II

A Forgotten Early Christian Symbol Illustrated by Three Objects Associated with St. Cuthbert

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> "But it is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are. For since there are four zones of the world in which we live, and four principle winds ... She (the Church) in which we live should have four pillars, and therefore the Gospels are in accord with these things amongst which Jesus Christ is seated." Iraneaus[1]

The essential elements of the symbol which is the subject of this paper are five motifs, four of which are usually identical in form whilst the fifth may or may not be the same as the others. These can be variously organised for different purposes but in this essay we are concerned only with the arrangement in which the four identical motifs are set in a square or rectangle around a different central motif.[2] Forgotten for centuries because it did not accord with the figural art of the Italian Renaissance, this simple abstract design was widely used in early Christian art. It is both a symbol of sanctity and, as Iraneaus' statement above suggests, an abstract expression of the fundamental message of Salvation brought by Christ, a visual addition to the sermons and writings of the Fathers.

Whilst the decoration of the three objects associated with Saint Cuthbert of Northumbria appear to be unrelated to each other, it is here proposed that each was an accurate reflection of the inner structural form of this abstract composition. The objects are: his gold pectoral cross, with the four cylinders set as a square in the intersections of the cross arms, around the central jewel; his portable altar whose face has five incised Latin crosses, four at the corners and one at the centre; and his coffin, whose lid has a simple carving of Christ surrounded by the four evangelist symbols.[3]

When the presence of this symbolic arrangement was first noticed by the writer in the cross-arms of the nimbus of Christ in manuscript miniatures, it became evident that if the arms were decorated at all, then it was almost always with this same design of four elements set in a square around a central motif.[4] It was reasonable to assume that this had some significance, though no explanation or reference could be found in the literature. Further observation showed that not only did the design occur in other places as well as in the nimbus but also, very significantly, it was found only in depictions of Christ, the Virgin and the Saints.[5] From this it further became apparent that objects such as reliquaries or bibles associated with these persons were also decorated with this symbol, as were artefacts used in the celebration of the Eucharist.[6] Subsequently it was of unexpected interest to find that it was also widely used in ecclesiastical buildings to indicate the sanctity of the structure.[7]

One important objection remained in postulating that such a five-element design was a symbol of sanctity. Following the precepts of the late antique schoolmen, a concept so fundamental as this would have been likely to have been expressed in 'perfect numbers', a system attributed to Pythagoras.[8] It was a great relief therefore to realise that this symbol is no "quincunx" singularity but is composed of a combination of one and four, both perfect numbers.[9] For centuries before Christ, Unity (= One) represented God and Four was 'Quaternity'. Christians likewise saw Unity as God, and adapted Quaternities to their own purposes, as they had done very early in the catacomb paintings in Rome.

Anna Esmeyer in her erudite study of Quaternities described sixteen different Christian types.[10] One of these is the Four Evangelists

(and their evangelical symbols); this was very suited to use in the "Unity and Quaternity" abstract design, for in early art and architecture the combination can express the fundamental message of Salvation brought by Christ to earth and spread by the four gospels of the Evangelists to the four corners of the earth – a concept which is explicit in the Iraneaus passage with which this paper opened.

As an abstract design, the four crosses set around the central incised cross on Cuthbert's portable altar clearly express this theme. So also does the configuration of four cylinders set around the central jewel of the Cuthbert cross. They can be compared with work from earlier in the same seventh century in Egypt in the monastery of Saint Apollonius at Bawit. Here the scene of the Ascension in the main apse has the front rail and uprights of the throne of Christ decorated with sets of five small circles in quaternal composition. The design is present in other parts of the scene, as well as in frescoes in each of the seventeen chapels of the monastery.[11]

The arrangement of the evangelist symbols on the lid of Cuthbert's coffin, two above and two below Christ, are not so immediately evident as examples of the same symbolic composition because of the long rectangular shape of the coffin. Clearly, however, we are dealing here with the same theme. In style these figures are not unlike those of the contemporary *Book of Durrow*, and it should be noted that the decoration of St Mathew's dress in that manuscript is composed alomost entirely of various quaternal designs.[12] Now Anna Esmeyer, in discussing figural versions of the Quaternity theme, maintained that the Carolingians were the first to adopt the type in their "Majestas Domini" scenes of Christ surrounded by the four evangelists; the five medallion "Majestas" scene in the *Gospels of Gundohinus* would therefore be the first figural version of the Unity and Quaternity symbol in the period.[13] But. since the wood of the Cuthbert coffin has been confirmed as contemporary with the death of Saint Cuthbert in 698 AD, such figural compositions clearly predated those of the Carolingians.[14]

Other examples can be marshalled to support this contention. Thus a page of a sixth-century Syrian Gospel Book with an illumination of the Baptism of Christ, bound into the eleventh-century *Echmiadzin* (Armenian) *Gospels*, has human heads at each corner of the border.[15] This is a scheme paralleled in a fourth-century gold glass from Cologne; here, within a square, a diamond encloses a bust named "Christus" whilst attached to the sides facing the square are four busts.[16] A second pre-Carolingian example is probably provided by the third or fourth century Hinton St Mary mosaic in the British Museum which has a representation of the head of Christ superimposed on the Chi-rho symbol.[17] The four surrounding heads have been variously thought to be the Seasons or the Evangelists; support for the latter suggestion is given by their arrangement as the square of a quaternal composition. The Carolingians were not therefore the first to make figural exegeses of this symbolic composition, but were preceded by earlier artists in a line of descent reaching back to the fourth century and including the carver of Saint Cuthbert's coffin.

Two of the three objects associated with Saint Cuthbert are thus decorated with a similar abstract design, whilst a third has a figural version of the same symbolic composition in which four motifs are set as a square around a central element. This composition was widely used in art in the early centuries of Byzantium, and rather later in the west, as a symbol of sanctity. The design is that of a "Quaternity" representation of the four evangelists who spread the message of Salvation, set around the Unity who brought that message to earth, Christ.

NOTES

[1] Iranaeus, Bishop of Rome, about 200 AD. J. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, 1957, 122; (ed.) W. W. Harvey, *Sancti Irenaei Libras Quinque Adversus Haereses*, 1857, III, 11.

[2] *British Bulletin of Byzantine Studies*, 25, 1986, 85. Chester Antiquary, *Chester Archaeology*, 1, 1.

[3] **Pectoral cross:** D. Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Art*, 1984, pl. 17; D. T. Rice, *The Dark Ages*, 1971, 252.

Portable Altar: A. C. Thomas, *The Early Christian Archaeology of Northern Britain*, 1971, fig. 93. Because of the risk of secular use, it was especially important that such altars received a design of sanctity.

Coffin: J.M. Cronyn and C.V. Horie, *St Cuthbert's coffin: the history, technology & conservation*, 1985; (ed.) C.F. Battiscombe, *The Relics of St Cuthbert*, 1956, pl. VII; (ed.) G. Bonner et al, *St Cuthbert, His Cult and Community to AD 1200*, 1989, 231-366.

[4] See, for instance, the Zoe mosaic in J. Beckwith, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art* (new edition, ed. J. Lowden), 1997, pl. 201.

[5] A good example of use only with holy persons can be found in an Ethiopian Gospel, where three consecutive folios have illuminations of the Nativity, Presentation and Baptism containing this symbol, whilst the depiction of the Massacre of the Innocents does not; see R Grierson and M. Heldman, *African Zion*, 1994, Cat 69.

[6] For reliquaries see Enger, Shrine of St Calamine, in P. Lasko, *Ars Sacra*, 1972, pl. 7. This casket, of about 1170, has remarkable unity and quaternity symbolism in enamel work; other chasses from the same workshop have confusing designs.

For liturgical furniture see most pillars supporting altars or pulpits.

For liturgical fans from Cologne and Zarzma, Georgia see: C.I.S. *Ornamenta Ecclesia* (Catalogue of the Exhibition : Karl der Grosse), 1965, I, 475; V Beridze, *Treasures of Georgia*, 1983, 204.

[7] A separate study of the use of this design in architecture is forthcoming.

[8] For Pythagorean numerology see V. N. Hopper, *Numerology*, 1975. Perfect numbers are one, two and three and their multiples. One was Unity, God. Two was male and female. Three was any larger number.

[9] Quincunx. Without their usual rectitude, mathematicians assimilated this name for a five-motif design of four circles arranged as a square about a central circle. It was placed on the five twelfth weight of the fourth century Roman As series. Three millennia before, it is found as number "five" on the board of the game discovered in the royal graves at Ur in Assyria.

Professor Michael Kauffmann proposed that the writer access the Harvard CD Rom of Latin authors. After an hour it could report no use of the word in a religious context; the only usages cited were in horticulture and weighing. In the sixteenth century Sir Thomas Brown refers to it in a horticultural context in the Garden of Cyrus in his *Religio Medici* whilst Gilbert White planted five trees in this name in his garden at Selborne: five trees survive there today. R. Kessler uses this term in his description of the "Majestas Domini" scenes in the Tours Bibles (personal communication, Leslie Brubaker) as does L. Nees in relation to *Gundohinus Gospels.*

In architecture R. Krautheimer applies the term for some centralised churches in the East (see his Early Christian Architecture, 1965, 375 where he admits to following the example of K. C. Conant)

"Quincunx" was a pleasing and brief word but the writer prefers the word 'Quaternal' as more relevant.

[10] Anna Esmeyer, *Divina Quaternitas,* 1978, 50: four rivers of Paradise; four Gospels; four evangelists; evangelical symbols; rings of the Ark of the Covenant; pillars of the Tabernacle; major prophets, great Councils; principal Church fathers; forms of Charity; quadriga of Aminadab; four chariots (Zach. 6: 1:8).

[11] Ascension of Christ. For Bawit see P. du Bourguet, *The Art of the Copts*, 1967, 35. See also : R. Wessel, *Coptic Art,* 1977 and J. Cledat, *The Monastery and Necropolis of St Apollonius at Bawit*, 1961.

[12] *The Book of Durrow*: see D. T. Rice, *op. cit.*, 250. Wilson, *op. cit.*, pl. 22.

[13] L. Nees, *The Gundohinus Gospels*, 1977.

[14] See note 3 above.

[15] The sixth-century Syriac page; see D.T. Rice, *op. cit.*, 70 and J. Beckwith, *op. cit.*, pl. 18.

[16] R. Milburn, *Early Christian Art and Architecture*, 1988, ill. 180. Egyptian (coptic) textiles, whose dates are inevitably uncertain, may well go back to the third century if not before : see Milburn, *op. cit.*, ill 16.

[17] R. Stokstad, *Medieval Art*, 1986, pl. 16.