

## The Dream of the Rood

The *Dream of the Rood* is one of the earliest poems in Old English poetry, as well as being one of the earliest examples of Old English literature. The longest surviving copy exists in the tenth century Vercelli book, an anthology of Old English poetry bound into a codex and which is housed in the Basilica of Sant'Andrea, in Vercelli, Italy. The manuscript itself contains over twenty homilies, which are interspersed with six poems. The book itself is in fact a *florilegium*, copied by a scribe onto manuscript at the end of the tenth century, who appears to have copied the works therein from a miscellany of sources. The scribe appears to have remained true to his source material and neither embellished nor changed the works with latter emendations, staying true to the structure, punctuation and dialect of his sources. The works which have been transcribed in the book are diverse in nature, not following a specific theme or sequence, and appear to have been selected for private reading and reflection. It is believed that the surviving copy of this poem is not a tenth century work, but possibly dates from the eighth century, or earlier still.



The Dream of the Rood, in the Vercelli book.

This suggestion that *The Dream of the Rood* is earlier than tenth century is based in part upon the fact that various extracts have been found to be inscribed on the Ruthwell Cross, which in itself dates approximately from the eighth century. The cross itself would have been approximately eighteen foot in height, and possibly was used in order to convert its visitors to Christianity. It is carved with scenes taken from the life of Jesus, including the Annunciation and the healing of the blind, together with runes

carved on the sides of the cross. During the Reformation in the sixteenth century, the cross itself was torn down and badly damaged, and it was not until many years later that the broken cross was eventually reconstructed.

The author of *The Dream of the Rood* remains unknown; however, owing to the presence of runic extracts and the dating of the cross to the eighth century suggest that the poem was reasonably well known and may have been in circulation amongst religious communities. Due to this likely proliferation of the poem, it might well be earlier in date still than the proposed eighth century date ascribed to it. Scholars have tentatively suggested two known Anglo-Saxon poets as possible authors: Caedmon and Cynewulf.



The Ruthwell Cross.

The scholar Daniel H. Haigh has proposed that the poem is by the hand of Caedmon. Haigh's suggestion is that the Cross itself was erected in the mid seventh century, in c. 665, basing his suggestion upon references made by Bede in the *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (*Ecclesiastical History of the English People*) in relation to Caedmon and his poetic talent. The little that is known of Caedmon is in fact directly attributed to Bede, informing his readers that Caedmon underwent a transformation following an inspired dream in which he went from being an illiterate herdsman to a great poet, singing hymns and composing poems glorifying God.

*Þa he ða þær in gelimlice tide his leomu on reste gesette ond onslepte, þa stod him sum mon æt þurh swefn ond hine halette ond grette ond hine be his noman nemnde: 'Cedmon, sing me hwæthwugu.' Þa ondswarede he ond cwæð: 'Ne con ic noht singan ond ic forþon of þeossum gebeorscipe uteode ond hider gewat, forþon ic naht singan ne cuðe.' Eft he cwæð, se ðe wið hine sprecende wæs: 'Hwæðreþu meahht singan.' Þa cwæð he: 'Hwæt sceal ic singan?' Cwæð he: 'Sing me frumsceaft.' Þa he ða þas andsware onfeng, þa ongon he sona singan in herenesse Godes Scyppends þa fers ond þa word þe he næfre gehyrde...*

*Þa aras he from þæm slæpe, ond eal þa þe he slæpende song, fæste in gemynde hæfde, ond þæm wordum sona monig word in þæt ilce gemet Gode wyrðes songes togeþeodde. Þa com he on morgenne to þæm tungerefan, þe his ealdormon wæs. Sægde him hwylc gife he onfeng, ond he hine sona to þære abbudissan gelædde ond hire þæt cyðde ond sægde. Þa heht heo gesomnian ealle þa gelæredestan men ond þa leorneras, ond him ondweardum het secgan þæt swefn ond þæt leoð singan, þæt ealra heora dome gecoren wære, hwæt oððe hwonon þæt cumen wære.*



The first page of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*.

When he there at a suitable time set his limbs at rest and fell asleep, then some man stood by him in his dream and hailed and greeted him and addressed him by his name: 'Caedmon, sing me something.'

Then he answered and said: 'I do not know how to sing and for that reason I went out from this feast and went hither, because I did not know how to sing at all.' Again he said, he who was speaking with him: 'Nevertheless, you must sing.' Then he said: 'What must I sing?' Said he: 'Sing to me of the first Creation.' When he received this answer, then he began immediately to sing in praise of God the Creator verses and words which he had never heard...

Then he arose from that sleep, and all of those (songs) which he sang while sleeping he had fast in his memory, and he soon added in the same manner to those words many words of songs worthy of God. Then in the morning he came to the town-reeve, who was his alderman. He said to him which gift did he bring, and he directly lead him to the abbess and made it known and declared to her. Then she ordered all of the most learned men and scholars to assemble, and to those who were present commanded him to tell of that dream and sing that song, so that it might be determined by the judgement of all of them: what it was and whence it had come. Then it was seen by all even as it was, that to him from God himself a heavenly gift had been given.



The 6th century Crux Vaticana, believed to house relics of the True Cross.

Haigh's attribution to the work as being that of Caedmon is based upon the high standard of the poetry, stating that Caedmon was the only English Christian poet of note prior to Bede. He infers that the dating of the poem's composition can be roughly aligned with the lifetime of that of Caedmon, and therefore,

he must be the author of the work. This idea has been backed up by the runic scholar, George Stephens, who claims there to be a runic inscription on the cross reading "Caedmon made me". Stephens echoes Haigh's theory of attribution of the poem to Caedmon, owing to lack of evidence of any other known poets during this period of history. Despite these brave suggestions, and apparent runic evidence, most scholars tend to disagree with Haigh and Stephens' theories. Furthermore, many question the attribution of the runic inscription proposed by Stephens as being to Caedmon.

The other candidate for the authorship of the poem proposed is that of Cynewulf, who lived approximately a century after Caedmon, in the late eighth century. Of Cynewulf's life, nothing is known other than what can be derived from his poetry. Two of his signed poems were found in the Vercelli book and scholars believe that owing to the presence of the two other poems that the scribe was using a common source, therefore all six poems in the book are actually his. It has also been suggested that there are marked similarities between the poem *Elene*, signed by Cynewulf, and *The Dream of the Rood*. *Elene* tells in part the story of St. Helena and her finding of the True Cross. The poem intersperses history and historical personalities, the most notable being Helena and her son, the emperor Constantine, with a tale of Judas. The poem tells of Judas' alleged conversion to Christianity, and the ensuing conflict with Satan as a result. *Elene* could be tentatively proposed as being an early form of allegory, with Helena representative of the Church, and Judas to be that of man, and the human condition. Both poems share do share similar themes such as a principal subject of both works being the Cross (or "rood", literally meaning "tree"), and its suffering alongside Christ.



The Vercelli book, complete with Saxon homilies and poems.

Sandra McEntire has discussed the importance placed in the devotion of the cross that arose from the fourth century onwards. McEntire states that the cross itself became a popular image to worship from the third century, and this devotion became more ardent from the fifth century onwards. This veneration begun in earnest in the wake of the supposed discovery of the true Cross. Liturgies were written to the devotion that was to be bestowed upon the Cross by Christians. In addition, grand ornate reliquaries were designed to house pieces of wood purporting to be from the Cross itself. In Christian worship, the Sign of the Cross began to become an intrinsic part of Christian ritual and doctrine by priests and worshipers alike. This sign was initially made by Christians upon their foreheads. However, this later extended to protect their whole body, and with prayers made, arms extended echoing the Crucifixion. The very shape of the cross was/is imbued with significant allegorical and cosmological meanings, as well as being recognised as a symbol for salvation.

The poem itself is unusual on numerous levels, although centred around the theme of the Passion of Christ, does not appear to have been influenced by either hymns or by the Gospels of the New Testament. The influences behind the composition of the poem remain obscure and cannot be pinned down to a specific text, Biblical or otherwise. It does seem to tie in with the Anglo Saxon belief to the person of Christ and the symbolic significance attributed to the cross at the time. Paradoxes are evident in the work. The rood/cross appears to be both triumphant yet suffering – mirroring the Christian message behind the Crucifixion, with the imagery of blood seeping from the resplendent, bejeweled cross in the prelude to the poem.

*Syllic wæs se sigebēam, ond ic synnum fāh,  
forwunded mid wommum. Geseah ic wuldres trēow,  
wædum geweorðod wynnum scīnan,  
gegyred mid golde; gimmas hæfdon  
bewrigen weorðlice wealdendes trēow.  
Hwæðre ic þurh þæt gold ongytan meahte  
earmra ærgewin, þæt hit ærest ongan  
swætan on þā swīðran healfē.*

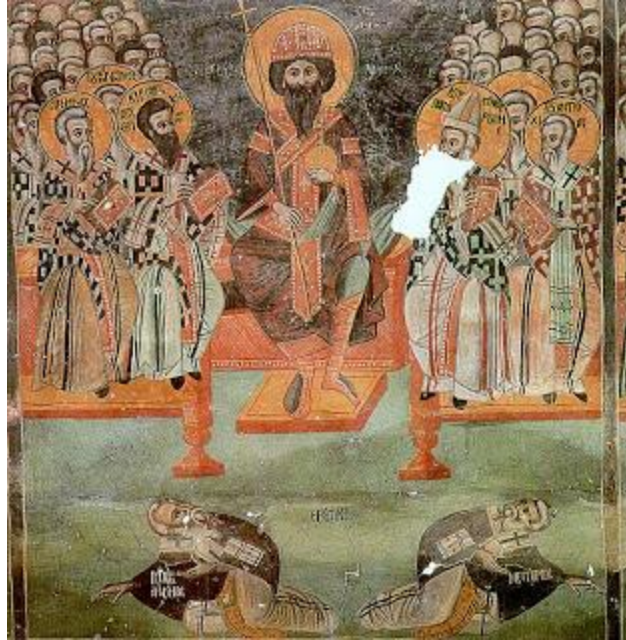
Sublime, the tree was, and I was foul with sin,  
wounded and filthy. I saw the wondrous tree

become more beautiful, bound with streamers,  
wound with gold; gems gathered nobly covering the King's tree.  
But through the gold I could glimpse,  
though buried by sinfulness,  
that it began to bleed on its right side.

The poem conveys the popular idea of a dual co-existence of paradoxical natures in Christ, man yet divine son of God, and through suffering bring about victory and redemption. At the time of writing the poem, these conflicting elements had caused a significant rupture in the forming of the Christian church. This state of affairs was due in part to the doctrine of docetism. Docetism has long been believed to have been integral to the teachings of the early Christian belief system of a number of the Gnostic schools. Part of the doctrine of these various schools was to refute the suggestion that God, in the form of Christ, had taken human form and been allowed to suffer and die on the cross. This was tied in with the belief that the human body is composed of matter, and therefore evil. However the spirit is considered eternal making the body of Christ that suffered and died on the cross nothing more than mere illusion. A number of the apocryphal Gospels contained such docetic ideas and thought; these included *The Gospel of Philip*, *The Acts of John*, and *The Gospel of Judas*.

This ideology extended further into the Docetists allegedly refusing to participate in the sacrament of the Eucharist, where the bread and wine represented the body and blood of Christ. Docetism was deemed heretical by the Early Church, eventually to peter out in Christian teachings. The interpretation of the significance of the Crucifixion was wholly dependent upon the stress in which the early Christians placed upon the actual event. The question of stress arose from whether it was to be seen as suffering or triumph, and if this event was due to an act Christ as God, or Christ as a man. Differing schools of thought veered from one philosophical doctrine to the other, in the belief that it was impossible to reconcile the two ideas into any form of unity.





The Third Ecumenical Council at Ephesus in 431.

Among the widespread Christian schools of thought in the fifth and sixth centuries were the Nestorians, headed up by the bishop Nestorius. His teachings including the revoking of the title bestowed upon the Virgin Mary of Θεοτόκος or *Theotokos* ('Bearer of God'). This repudiation of her title implied that Nestorius and his followers did not believe in the divinity of Christ. Nestorius himself was initially labelled a heretic by Eusebius, bishop of Dorylaeum, and later by the Patriarch, Cyril of Alexandria. As a result, Nestorius was excommunicated by the Pope, Celestine of Rome, and officially denounced as a heretic in 431 at the Council of Ephesus. This was met with objections from the Eastern Church, led by John I of Antioch. Nonetheless, Nestorius was sent into exile to a monastery in the Great Oasis of Hibis, where he was to die several years afterwards. For many centuries the belief that Nestorius was guilty of heresy for his beliefs was held by many orthodox Christians. The exception to this being the Assyrian Church of the East, where he is honoured as a saint.

In the mid eighteenth century, a copy of a manuscript entitled the *Bazaar of Heracleides* was discovered. This copy, in Syriac, was apparently written by Nestorius towards the end of his life, in which he repudiates the charges of heresy laid against him. The doctrine in the *Bazaar* suggests that Nestorius affirmed his belief in the dual nature of Christ - "the same One is twofold". Despite Nestorius and his followers appearing to have acknowledged the two natures of Christ, they seemed to have overemphasized his humanity over his divinity. This heresy led to a school of thought wherein the followers were called the Monophysites; an antithesis to the teachings of Nestorius, which placing emphasis upon the divinity of Christ over his human nature. This school of thought was also later considered to be heretical in its teaching and refuted by the Church Fathers.



With so much debate and dispute between these (and other) schools of thought, the Christian Church in Rome held the Council of Chalcedon in 449. At Chalcedon, the council decided that Jesus Christ had indeed been one person but that he had two natures: the human and the divine. This definition was confirmed by Pope Leo I in his *Tome* wherein he identified the characteristics and attributes of Christ which made him human, but at the same time those which made him divine. Through this work, a description for Christ's life and nature were established, and is still recognised by most Christians as orthodox to this day. However, it did not put a complete end to the dispute over the divinity of Christ, and other so-called heresies arose over the centuries, provoking further dissent.

As touched upon in the previous article [The Culdee, the Copts, and the Celtic Church](#), the British Isles and Ireland were open to influences outside of the Church of Rome and her doctrines. Although Christianity was prevalent in the Britain and Ireland during the Anglo-Saxon era, the isolation and remoteness of the islands themselves did not mean that the ecclesiastics and clergy, relatively newly converted to the Christian creed, did not question some of doctrine from Rome, despite not having the philosophical heritage of say, Greece or Rome. It seems likely that, although not as many of the teachings of those accused of heresy would have reached British shores that both through trade routes with Spain, Egypt and beyond, that it was through the instruction *against* heresy that the early English church fathers would have become further aware of their existence.

Such instruction would have been found in readily circulated works, such as those of Ambrose, Augustine and Jerome and their reinforced stance against heresy. These attitudes are mirrored in the works of Bede and his commentaries on the Gospels. These commentaries clearly draw their stance from other works, and through their repudiation of heretics, it is clear that Bede was at least aware of their existence if not their doctrines. It is uncertain how the unorthodox dogma would have been greeted on British shores, whether with curiosity or with and might have given rise to the questioning of teachings coming from Rome. The Anglo-Saxons were far from an uncultured, barbaric race and would have had, at the very least, an understanding of the theological teachings of their new, widespread Christian beliefs, yet would have had neither the fanatical zeal nor philosophical reason to dispute doctrine. A synod was held in Hatfield in 679 to determine the doctrine and beliefs held by the seventh century Anglo-Saxon church. The synod, led by Theodore, Archbishop of Canterbury, condemned heretics and their teachings such as Nestorius, and affirmed belief in existing doctrine, including Leo's *Tome*. Therefore, by extension, it seems unlikely that the author of *The Dream of the Rood* would not have been aware of the Christological debate taking place as to Christ's divinity/humanity.



A mediaeval representation of Council of Chalcedon

Although the aspects of Christ's suffering and triumph on the Cross were to be separated into two separate aspects in the Middle Ages, *The Dream of the Rood* successfully manages to weave the two ideas into his poem. The Crucifixion was seen during the Mediaeval era as being one of suffering and anguish by Christ on the cross, with the ultimate conclusion, his death on the cross. His triumph was to come following the Harrowing of Hell, and in his resurrection from the dead on the third day. The words of the poet depict a considerably different portrayal from the orthodox image of Christ. Christ is portrayed as a warrior and hero, and the actual crucifixion as a conflict and salvation or redemption as his victory. This imagery of Christ as a chivalrous knight was to largely die out until it returned in the allegorical motifs adopted by the idea of courtly love; the knight battling to the death to save the lady he loves and his lady-love representative of his church, and mankind. This allegorical motif is equally apparent in the later *Piers Plowman* by William Langland.

Christ's heroism is emphasised in *The Dream of the Rood*, by his acceptance of his quest. He approaches the tree/cross with bravery and determination, strips, and then ascends it. This idea is consistent with the motifs of the Crucifixion in the Early Church, it was only in Mediaeval imagery that Christ was depicted as suffering under the cross despite the synoptic Gospels suggesting that the cross itself was in fact carried for some of the journey by Simon of Cyrene. Again, the Mediaeval commentaries on the Gospels and the subsequent Stations of the Cross in Catholic churches have shown the soldiers gambling for Christ's garments before he was crucified. The Early Church father, Ambrose, suggests the opposite in his commentary on St. Luke, in that Christ removed his clothes willingly. Again, this theme is akin with

that of a warrior stripping himself in preparation for battle. This voluntary stripping and subsequent ascension is played out in *The Dream of the Rood*. Christ's death upon the cross is not detailed in the poem, the poet simply tells of his presence there.



An illuminated version of Piers Plowman.

*Ealle ic mihte  
feondas gefyllan, hwæðre ic fæste stod.  
Ongyrede hine þa geong hæleð, (þæt wæs god ælmihtig),  
strang ond stiðmod. Gestah he on gealgan heanne,  
modig on manigra gesyhðe, þa he wolde mancyn lysan.  
Bifode ic þa me se beorn ymbclypte:*

I was able to destroy

all the enemies, nevertheless, I stood firmly,

The young hero stripped himself the (that was God Almighty)  
strong and resolute. He ascended onto the high gallows  
brave in the sight of many, there, since he wished to release mankind  
I trembled when the man embraced me. However, I dared not bow to the earth,  
fall to the surface of the earth, but I had to stand fast:  
I was raised as a cross.

Scholars have placed much emphasis upon the treatment of the cross, for its humility at having to bear Christ upon it. The device used by the poet of making the Cross speak is unusual but not unique to the poem. In the passage of one of the apocryphal Gospels, the Gospel of Peter, the Cross is said to possess human attributes and one point does indeed speak. The gospel itself was rejected by the Early Church fathers when compiling the books to be included in the Canon of the New Testament. A fragment of the gospel was recovered in 1886 by Urbain Bouriant in Akhmim, where it had been buried with an Egyptian monk, in a grave dating from the eighth or ninth century. Despite the work having been officially excluded, it appears that the work was considered valuable and important enough to have been buried, possibly with its owner, some five or six centuries after its proscription.



The partial remains of the Gospel of Peter, found in a 8th-9th century grave.

In conclusion, *The Dream of the Rood*, is clearly influenced by the writings of Cynewulf, if in fact he wasn't the actual author of the poem. However, as evidenced by runes on the Ruthwell Cross, the poem may well have been also influenced by the earlier Biblical inspired works of Caedmon. *The Dream of the*

*Rood* is important in that it is not simply a poetic interpretation nor paraphrase of the Canonical Passion stories presented in a style that would have been immediately recognisable to its contemporary readers. The poem allows its present readers an insight into understanding the Christian doctrine of the early English Church. In addition, despite its misgivings, it is still a richly textured work; full of beautiful yet dramatic imagery, allegory, and devotion.

*"The Dream of the Rood," Echoes of the Gnosis blog, April 19, 2012 accessed 6/11/15.*

*<http://echoesfromthegnosis.blogspot.com/search?q=Dream+of+the+rood>*