



A Proto-*The Dream of the Rood* Tradition? From the Ruthwell Cross to Vercelli Text

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The Dream of the Rood, as a canonical Old English text, has long attracted critics' attention and invited various interpretations. Slightly different from the majority of Old English poems, *The Dream of the Rood* has two related versions, the inscriptions on The Ruthwell Cross and the Vercelli manuscript.¹ Though their connections are generally verified², few critics are willing to view them in line with a single tradition and interpret them accordingly. This essay argues that both versions share a common ancestor, named in this essay as Proto-*The Dream of the Rood* tradition, and the Ruthwell poem might be representative of its early formulations³; the paradoxical element of the portrait of Christ should then be understood as a natural byproduct of elaborating the tradition.

The Vercelli text manifests traces of composite authorship. As early as 1905, critics have noticed the changing tone at Line 77 and suggested that the second half might come from a different poet.⁴ Their argument centres on the inferior projection of simultaneous emotions in the second half of the poem. Neidorf analyses hypermetrical clusters and finds that clusters frequently appear in the first 77 lines whereas the second half occupy none of such features.⁵ Wording repetition further attests to the nature of composite authorship in the Vercelli text. *Behaldan*, 'to behold', is used five times in the first half of the text, but never appears in the second half.⁶ Despite the textual details that affirm the composite authorship, thematic unity is not compromised.⁷ Plot flows naturally from the dreamer in the dark to being inspired by the cross and seems to be immune from the differences brought by stylistic choices.⁸

¹ Mark C. Amodio, *The Anglo-Saxon Handbook* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), p. 193.

² Sarah Larrat Keefer, 'The Dream of the Rood at Nones on Good Friday', in *Poetry, Place, and Gender: Studies in Medieval Culture in Honour of Helen Damico*. ed. by Catherine E. Karkov (Kalamazoo: West Michigan University, 2009), p. 47.

³ This hypothesis is partially based on the estimated erected date of the Ruthwell Cross and follows the assumption that the runic inscription was originally on the Cross. Linguistic devices employed in the inscription clearly demonstrate the close alignment to the eighth century Northumbria dialect. See *The Dream of the Rood*. ed. by Bruce Dickins and Alan S. C. Ross (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd.), pp. 12-13. Conner proposes an alternative setting of the runic poem in the 10th century on the ground that runic inscription on a monument was rare in the 8th century, and linguistic devices might be a result of mimicking an archaic style of Northumbria dialect. See Patrick W. Conner, 'The Ruthwell Monument Runic Poem in a Tenth-Century Context', *The Review of English Studies*, 59:238(2008), 25-51 (p. 48). Such perception ignores the creativity of the Ruthwell Cross and overlooks the details of the analysis in linguistic forms. Howlett has concluded that no evidence of intentionally imitating an older style has been found. For full analysis, see D. H. Howlett, 'Three Forms in the Ruthwell Text of the Dream of the Rood', *English Studies*, 55:1(1974), 1-5 (p. 5). Other reasons that validate this hypothesis will be discussed later.

This essay thoroughly acknowledges that chronological sequence of different manuscripts does not necessitate directly the judgement of the alignment. Numerous studies on early manuscripts in other cultures indicate that a later manuscript could as well preserve the original tradition with special editing efforts. The alignment judgement could only be reached in a close comparison between their contextual factors. The closer the contextual elements resemble, the less necessity for altering the tradition to appropriate it. See Liu, X. G. (刘笑敢), '出土简帛的方法论启示' [Methodological Inspirations from the Excavated Texts] in *简帛思想文献研究: 个案与方法* [Research on Thoughts Inscribed on Bamboo and Silk: Cases and Methodologies] ed. by Liu Xiaogan, Zheng Jixiong, Liang Tao (Beijing: Dong Fang Chu Ban She, 2019), pp. 26-28. Dirk Meyer, *Philosophy on Bamboo: Text and the Production of Meaning in Early China* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), p. 2.

⁴ See Carol Braun Pasternac, 'Stylistic Disjunctions in *The Dream of the Rood*', in *Old English Literature: Critical Essays*. ed. by R. M. Liuzza (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 404-405.

⁵ Leonard Neidorf, 'The Composite Authorship of the *Dream of the Rood*', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 45(2016), 51-70 (p. 59).

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 62

⁷ Pasternac, 'Stylistic Disjunctions in *The Dream of the Rood*', p. 405.

⁸ Edward B. Irving, 'Crucifixion Witnessed, or Dramatic Interaction in *The Dream of the Rood*', in *Old English Literature: A Guide to Criticism with Selected Readings*, ed. by John D. Niles (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), p. 267.

The pattern of composite authorship explicitly falsifies the possibility that *The Dream of the Rood* might be a single-author text. The untouched thematic unity dictates a strong oral tradition that is still lively in its composing time. It gives birth to various accounts synthesised in the Vercelli manuscript. The tradition functions similar to a repertoire where key themes and wordings are stored; individual authors, when retelling the story, could draw the elements within and recover similar versions of the original stories. Hence, until the 10th century when it is collected in the manuscript, the tradition is still not rigidly codified and permits potential reediting or rearrangement. The Ruthwell poem, in close similarity with sections of *The Dream of the Rood*, is arguably also a descent of this tradition, and is likely to well preserve its outlook in the 8th century.⁹ The tradition then might contain the dream frame, but it did not enter the inscription due to reasons unknown.¹⁰ The Ruthwell Cross is situated 'inside the Ruthwell parish church'¹¹ and needs to shoulder some communal functions and form an essential part of public rituals.¹² Therefore, the Cross should *a.* be interesting and accessible enough to the lay participants *b.* reflect religious traits that better connect with major Christian themes and liturgical rituals.

The demand of the Cross seems to highly match with the established sources of the Proto-tradition. The heroic traits in *The Dream of the Rood* draw from the common perceptions in Anglo-Saxon society and offer a more accessible frame for locals to approach and understand christianity.¹³ Though critics tend to emphasise deviations from gospel traditions, the core scene in *The Dream of the Rood* tradition, the crucifixion, is nevertheless a direct borrowing from the gospels.¹⁴ The episode where the incoming disciples to free Christ from the torments on the Cross highly resembles the gospels with only minor changes.¹⁵ Apart from the gospel influences, other sources of influence such as the Good Friday rituals and the Annunciation are also contributing to the formulation of *The Dream of the Rood* tradition.¹⁶

Apart from the match analysed above, the geographic location of the Cross seems to further suggest the close alignment. As Hinton notes, the poem seems to also draw from the Celts - influenced penitential tradition.¹⁷ The Cross, in the story, is faithfully and outwardly expressing its sins that it does not actively defend God. In breaching its secret, the monument itself is encouraging the participants to confess their sins and restore their mental equilibrium interfered by the hidden sins. The purification initiated by Christ is projected to the participants. Ruthwell is particularly close to the Celtic regions and may naturally receive its influences. When erecting the Cross, faithfully inscribing *The Dream of the Rood* tradition could also demonstrate some native elements, better connecting to the public.

The correspondent contextual parallels between the Ruthwell Cross confirm that the Ruthwell Cross is likely to model the established elements in the Proto-tradition faithfully, hence, reflecting the authentic outlook of this tradition in its time. From the Ruthwell to the Vercelli manuscript, this

⁹ Existing literature only confirms that *The Dream of the Rood* and the Ruthwell Cross derive from the same or similar ritualistic practices. See *famonn í Carragáin, Ritual and the Rood: Liturgical Images and the Old English Poems of the Dream of the Rood Tradition* (Toronto: The British Library and University of Toronto Press, 2005), p. 9. My argument here does not entail the reading that the runic poem on the Ruthwell Cross is the direct ancestor of the Vercelli text, nor the Ruthwell poem is the original full text of this tradition, but intends to make one step forward by explicating that Ruthwell poem is closer to the original tradition.

¹⁰ The tradition was born in a monastic setting and might primarily target clergies in the monastery in the first place. The special arrangement of the text highlights the role of the narrator and enables the audience to relate to this figure. The dreamer frame offers a character that searches a means of conversion 'from sins to spiritual heroism', echoing the monks who seek a comprehensive understanding of Christian doctrines. Therefore, the dream frame offers a relatable figure for its original audience and might be an integral element of this tradition. See *famonn í Carragáin, 'Vidi Aquam: The Liturgical Background to the Dream of the Rood 20a: 'Swætan on Ða Swiðran Healfe'', Notes and Queries*, (1983), 8-15 (p. 12). and Bedingfield, *The Dramatic Liturgy of Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 224.

¹¹ Pamela O'Neill, 'A Pillar Curiously Engraven; with Some Inscription upon it': What is the Ruthwell Cross? (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2005), p. 13.

¹² *famonn í Carragáin, Ritual and the Rood*, p. 10.

¹³ John V. Fleming, 'The Dream of the Rood' and Anglo-saxon Monasticism', *Tradito*, 22(1966), 42-72 (p. 67).

¹⁴ The deviations are mainly about who brought the Cross. The gospel traditions select either Christ himself or Simon of Cyrene. See *famonn í Carragáin, Ritual and the Rood*, pp. 2-3.

¹⁵ Keefer, 'The Dream of the Rood at Nones on Good Friday', p. 54.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ Rebecca Hinton, 'The Dream of the Rood', *The Explicator*, 54:2(1996), 77-79 (p.78).

tradition should undergo a series of changes. Details could be edited in and out; the characteristics of the dreamer, the Cross, and Christ could be enriched. In the Vercelli text, the heroicised Christ and Cross seem unable to reconcile¹⁸. The Cross, as a hero, should defend its lord and not be as passive as the text shows. The heroicised Christ is equally in conflict with the religious Christ. Christ as a warrior should not surrender to his enemies easily whereas the religious Christ must perform it in search of the redemption for all.

Modern scholars, viewing the text isolatedly, attempt to resolve the contradiction by theorising the Cross as a weapon¹⁹ or introducing causality into the story (i.e. the Christ was heroicised first, so the Cross was heroicised subsequently).²⁰ Viewed in a synthetic perspective with the Ruthwell poem, the paradox seems to manifest only in the Vercelli text whereas the older poem seems to be immune from it. The presence of the paradox only in a later text suggests that the original tradition might not contain this element; and its root may be not the intrinsic dichotomy of the heroic and religious, but the overwhelming emphasis and repetition of both elements through its development.²¹

The Ruthwell poem starts plainly with [+ *Ond*]geredæ hinæ God almehttig ('Almighty God stripped himself')²² whereas the Vercelli adopts the wording of 39a *þa geong hæleð* ('the young warrior')²³. The Vercelli text directly activates mental schema about the heroic traditions and establishes an image of a ruthless warrior. The preceding 39b *þæt wæs God ælmihtig* ('that was God almighty') forges a strong aggregate of heroic-religious Christ. Ruthwell poem avoids allocating Christ with the identity of warrior explicitly and directly transitions to the scene where Christ climbed onto the gallows.²⁴ The Vercelli text supplies *strang ond stiðmod* ('strong and resolute') to further elaborate the heroicity of Christ.

When depicting religious elements, the Ruthwell poem is comparatively more discreet and only introduces a religious background when explicating the man who 'wished to mount the gallows'²⁵ is God. The Vercelli text adds *þa he wold mancyn lysan* ('then he wished to redeem mankind') in 41b. The statement clearly demonstrates the God's will to sacrifice and suggests a transcendent image of God (i.e. God is an ideal and selfless figure). The manuscript further sanctifies God through the description of the reaction of the nature when Christ sacrificed.

'... bystro hæfdon
bewrigen mid wolcnum wealdendes hræw,
scorn sciman; sceadu forð eode,
wann under wolcnum. Weop mal gesceaft,
cwiðdon cyninges fyll.
(52b-56a)

'... Darkness had
hidden the ruler's corpse with clouds
shining in splendour; shadow went forth
dark under clouds. All creatures wept
lamented the king's death.'

¹⁸ Even the Vercelli text collector shows his confusion through the compositional arrangement. For full details, see *f. î*. Carragáin, 'How Did the Vercelli Collector Interpret The Dream of the Rood', in *Studies in English Language and Early Literature in Honour of Paul Christophersen*, ed. by P. M. Tilling (Ulster: The New University of Ulster), p. 92.

¹⁹ Michael Cherniss, 'The Cross as Christ's Weapon: the Influence of Heroic Literary Tradition on The Dream of the Rood', *ASE*, 2(1973), 241-52 (p. 247).

²⁰ Jill Frederick, 'At Cross Purposes: Six Riddles in the Exeter Book', in *Cross and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England: Studies in Honour of George Hardin Brown*, ed. by Karen Louise Jolly, Catherine E. Karkov, and Sarah Larratt Keffer (Morgantown: West Virginia University, 2007), p.53.

²¹ The Ruthwell poem does not highlight the heroic role the Cross played in the Crucifixion. Therefore, analysis featured with both heroic and religious elements in these two version predominantly focuses on the image of Christ.

²² Text and translation (including following) on the Ruthwell Cross is reprinted from *ð* Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, pp. xxiii-xxvii.

²³ Text of The Dream of the Rood (including following) is reprinted from Richard Marsden, *The Cambridge Old English Reader*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 232-234. My translation.

²⁴ *ð* Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, pp. xxiii-xxvii.

²⁵ *ibid.*

The dramatic weather conditions, as entailed by the weeping creatures, documented in the manuscript highlights the supernaturalness of Christ. The nature is described as if it were in a deep bereavement. The reaction of the nature alludes to his identity of a truly almighty and divine deity, who should be in firm control. The depiction suspends and even overthrows readers' attempt to characterise Christ with human or heroic qualities. The overwhelming references to the religious Christ in the Vercelli text indeed projects his majesty and divinity, yet also places it in a dilemma between the heroic and the religious. The Ruthwell poem, only sketching the major plot actions, manoeuvres the borderline between these features and avoids entering such a controversial zone. Hence, the paradox of the Christ and the Cross may be a later phenomenon in the tradition and only reflect a gradual elaboration of this tradition.

In conclusion, this essay has analysed the close relationship between the Ruthwell poem and *The Dream of the Rood* and attributed them to a single Proto-*The Dream of the Rood* tradition. The Ruthwell poem, originated in circa the 8th century, is likely to be more closely aligned with the Proto-tradition. It is not only chronologically earlier but also shares similar contextual factors to the informing sources such as being situated in a monastic-like setting, shouldering ritualistic practices, and within the sphere of Celtic influence. Moreover, the Proto-tradition may be less paradoxical in terms of the characterisation of Christ and the Cross. Later development of this tradition might increasingly draw elements from heroic and religious tradition for further elaboration. The paradoxical outlook in the Vercelli manuscript might be formed when the effects of such practices gradually break the intricate equilibrium of Christ as both a heroic and divine figure.

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