

WHAT'S A NICE GOD LIKE YOU DOING IN A PLACE LIKE THIS?

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Therefore your end is on you,
Is on you and your kings,
Not for a fire in Ely fen,
Not that your gods are nine or ten,
But because it is only Christian men
Guard even heathen things.¹

THE RIDDLE OF CONVERSION

Conversion to Christianity has been traditionally regarded as a psychological phenomenon, an interior change which involved the individual convert realising that the old religion 'was wrong and the new is right'.² However, the process of conversion rarely conformed to this model and usually involved whole socio-political groups encountering the new faith and making corporate decisions to adopt it. Christianity came to Anglo-Saxon England through the mission of Augustine, sent by Pope Gregory the Great to the kingdom of Kent in 597 CE. Medieval missionaries generally approached the king and effected the conversion of the people by converting him, and all those bound to the king by ties of loyalty 'converted' at the same time.

The motives of the Anglo-Saxon kings were often spiritually dubious, in that they perceived the missionaries as emissaries of a powerful centralised culture on the continent, to which it would be advantageous to belong. Coupled with this was the realisation on the part of the missionaries that it was virtually impossible to instil a basic knowledge of the doctrines of Christianity into the vast majority of converts, and that superficial changes would have to suffice until the new faith penetrated osmotically over generations. Pope Gregory wrote to Mellitus, one of Augustine's companions, in 601:

the idol temples of that race should by no means be destroyed, but only the idols in them. Take holy water and sprinkle it in these shrines, build altars and place relics in them...When the people see that their shrines are not destroyed they will be able to banish error from their hearts and be more ready to come to the places that they are familiar with, but now recognising and worshipping the true God...³

It is clear that Gregory intended only the outward forms of the old religion to be preserved, and these only to facilitate the people's acceptance of the new doctrines. However, the interrelationship of form and content is such that the meanings inherent in the forms were carried over into Christianity. Traditional Germanic society was transformed by Christianity, but Christianity was also transformed.

This transformation can be seen in the *Heliand*, also known as 'The Saxon Gospel', a remarkable Saxon text produced in the ninth century by an anonymous monastic author. In this work Christ is a warrior, all the towns of the gospels are hill-forts, the three wise men are warriors and thanes, John the Baptist is called a soothsayer, and the 'Lord's Prayer' contains 'secret runes'.⁴

THE DECORATION OF CHURCHES

Early Christianity shared the cautious attitude of Judaism to all forms of representational art. However, as the church became more influenced by Greco-Roman culture, the utilisation of art for devotional and pedagogical purposes displaced the initial suspicion of representation. Romanesque architecture developed from the fifth to the twelfth centuries and was characterised by gorgeously decorated walls, usually depicting stories from the Bible and the lives of the saints. The illiteracy of the faithful meant that these illustrations were educational, familiarising the congregation with the content of the faith.

However, the possibilities for syncretistic beliefs inherent in the context of the conversion of northern Europe often resulted in artistic ornamentation on churches and Christian monuments, such as tombstones and standing crosses, depicting the gods and heroes of the old religion. These depictions seemingly cannot be explained in Christian pedagogical terms. This paper will analyse the ornamentation on three standing crosses from north-west Britain, and three carved churches from Norway.

THE RUTHWELL, BEWCASTLE AND GOSFORTH CROSSES

The date of the acceptance of Christianity in Cumbria and south-west Scotland is the subject of scholarly debate, with dates ranging from the mission of Saint Ninian in the Late Roman period to the Anglo-Saxon missions of the seventh and eighth centuries being suggested. Ruthwell, on the north shore of the Solway Firth, is close to Ninian's episcopal seat at

Whithorn in Dumfriesshire. The great cross contained in the church at Ruthwell has Biblical scenes on the wider faces, with Latin and runic inscriptions. There is a 'desert theme' in some of these scenes, with the depiction of Christ and the beasts, and also of John the Baptist.⁵ The narrow faces of the Cross are covered in inhabited vine scroll.

The Ruthwell Cross is the least obviously syncretistic of the three crosses, in that its subject matter is unquestionably Christian and its iconography is derived from Classical models. The depiction of Christ and Mary Magdalene is within the Roman Christian representational tradition. It has been tentatively suggested that the Latin inscriptions could be based on parts of the *Vita S. Pauli* text, a well-known text in eighth and ninth century Anglo-Saxon England. This saint's life discusses Saint Anthony living as a hermit in the desert, and thus would connect the text with the desert scenes depicted.⁶

However, the runic inscription has more potential for speculation about syncretistic beliefs. It appears to be sections of the Anglo-Saxon poem 'The Dream of the Rood'. This poem functions like the *Heliand* in that it depicts Christ as a Germanic hero and the cross on which he is crucified as a faithful retainer, remaining with his lord until death. This poem is evidence for the 'Germanisation' of early medieval Christianity, in which the mission-field cultures indigenised the faith brought to them from the Roman world.⁷ The Ruthwell Cross was probably erected between 730 and 750 CE, during the episcopate of Pecthelm of Whithorn. This dating has given rise to speculation that there may have been an Anglo-Saxon monastery at Ruthwell. The reasons for the erection of these crosses become clearer when the second cross, the Bewcastle Cross, is considered.

At Bewcastle there is a church built in the middle of a Roman fort somewhat north of Hadrian's Wall. The Cross has been dated to the eighth century: its cross head is gone, although it survived to the sixteenth century. The style of carving on the cross resembles that of Ruthwell in that there are naturalistic figures in a Classical style on the pictorial face. On the narrow faces there are Celtic knotwork and chequerboard patterns (which closely resemble the decorative elements of the great Insular Gospel manuscripts such as Lindisfarne, Durrow and Kells). There are two hints as to the reason for the erection of the cross: on one face there is a sundial, which may indicate the presence of a monastic community needing a time-keeping device to know the hours for the recitation of the Holy Office; and there is a now nearly illegible inscription indicating that the Cross was erected to celebrate a victory.⁸

This suggestion is interesting because of a passage in the Venerable Bede's *Historia*, which refers to the erection of a victory cross:

When King Oswald was about to give battle to the heathen, he set up the sign of the holy cross... it is told that, when the cross had been hurriedly made and a hole had been dug to receive it, the devout king with ardent faith took the cross and placed it in position... This place is called in English Hefenfelth, meaning 'the heavenly field', which name, bestowed upon it long ago, was a sure omen of events to come, portending that there the heavenly sign would be set up, a heavenly victory won, and heavenly wonders shown.⁹

The nature of the victory at Bewcastle has been debated. Many medieval Christian holy sites were re-used pre-Christian religious places. Bewcastle is a Roman site, with the nearby shrine of Cocidius, a Celtic deity. Therefore the site had religious connotations prior to Roman occupation. Angus Winchester, in a documentary made by Lancaster University, suggests that the victory recorded on the Cross may be that of Christianity over paganism. The inscription is severely weather damaged, and it is not possible to prove conclusively that this was the case.

The third cross to be considered, the Gosforth Cross, speaks most eloquently of the transition from the old to the new religion in Cumbria. Settlement at Gosforth reflects the Viking presence in the ninth and tenth centuries, with 'the Norse Cross and the hogback stones in the churchyard, and the numerous Norse place-names and personal names which occur in the district'.¹⁰ Gosforth is on the coast, and looks across the sea to Ireland, the Isle of Man and the Galloway peninsula of south-west Scotland. The remarkable tenth-century cross is a single piece of red sandstone, a symbolic tree of life, 'rooted in the earth but reaching toward Heaven'.¹¹

On the east face the only recognisably Christian scene is depicted - a crucifixion. The crucified Christ is depicted in traditional Scandinavian fashion, and is very different from the naturalistic Christ of the Ruthwell Cross. The south face depicts events from Norse mythology: at the base is the bound wolf, Fenris; above him Odin rides on horseback. The west face has Loki in chains with his wife Sigyn collecting the venom or the serpent which is torturing him at the base; in the middle is Odin; and at the top the watchman of the gods, Heimdall, is being attacked by two dragons. The north face shows Odin being attacked by a winged dragon.¹² Plausibly, these illustrations have been interpreted as referring to Ragnarok, the doom of the gods, which the poem *Voluspá* describes in detail:

Loud blows Heimdall, the Horn is on high, Woden talks with Mimi's head, the towering Ash Ygg-drasil quivers, the aged tree groans, the Giants have broken loose...¹³

The cross is weather-beaten, and to correctly interpret the imagery detail has been restored through the use of a computer. What then in the purpose of depicting these pre-Christian deities on a Christian monument? Winchester, in what sounds like a Christian apologetic, suggests that the depiction of Ragnarok indicates that the end of the old faith has been announced, and the cross is the beginning of the new faith. In addition to the Cross, Gosforth church has two hogback stones and the Fishing Stone, which depicts the myth of Thor fishing for the World Serpent with the giant Hymir. The top panel of this stone has a hart trampling on a serpent. The hart is often a symbol for Jesus. Winchester asks whether there is a parallel being drawn between the two panels: whether the reign of Jesus is not being contrasted with the reign of Thor? There is also an intriguing possibility, hitherto unexplored by scholars, that the link is the fishing motif: Jesus, after all, called the disciples to be 'fishers of men'.

It must be asked however, whether in the eyes of the beholder, who was likely to be poorly educated in the complexities of Christian doctrine, the imagery of the old gods at a Christian site of worship might not have proved confusing. The Christ figure on the Gosforth Cross is tiny, one minor design element which seems inadequate to the task of banishing all the familiar and powerful deities of the pre-conversion world. This is particularly the case when Graham-Campbell's contention that

the Gosforth Master was clearly familiar with Scandinavian mythology and the scenes he portrayed on the Gosforth Cross must have been ultimately based on Scandinavian representations... He also used a distinctive form of the Borre-style ring-chain pattern, related to that used on the Isle of Man, by e.g. Gautr... but the other way up¹⁴

is seriously considered. These stylistic similarities indicate a high level of contact between the ecclesiastical centre at Gosforth and the still-pagan Viking settlements in Scandinavia and the Isle of Man.

THE LEGEND OF SIGURD IN THE CHURCHES OF MEDIEVAL NORWAY

The figure of Sigurd, hero of the Volsunga Saga, is one of the best-known heroes in Scandinavian literature. In continental Germany he is Siegfried,

hero of the *Nibelungenlied*.¹⁵ Like the Norse gods on the Gosforth Cross, Sigurd and his companions from legend are often found in the context of a Christian church. There are exquisite carvings on this subject from three churches: Starkirba (dating from the first half of the thirteenth century); Mael in Upper Telemark (mid-thirteenth century); and Hylestad in Setesdal (twelfth to thirteenth century) among others.

While Sigurd was not a deity, and his presence in church was therefore less problematic than that of Odin or Thor, the Volsung legend nonetheless exemplified pre-Christian Scandinavian society. It was preserved in a number of literary sources: the late thirteenth century *Volsunga Saga*; several Eddic poems, including the *Sigrdrifumal*; and a brief reference in the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*. Its roots lie in the Late Antique period, and many of the dramatis personae, such as Jormunrekkr, Atli, and Gunnar, can be identified with historical barbarian leaders (Ermanaric the Goth, Attila the Hun, and Gundicarius the Burgundian).

The tale is complex, and when artists represented it they tended to concentrate on the early life of the young hero Sigurd, while he was apprenticed to the dwarf Regin. The central episode of this period is the killing of the dragon Fafnir. Regin, a smith, had forged the sword Gramr for Sigurd from the fragments of an older sword which his father had received from Odin.¹⁶ Sigurd then killed Fafnir, and was instructed by Regin to roast the dragon's heart. While performing this task Sigurd touched the heart, burned his thumb, sucked it, and was then able to understand the language of the birds above. From them he learned that Regin intended to kill him, and decided that he had to kill Regin.

The carvers who illustrated the story in the aforementioned churches were interested in the sword Sigurd wielded, and it is often depicted. In the written sources, Snorri Sturluson's *Skaldskaparmal* and the *Volsunga Saga* both refer to two swords - Gramr and Rithill. *Fafnismal* and *Skaldskaparmal* suggests that Gramr belongs to Sigurd and Rithill belongs to Regin. Sigurd uses the sword three times: to kill Fafnir; to cut out the dragon's heart; and to kill Regin.¹⁷

The wooden portal at Hylestad shows Sigurd assisting Regin in the re-forging of his father's sword; Sigurd slaying Fafnir with Gramr; and Sigurd roasting the heart of Fafnir, among others. These carvings show the influence of Christian European wood-carving stylistically, and are mostly elegant compositions in roundels.¹⁸ These are the best illustrations of the Volsung legend. They exemplify pre-Christian Germanic society in that they represent the warrior-hero as a desirable ideal. Christianity had struggled to

establish itself in Scandinavia as the local kings had rejected it as a religion fit only for women and children.

The question which must now be addressed is how these figures from the pre-Christian world were incorporated into Christian structures, and what consequences this has for our understanding of the type of Christianity accepted by the early medieval Germanic peoples?

CONCLUSION

In 797 Alcuin of York wrote to Speratus, a bishop of an as yet unidentified see in England, asking '*Quid Hinieldus cum Christo?*' (What has Ingeld to do with Christ?) This question played on that asked by Tertullian, the North African Church Father, around 200 CE: 'What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?' Both questions are about the relationship of Christianity and culture. Many Christians in the past considered the two were mutually exclusive: the action of conversion removed the convert's cultural context, and he or she entered Christianity a cultural *tabula rasa*. Of late the weaknesses of this position have been recognised and many scholars, missionaries and theologians have acknowledged that there are a multitude of Christianities.¹⁹

Conversion must be backed up with rapid infrastructural support if converts are not to forget the new teaching they have received, or allow it to meld with the old beliefs and cultural patterns they have always held. In early medieval Europe the establishment of monasteries performed this function, but the majority of people lived in remote villages and were not exposed to regular catechetical instruction. Ingeld, and all the gods and heroes of the old dispensation, remained real and important in their world. Moreover, both Christ and the old gods gained from the association: Christ was often identified with Thor, and this meant that for Christians Thor gained in stature because he was worthy to be compared to Christ; and in the pagan mind Christ gained from being considered worthy to be compared to Thor.

Alcuin's question would have only been answered with a resounding 'Nothing!' by ecclesiastics in early medieval England. For the nobility, Beowulf and Ingeld continued to provide models of behaviour, and their stories were highly valued as entertainment (and ultimately Beowulf was written down by a cleric).²⁰

So it is a mistake to ask 'What's a nice god like you doing in a place like this?' when Odin or Thor is encountered in a Christian church. The early

medieval Germanic Christian saw no discontinuity between the old and the new dispensations. Indeed, as has been remarked recently about the Franks Casket, their culture could balance all its constituent elements:

altogether, the scenes... present a curious mix of Germanic, Classical and Christian themes. The varied nature of the content of the panels seems to be a sort of encapsulation of known history in the form of significant events, all given more or less equal status. That is, that Weyland is no less a significant historical figure as Jesus.²¹

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