles of Christ, with one exception, which represents the meeting in the Egyptian desert of St. Paul and St. Anthony, the founders of monasticism.<sup>2</sup> This curious link with eastern monasticism suggests that the monument derives its inspiration rather from the Celtic than from the Roman church which took the ascendancy in Northumbria after 664. This monastic subject occurs again and again on the Irish crosses. Indeed, the whole scheme of sculpture on the Irish crosses follows the Ruthwell scheme in having the Crucifixion on one side and the risen Christ on the other together with other scenes from the life of Christ. The iconography is all of an early Christian type.

(5) The Ruthwell cross is one of those which were erected before churches. At a later time a church was built over it. It belongs, as will be shown, to the time when the cross was the battle-standard in the war with the heathen.

The Ruthwell cross thus appears to be a work of the Celtic church in Northumbria, erected under what Bede calls "the episcopacy of the Scots among the English," that is, before the synod of Whitby in 664.

I should say that I had arrived at the general conclusion as to the Ruthwell cross being earlier than its companion

<sup>1</sup> I published the alphabet in the *Burlington Magazine* for June, 1912; I should now like to make the correction that the sign for & is much more like that found in Irish manuscripts than was shown. See fig. 1, which is only an approximation, as

I cannot see it properly in a bad light. A similar symbol is found on the Welsh cross at Caldey island and on a Cornish cross at Lanherne; see fig. 3.

<sup>2</sup> See note 2, p. 145.

work by some ten or twelve years, quite independently of what is to follow. If I am right, it is almost certain that the greater cross was the work of king Oswy at the time of the high prosperity of his kingdom following on the defeat of Penda.

One distinction between the two crosses must be noticed. The Bewcastle cross is a personal memorial, that is, a grave-cross. This is certain from the general type of the inscription apart from any disputed details. That the Ruthwell cross was not such a memorial follows from the absence of such an inscription. It is a "high cross," an important national or ecclesiastical monument. The sculptures which it bears are intended to outline the chief facts in the history of the church, a monastic church, as has been said. This magnificent work must have been executed at great cost, and this is one of the factors which require explanation. It seems evident that it could only have been a royal work, paid for by national funds.

I have long felt, but feeling is no argument, that the cross might be the memorial of a battle, and a passage in Professor Oman's excellent *England before the Norman Conquest* (p. 284) has suggested a possibility which is worth pointing out on account of its importance, although I cannot pretend to hold any proofs that could make it a certainty. Writing of the war of 655 between Oswy and Penda, he tells how Oswy fled to a hold on the Firth of Forth, and how he offered a great ransom, "the ransom of Judeu," which, when Penda would not accept it, he dedicated to the "God of battles." Then he and his son Alcfred gave battle to the "warlike old heathen," Penda, who was defeated and slain. On the events of this time Prof. Oman remarks: "If Judeu is Inchkeith, or Dunbar, or Edinburgh, it is very strange that the battle should have taken place at Winwedfield near Leeds. We should have expected it to have been within the bounds of Bernicia on the Tweed, or in Lothian. Yet Bede says that Oswy concluded the war *in regione Loidis*, which seems to bring us to Leeds. Possibly when his overtures were rejected he took the offensive in despair and advanced into Deira to meet Penda." Sir John Rhys, relying on Nennius, supposes that the battle may have been "in

the Pictish part of Manaw," and that the war was only concluded near Leeds.<sup>1</sup>

We find in all this a war between Oswy and Penda which ranged from the Firth of Forth to Leeds, and further that Oswy had made a vow to devote a great treasure to God. It is possible that the costly Ruthwell cross may be a memorial of his victory. If the Bewcastle cross was set up about the year 670 and the Ruthwell cross about ten years earlier, that would perfectly suit the condition as to time. I can suggest no reason why Ruthwell



FIG. 2.  
COINS OF ECGFRID AND ALDRID.



FIG. 3. INSCRIPTION FROM A SLAB FOUND AT HARTLEPOOL, AND TWO EXAMPLES OF THE SYMBOL FOR "ET" FROM OTHER SOURCES.

should have been selected as the site for such a memorial, but if the cross was erected by Oswy or his son Alcfrid,

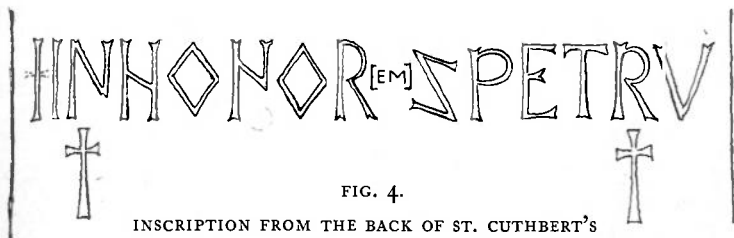


FIG. 4.  
INSCRIPTION FROM THE BACK OF ST. CUTHBERT'S ALTAR.

as most English archaeologists believe, there was in any case a link of relation between Ruthwell and the royal house of Northumbria. It is probable enough that the

<sup>1</sup> *Celtic Britain*, p. 133.

joint forces of Penda and the Welsh advanced through Carlisle and perhaps even through Ruthwell. I must repeat that I have not to convince English students of the connexion of the cross with the royal house of Northumbria.



FIG. 5. COLLECTION OF LETTERS FROM ST. CUTHBERT'S COFFIN, NOW AT DURHAM.

The inscription on the Bewcastle cross names it *Sig-becn*,<sup>1</sup> or victory-sign, a formula which occurs also on other early crosses. Professor Cook of Yale, who has tried to prove

that the crosses belong to the twelfth century, points out<sup>2</sup> that this phrase occurs again several times in the old English poem *Elene*, which deals with the history of the Cross of Christ. He goes on to show that this term is doubtless derived from the sign of the victorious cross



FIG. 6. LETTERING ON A GRAVE-SLAB FOUND AT BILLINGHAM, DURHAM, NOW IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM: CF. FIG. 7.

seen by Constantine before the battle of the Milvian bridge. The Ruthwell cross, to the man who set it up, was thus by its very name a victory-sign, and it carried a linking of memory back to the cross which Constantine saw as a presage of victory. Now it must be admitted that this name and this thought would have been strikingly appropriate for a memorial set up after a great battle between English Christianity and native heathendom led by the Mercian king. There can be no doubt on the point that the war was conceived of as waged between Christianity and paganism. Twenty-one years before, when Oswald, the elder brother of Oswy, had fought a similar battle with Penda and the Welsh, he "set up as his

<sup>1</sup> *Becn* or *becun* = beacon.

<sup>2</sup> *The Bewcastle Cross*, 1909.

standard a great wooden cross near Hexham. He was completely victorious and the Welsh king was slain. The spot of victory was called Heavenfield."<sup>1</sup> Oswald was afterwards killed by Penda, and Oswy, who may himself have fought at Heavenfield, must have inherited these traditions with the strife.

In the full text of the *Dream of the Rood* there also seems to be a reference to Constantine's vision.

"For I saw as it seemed in the air a strange tree moving circled with light, the most shining of stems."

Further, the words *beacun* and *sige* (victory) are used in the poem itself: "Eall theat beacun waes begoten mid gold." . . . Wonderful was that "sige-beam."

The same thought of the shining cross is found again, and this is quite a remarkable coincidence, on the only coin of Ecgrid, the successor of Oswy (671), which is known to exist. It shows a cross surrounded by flashes of light and the letters + L V X<sup>2</sup> (fig. 2). The priests, addressing a nation of warriors, must have insisted on the magic virtue of the cross as shown by Constantine's victory. Hence, too, would have arisen the interest in the subject of the *Elene*.

Bede says that Oswald's battle-standard was erected where "the heavenly victory was begun," and calls it "the sign of the holy cross," "the heavenly trophy." Oswald is called "most holy and victorious." Such ideas as these explain the origin of such a title for the cross as victory-sign (*sig-becn*) which is found in the Bewcastle inscription. One of the coins of Offa has a banner inscribed with his name attached to a cross; and most of the earliest Saxon coins bear the sign of the cross.<sup>3</sup>

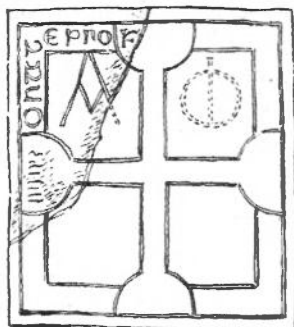


FIG. 7. GRAVE-SLAB FROM BILLINGHAM: CF. FIG. 6.

<sup>1</sup> Oman, op. cit. p. 278.

<sup>2</sup> The animal next to it is from another early Northumbrian coin, and may be compared with the creatures on the Ruthwell cross.

<sup>3</sup> Several Northumbrian coins have

recently been identified in a paper read before the British Numismatic Society by Mr. H. A. Parsons on 22nd October 1913, but not yet published. These are an interesting addition to the body of Anglian art in the north.



One of the proofs that the Ruthwell cross is of the seventh century is the Irish character of the inscription (fig. 1), and the same argument applies, of course, to other monuments inscribed in similar letters. For instance, the little slabs found at Hartlepool "on the site of the ancient cemetery of the abbey over which Hilda presided until she migrated to Whitby, A.D. 658," are inscribed either in capitals like those of the Ruthwell cross or in minuscules, also of Irish type. One of these is given in fig. 3; the



FIG. 8. INSCRIPTION ON FRAGMENT OF A CROSS FROM DEWSBURY, NOW IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM.

letters closely resemble those of the Ruthwell inscription: compare especially q s and o. Figs. 4 and 5 are also early inscriptions. In the British Museum is a fragment of a slab found by Dr. Greenwell at Billingham, Durham, which resembles closely the other Hartlepool slabs. It is inscribed "Orate pro F" in beautiful minuscules, which must have been written by a learned scribe (fig. 6). I have no doubt that this, like the Hartlepool

slabs, is a monument of the Anglo-Celtic church of the seventh century. It must be one of the very earliest specimens of writing which we possess. Fig. 7 gives a restoration of the slab. The A and Ω are characteristic of early Christian art.<sup>1</sup> A fragment of a cross from Dewsbury in the same museum is also inscribed in good minuscules, and it cannot be far removed in age from the other; its date must be about 700. The illustration (fig. 8) is made from a comparison of one given in the

<sup>1</sup> These small grave-slabs with a cross and the alpha and omega are very like some Coptic memorials.

*Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, vol. 1, with the original fragment. It represents the back of the stone shown in fig. 13.

This inscription reads: "... rhtae becuu aefter beornae gibiddad daer saule."<sup>1</sup> Here we have our word *becun* again. In the Newcastle museum is a small stone inscribed in minuscules and runes on which are similar words. "... becuu aefter Eomer gebiddad der saule."<sup>2</sup> Fig. 9 is a portion of the famous Lindisfarne Gospels (c. 700). The first letter of the last line is the symbol

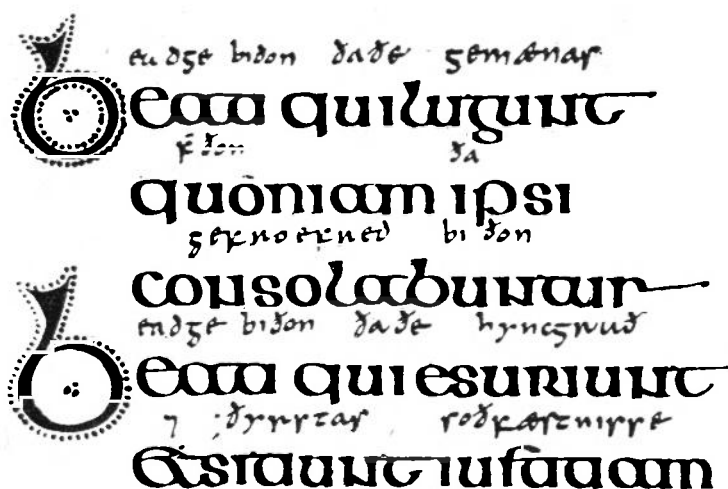


FIG. 9. WRITING FROM THE LINDISFARNE GOSPELS (B.M.)

for *et*: fig. 1 shows the same symbol at Ruthwell. Fig. 3, on which similar symbols are shown, taken from Welsh and Cornish crosses, should be compared. Mr. Romilly Allen has said that inscriptions on stones in "the Celtic portions of Great Britain" are nearly all in minuscules. The few monuments of this type in England occur in Northumberland, Cumberland, Durham, Yorkshire and Cornwall. It cannot be doubted, from their distribution and character, that all of these are derived from the Celtic

<sup>1</sup> *Beornae* has been said to be "the prince" or "the bairn," but it is probably a man's name.

<sup>2</sup> Illustrations of this and other minuscule inscriptions are given in Stephens' *Handbook of Runic Monuments*.

tradition, and that the use of the word *becun* for *sign* of the cross goes back to the age before the Roman obedience. In Skeat we find: "A.S. *beacen*, a sign, signal, standard; also spelt *becn*." The memorial cairn or barrow to the hero in that oldest English poem *Beowulf* is called a *becn*. This suits us perfectly, and *becn* seems to be the form on the Bewcastle cross.

It may further be pointed out that the inscriptions on Irish and Welsh crosses give the names of the makers, thus: "Pray for X by whom this was made," or "X erected this stone": it thus appears that the general type of these inscriptions, to which that on the Bewcastle cross conforms, follows the custom of the Celtic church. We come round, too, to the high probability that the Ruthwell cross did actually have a maker's inscription as Stephens thought: "X me made," or something of the sort in runes.

It cannot be doubted that after the Synod of Whitby there was a great break in the church customs of Northumbria, which accounts for all the journeys to Rome of the "Catholic" party, and the bringing back thence of pictures and teachers to instruct the people "according to the Roman use in the order of chanting and ministration in the church."

As all archaeologists know, the Ruthwell cross bears a most remarkable poem, *The Dream of the Holy Rood*, inscribed on it in runes. This poem is in form and feeling a most astonishingly intense victory-song uttered as by the cross itself. Our best authority, Dr. H. Bradley, in common with others before him, assigns the authorship of the poem to the Northumbrian poet Caedmon.<sup>1</sup> The matter and manner of the poem have hitherto been explained wholly in reference to the Crucifixion, but if it were also a song-offering for another immediate deliverance by means of the Cross, we might better understand its warlike imagery and vibrating passion.

It is noteworthy and significant that this wonderful poem is in English speech and runic alphabet, and occupies the lateral surfaces of the monument. Other inscriptions on the principal faces of the cross, which explain the sculptures,

<sup>1</sup> See *Encyc. Brit.* s.v. *Caedmon*.

are in Latin (plate 1). We may see in this bilingual monument some indications of a double origin or purpose. My theory implies that *The Dream of the Holy Rood* was written in the first place soon after the defeat of Penda; I suppose that it is given in runes because at the time it was written that was the one alphabet proper for English. I suggest that, except perhaps for a few names of persons for which their Latin forms would make an easy means of transition, English had not been written in Latin letters at the time the cross was inscribed. I believe that the early Northumbrian stones exhibit the steps in the transition; the Yarm stone, for instance, gives the same inscription in runes and in Latin-Irish minuscules. I would suggest further that the sculpture of the meeting of St. Anthony and St. Paul in the Egyptian desert was put on the cross to indicate that the "episcopacy of the Scots" derived its traditions from eastern monasticism



FIG. 10. RUNES FOR G, K (OR C) AND O.

independently of Rome. It is true that this subject occurs on some later Irish crosses, and apparently on at least one English monument, but they are all probably derived from the Ruthwell cross, and it is the first use which matters.

In regard to Professor Baldwin Brown's difficulties as to the date of our crosses, he candidly allows that there is very much to be said in favour of the early date of the sculptures, and he narrows his objections down to two details, the shape of the cross-head and the form of two of the runes. Now the cross-head has been falsified in restoration, the second curve in the lower arm had no existence before the cross was broken.<sup>1</sup> Comparison of the runes with runic inscriptions on English coins and other objects which may be dated with certainty as belonging to the seventh century or thereabouts, shows remarkable resemblances. These inscriptions are so few that a complete

<sup>1</sup> As to the form cf. fig. 13.

alphabet cannot be made up from them. Now it happens that the need for the particular runic letters which are objected to does not, I believe, occur at all in the short series, so that it is impossible to say that they would not have been used. From a careful comparative examination of the runes I believe that the resulting evidence is in fact strongly in favour of the seventh-century date of the crosses.

The two runic characters on our crosses which Professor Brown objects to, as being not earlier than the ninth century are those for *g* and *κ*. The former is like *x* with two little loops added at the sides : the latter is like *m* with the central stroke prolonged upwards. Now in the long Ruthwell inscription varieties of runes appear, *g* is given as plain *x* as well as with the side loops, and *κ* is written *h* as well as with a front stroke. There are also two forms of *o*, one written like *x* with the top part completed into a loop, and the other like *f* with the ends of the bars turned up at an angle (see fig. 10). In the British Museum catalogue of coins we are specially told that the former is an early rune, and it appears on a gold coin of about A.D. 600, the runes of which closely agree with those of the crosses. The other *o* is said to be a form intermediate in age. A further point on the runes may be mentioned. Those which appear in the poems of Cynewulf, sixteen in all, are identical with those of the Ruthwell cross. It seems to follow that these poems are not very much later in date than the cross, and were written by one who knew the runes as they were written in Northumbria.

I hope to return again to the evidences for the date of the Bewcastle cross : here I will only note one or two small points which have occurred to me while writing this short paper. The title *Sig-becn*, or victory-sign, which occurs on it, should most naturally be referred back to a time when the cross was thought of as a battle-standard, and when the strife between Christianity and paganism was not of words but of war. As Bewcastle was a Roman stronghold on a Roman road it might very well be held by the royal house of Northumbria, and thus be a suitable site for Alcfrid's grave. Prof. Oman, in tracing the English conquest of the north country, says : " We may take it for granted that all the Roman-British towns in the north-east, York,

Corbridge, Aldborough, and their smaller sisters, perished long before the year 500 . . . Many of them, like Corbridge, emerged as royal 'vills' in the Northumbrian period."<sup>1</sup>

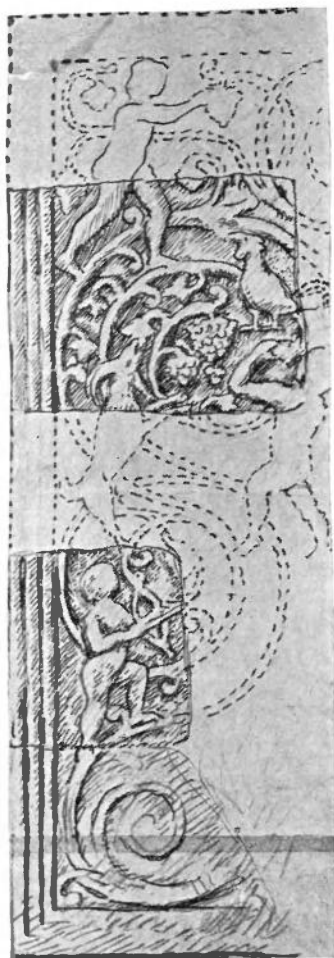


FIG. II. FRAGMENTS OF SCULPTURE IN HEXHAM CHURCH AND AT DURHAM, RESTORED CONJECTURALLY.

I have carefully compared all the published versions of the inscription on the Bewcastle cross with Professor Collingwood's photographic reproduction,<sup>2</sup> and I believe

<sup>1</sup> *op. cit.* p. 241.

<sup>2</sup> *Early Sculptured Crosses.*

that Maughan's reading<sup>1</sup> is in the main correct. On this comparison, I would put forward the following for the first six lines :

+ THIS SIG BECN  
UN SETTÆ H  
WÆTRED WETH  
GÆR ALWF[WÆL?]  
THU ÆFT ALCFRI  
THUM ÆN CYNING

Our two crosses belong to a class of monuments which has never been collected together ; only two or three can

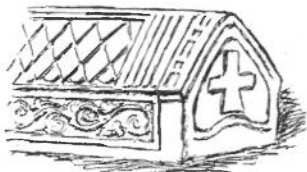


FIG. 12. END OF A TOMB OF  
EARLY CHRISTIAN TYPE FOUND  
AT DEWSBURY.



FIG. 13. FRAGMENT OF A  
CROSS FOUND AT DEWS-  
BURY, NOW IN THE BRITISH  
MUSEUM : CF. FIG. 8.

be referred to here. Fig. 11 gives a restoration of the remarkable sculptured fragments found at Hexham, from one piece still in the church and two now at Durham. Of course it is improbable that all three belonged to one and the same slab, but fitting all the pieces together gives a clear idea of what the original must have been. The pieces are about seven inches thick ; and it is probable that the slabs of which they were part formed the quire enclosure, being fitted into posts placed at intervals.<sup>2</sup> A design so classical as this cannot surely be later than the seventh century.

In Whitaker's *Loidis and Elmete* several remarkable sculptured stones are shown, which were found at Dewsbury in the walls of the old church. One of these was the end of a coped tomb of early Christian type, which doubtless was the origin of the ruder and later hog-backed tombs. The style is nearly Roman and it seems impossible

<sup>1</sup> *Memoir on the Roman Station and Runic Cross at Bewcastle* (1857).

<sup>2</sup> Compare several enclosures of this

type illustrated in Lasteyrie's account of Romanesque architecture in France, *L'Architecture religieuse*, etc. 1912.

that it should be later than the seventh century (fig. 12). Another fragment was a piece of a cross decorated with interlacing foliage of the best type, similar to that of the Bewcastle and Acca crosses. This beautiful fragment (fig. 14) had a cable border which seems to have been exactly like that of the inscribed piece at the British Museum (fig. 13). It may very well have been part of the same cross ; if not, the carving at the back of the British Museum fragment and its cable edging shows that it formed part of a cross of the same age.



FIG. 14. FRAGMENT OF A CROSS FOUND AT DEWSBURY.

Most of the sculptured stones at Dewsbury illustrated by Whitaker were more carefully described by the Rev. D. H. Haigh in the first volume of the *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal* (1870). One of the sculptures is a fine figure of Christ in majesty, and others are fragmentary representations of the miracles of the loaves and fishes and of turning the water to wine, both explained by Latin inscriptions. They seem to have belonged to a fine cross of somewhat the same type as that at Ruthwell, but the lettering is later. It is desirable that these remarkable sculptures should be adequately published. I fear that the piece with interlacing foliage of an early type (fig. 14) has disappeared.

At Dewsbury St. Paulinus seems to have preached. Camden described a cross there which was inscribed PAULINUS HIC PRAEDICAVIT ET CELEBRAVIT. On this Whitaker remarks : " Though churches were not immediately erected on the sites of memorable events, crosses were. Of this we have an instance in the case of king Oswald ; and where there were crosses . . . the clergy



and the people assembled for devotion, and even celebrated the holy Communion.”<sup>1</sup> This falls in perfectly with the fact that Ruthwell cross was *in the church*, and according to tradition the church was built over it. The oratory in which Paulinus baptised Edwin was afterwards enclosed in a larger church.

As I have said, the church at Ruthwell was built over a pre-existing cross. Gordon (1726) says “it lies flat on the ground within the church at Ruthwell.” Pennant (1774) writes : “Tradition says that the church was built over the obelisk long after its erection. The pedestal lies buried beneath the floor of the church.” Dr. Duncan (1845) says : “At a very early period it was erected in the church, where it was held in the highest veneration till the reformation; and where even after that event it was preserved till the middle of the seventeenth century, probably by the influence of the Murrays.”<sup>2</sup> We have a record in the life of St. Willibald that in the seventh century it was customary to erect crosses where the people worshipped before churches came to be built. Mr. Romilly Allen, writing of the Irish crosses,<sup>3</sup> points out how the cross at Clonmacnois is referred to in the *Annals of the Four Masters*, under A.D. 959, as “the high cross,” and under A.D. 1060 as the “cross of the scriptures.” He adds : “It is evident that the more important crosses found in Ireland were erected for devotional purposes upon the most sacred spots.” Mr. A. G. Langdon, in his *Old Cornish Crosses* (1896) says there can be no doubt that they were erected for devotional purposes or for praying stations. Of Wales it is said : “Each house [monastic] was the centre of missionary efforts. Stone crosses were set up to mark the preaching stations. In course of time a rude building was constructed, and ultimately a church.”<sup>4</sup> The Ruthwell cross must have been a “high cross” or “scripture cross.”

I am not qualified to speak on that wonderful poem, *The Dream of the Rood*, which is inscribed on the stone cross; but every sign which I can understand points to its being the first, as the noblest, work of Christian English

<sup>1</sup> op. cit. under Dewsbury.

<sup>2</sup> *The New Statistical Account of Scotland.*

<sup>3</sup> *Monumental History of the British Church*, 124.

<sup>4</sup> *Social England*, i, 118.

literature. As before said, it must have been written in runes before the English language had been put into Latin letters. This stage belonged to the seventh century, and is represented by some of the coins. The poems of Cynewulf were written later when English was commonly written in the Latin (Irish) alphabet, but the runes were still known and retained as a secondary alphabet. This stage is characteristic of the eighth century. The Rood poem has many points in common with *Beowulf*; thus both begin "Hwaet!" The seats of the hall after Grendel's visit were all "bestreamed with blood," as was the Rood after the Crucifixion. A memorial to the dead, is a *becn* in *Beowulf*, as on the Bewcastle cross. Kemble pointed to the word *ungket* on the Ruthwell cross as an indication of great antiquity, but Professor Cook tries to argue it away; the word, he says, is not *ungket*, but *ungget*, for the *κ* is not the normal rune, but one like the letter *x*, which is *G*. Now it happens that the *κ* is not the normal one, but one in the form of an *x* with an additional upright stroke bisecting it. It occurs elsewhere in the inscription, and there can be no doubt whatever that it is one of the forms of *κ* and not a *G* (*x*).

Stephens<sup>1</sup> thought that there was an echo of old pagan imagery in the poem, where the cross wounded by the nails speaks, saying: "All things created wept . . . me the heroes left to stand blood-stained, with arrows wounded . . . we crosses staid there weeping." This reminded him of Baldur's story, but the arrows need be nothing more than poetic imagery for the nails. On the other hand some later crosses have sculptures which relate to Norse story, and it seems probable that the Ruthwell cross was imaginatively equated with Yggdrasil, the World-tree. Such an idea would explain the sculptured foliage on the sides of the cross, and the birds and squirrels in the branches, and above all the eagle at the top.

According to Bede, Caedmon's first poem came to him in a night vision after he had heard harping and songs in the hall. Can it be only a coincidence that the poem on the rood is also cast into the form of a harper's song relating a dream? "What! I will tell you the choicest of dreams that I dreamt at midnight when all the talkers were still."

<sup>1</sup> The Ruthwell Cross in *Old-Northern Runic Monuments*.