Ashley Cook

Thesis Proposal: The Liturgical Function and Medieval Perception of the
Ruthwell Cross

Art historians have given little attention to the possible liturgical function of Hiberno-
Saxon standing crosses, focusing instead on their iconography. For the early medieval
worshipper, a standing cross was not only a visual symbol, but also a three-dimensional,
tactile object, which served both a physical and spiritual purpose. The Ruthwell Cross,
dating from the eighth century, is one of the earliest and most celebrated examples of the
insular tradition. This eighteen-foot-tall cross is covered in figurative sculpture on its
four sides and includes inscriptions in both Latin and Saxon runes. In this thesis, I will
explore the function of the Ruthwell Cross and particularly the ways in which the object
was experienced by the medieval worshipper through physical perception and interaction.

The Inquiry/Problem

Current scholarship views the Ruthwell Cross as visual instruction for the viewer, and as
a calculated embodiment of Anglo-Saxon Christian ideology.¹ This thesis will examine
the Hiberno-Saxon tradition of the standing cross in terms of its function within the
Christian liturgical practices of the Anglo-Saxons. My inquiry into the ceremonial
function of the Ruthwell Cross will draw upon comparisons with similar standing crosses
of the time period, paying particular attention to their locations in relation to churches,
monasteries, and the landscape. Careful examination of the archaeological and

¹ Karkov, Catherine E., “Naming and Renaming: The Inscription of Gender in Anglo
Saxon Sculpture.” In Theorizing Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture. Catherine Karkov
topographical evidence will help to reconstruct the physical space that the Ruthwell Cross occupied. In this way I will attempt to position the Ruthwell Cross within its medieval space.

My analysis of the problem will also include an investigation of Anglo-Saxon theology and liturgical practices. I will examine sources such as Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of Britain*, sermons, and other forms of early Anglo-Saxon religious literature. This section will include a discussion of the “Dream of the Rood,” which is inscribed in runes on the Ruthwell Cross. In an effort to understand the way this poem relates to Anglo-Saxon viewers and the cross, itself, I will conduct a careful literary analysis of the work and explore its secondary scholarship. Finally, I will explore secondary historical sources addressing the conversion of England and the development of Anglo-Saxon Christianity, with particular attention to the organization of clergy and shape of the liturgy. In so doing, I hope to shed light on the possible ritual function of the Ruthwell Cross. Considering these issues, as well as the subject matter and form of the Ruthwell Cross, I will explore the problem of interaction between viewer and sculpture.

**Methods**

As a model for my methodology I draw upon the work of medievalist Bissera Pentcheva, whose research examines the purpose of Byzantine icons in liturgical processions, the perception of the medieval viewer, and how ritual uses conveyed political ideology.²

² Pentcheva also writes on the medieval perception of icons through the five senses.
While Byzantinists have recently engaged in discussions of art and interaction, scholars of early medieval Europe, in particular specialists in stone crosses, have yet to do so. Nevertheless, I would like to apply this type of contextualization to the Ruthwell Cross by investigating its function within Anglo-Saxon religious ceremonies, by considering its original physical space, and by probing factors influencing the medieval perception of the object.

**Previous Scholarship**

The body of scholarship surrounding insular art has increased dramatically within the past decade. Recent scholars have contributed to a lively discussion of Hiberno-Saxon art in terms of examining style, considering social and political implications, and even determining the concept of gender made apparent by the material culture of the Hiberno-Saxons. The work of art historian Catherine Karkov is particularly relevant to the proposed project, as her publications discuss the function of the cross in Anglo-Saxon Christianity and its significance in Anglo-Saxon art. In 2000, Karkov, literary scholar Sarah Keefer, and historian Karen Jolly began an interdisciplinary project entitled “The Cross in Anglo-Saxon England” which included three conferences and publications addressing the cross in different aspects of Anglo-Saxon culture. One of the three publications has been published and the two remaining are currently in press. This project has a website with links to all three conferences and an extensive and extremely

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helpful project bibliography. My project will greatly benefit from this webpage as a resource for my own research.

**Tentative Timeline for Research**

The timeline in executing my research for the Fall 2006 semester is as follows: during September, I will focus on the actual physical location of the original Ruthwell Cross—its proximity to an eighth-century church or monastery, and also its proximity to a settlement. Also, I will conduct a comparison of other eighth and ninth century standing crosses, like the Bewcastle Monument, and the corresponding topographical sites during this segment of my research. In October my focus will be on the appearance of the Ruthwell Cross and its iconography. I will research the relationship between the images themselves, the images and the inscriptions, and the ways that the viewer perceives the images and inscriptions together. I will also conduct a literary analysis of the poem, “The Dream of the Rood,” inscribed on the cross, which is an account of Christ’s Crucifixion from the viewpoint of the cross, itself. November will be dedicated to researching works of contemporary Anglo-Saxon religious literature and descriptions of liturgical ceremonies and feast days. I will also use secondary historical sources to determine the organization of Christianity in England.

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3 I will possibly be looking into the Annunciation and the Crucifixion imagery on the cross, in terms of a possible connection between ritual function and visual representation. Scholars, such as Eamonn O’Carrigain, have already studied the link between Annunciation and Crucifixion in Anglo-Saxon liturgy using the *Ruthwell Cross* and its runic inscription from “Dream of the Rood” as a model. The iconography of this cross presents a visual link between the Annunciation and the Crucifixion, so I will explore this and also research the liturgical ceremonies used to celebrate the feast day of the Annunciation and Good Friday.
In December I will compile all of my research, allow for extra time to research areas that I may not be able to predict at this point, and formulate a conclusion to my research work. In addition to my library research, I will also be sitting in on the first part of a UWM history class with Dr. Larsen entitled British History Until 1688 in order to gain historical and political context for my research.

**Possible Outcomes**

In writing this thesis, I hope to offer a more nuanced understanding of both the physical and the spiritual functions of standing crosses from the Early Saxon Period. One possible connection I hope to encounter is the pre-Christian influence of the Germanic Saxons on the iconography and objectification of the cross in Anglo-Saxon Christianity. I am also interested in considering the Christian traditions of the Celts and any impact that other local cultures may have had on the Anglo-Saxon understanding of Christianity. I also hope to discover the effects of the Christianity brought by missionaries from Rome in terms of the possible changes made in Anglo-Saxon Christianity. Perhaps these missions functioned to enact a standardization of Christianity in Britain, which would become apparent in the objects created for ritual use and in the actual rituals themselves. I am especially interested in the combination of both Latin and Saxon runes featured on the Ruthwell Cross and what this might reveal regarding the relationship between Anglo-Saxon and Roman-Christian traditions. The main purpose of the thesis, however, is to

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4 I will especially consider the liturgy of the feast days of the Annunciation and Good Friday, because of the Annunciation and Crucifixion imagery pictured on the *Ruthwell Cross*. 
inquire into art and interaction in the early Middle Ages. By focusing on the Ruthwell Cross and adopting an approach otherwise used in the context of Byzantine images, I hope to shed new light on a celebrated monument.
Image 1, *The Ruthwell Cross, 8th Century, Ruthwell, Scotland*
Bibliography


