There is at the Victoria and Albert Museum at South Kensington a remarkable plaster cast, the facsimile of one of the two beautiful obelisks of Anglo-Saxon workmanship, which like far-reaching voices speak to us across the gulf of at least nine centuries.

The interest which surrounds these ancient crosses is of a twofold nature. There is the marvellous art expressed in the sculptured stones themselves, and there is the mysterious charm of the runes with which the stones are inscribed. The art is of a very high order, and in the opinion of archaeologists such as Haigh, Kemble, Professor Stephens, and others, better than anything of the kind produced in mediaeval times, before the beginning of the thirteenth century.

The kingdom of Northumbria extended at its most flourishing period as far north as Edinburgh, so named after the great Northumbrian King, Edwin, its southern limit being, as its name implied, the river Humber. Thus, the Ruthwell Cross in Dumfriesshire, and the Bewcastle Cross in Cumberland, belonged alike to Anglia; for although Dumfries formed part of the kingdom of Strathclyde, the territory to the east of Nithsdale was generally reckoned a part of Northumbria, and if we were less hampered by our modern geographical limits and boundaries, we should better realise that the land north and south of the Tweed was one and the same country, without distinction of race or language. And as if in solemn protest of the political barriers, which were set up in the course of ages, these two obelisks, the one now in Scotland, the other in England, continue to point heavenwards, each bearing upon their faces the same grand old Northumbrian language, which is the mother-tongue of all English speaking people.

Both crosses have been, down to the present day, the subject of much diversity of opinion among antiquaries, first with regard to their respective ages, and secondly as to the authorship of the inscriptions on the Ruthwell Cross. The celebrated Danish antiquary, Dr. Muller, considered that the Ruthwell Cross could not be older than the year 1000, and he arrived at this conclusion by a study of the ornamentation, which he placed as late as the Carlovician period, the style having been imported from France into England. Muller, however, though a good archaeologist, was not a runic scholar, and Professor George Stephens maintained* that not ornamentation merely, but a variety of other things must also be taken into consideration, and that these are often absolute and final, so that sometimes the object itself must date the ornamentation. Then Dr. Haigh, who had passed his life in the study of the oldest sculptured and inscribed stones of Great Britain and Ireland, stepped in and pronounced "this monument (the Ruthwell Cross) and that of Bewcastle to be of the same age and the work of the same hand; and the latter must have been erected A.D. 664-5."*

* Old Northern Runic Monuments, Afterwrit, p. 431,

He was led to this conclusion not by the ornamentation, but rather in spite of it; and in consideration of the runic inscriptions, which he declared had not only passed out of date on funeral monuments as late as the year 1000, but as he read the name of Alcfrid on the Bewcastle Cross, he inferred both that and the Ruthwell Cross to be productions of the latter half of the seventh century. The inscription, of which we will treat more particularly later on, is to the effect that the obelisk was raised to the memory of Alcfrid, son of that King of Northumbria, who decided to celebrate Easter
according to the Roman precept. Alcfrid died about the year 664, and thus when we consider the similarity of the ornamentation, and the character of the runes on both obelisks, there seemed good reason for the above inference.

Dr. Haigh further remarked that the scroll-work on the east side of the Bewcastle monument, and on the two sides of that at Ruthwell was identical in design, and differed very much from that which he found on other Saxon crosses. In fact, he knew of nothing like it, except small portions on a fragment of a cross in the York museum, on another fragment preserved in Yarrow Church, and on a cross at Hexham. There are, however, several other such stones which were unknown to Dr. Haigh, and engravings of them may be seen in Dr. John Stuart's magnificent work on The Sculptured Stones of Scotland.

At Carew, in Pembrokeshire, runic crosses of the Saxon period without figures may be seen, and there is a runic cross at Lancaster with incised lines and a pattern in relief, supposed to be of the fifth or sixth century. The sculptured stones of Meigle in Scotland have no runes. Runes were, as it is well known, the characters used by the Teutonic tribes of northwest Europe before they received the Latin alphabet. They are divided into three principal classes, the Anglo-Saxon, the Germanic, and the Scandinavian, bearing the same relation to each other as do the different Greek alphabets. Their likeness to each other is so great that a common origin may be ascribed to all. They date from the dim twilight of paganism, but were for a time employed in the service of Christianity, when after being imported into this country where they were first used in pagan inscriptions cut into the surface of rocks, or on sticks for casting lots, or for divination, they were at last made to express Christian ideas on grave crosses or sacred vessels.

"In times," says Kemble,* "when there was neither pen, ink, nor parchment the bark of trees and smooth surfaces of wood or soft stone were the usual depositaries of these symbols or runes--hence the name run-stafas, mysterious staves answering to the Buchstaben of the Germans.


We may observe in passing, that the word Buchstaben, beech-staves, is a direct descendant of these wooden runes.

As early as 1695 antiquaries were busy with the Ruthwell Cross, but at the beginning of the nineteenth century profound ignorance still reigned in regard even to the language which the runes were intended to convey. Bishop Gibson, in his additions to Camden's Britannia, described the cross vaguely as "a pillar curiously engraven with some inscription upon it." In a second edition this reads, "with a Danish inscription." Later it was thought to be Icelandic, and it was Haigh who first thought that Caedmon and no other was the author of the runic verses which he deciphered, considering that there was no one living at the period to which he assigned the monument, who could have composed such a poem but the first of all the English nation to express in verse the beginning of created things.

In 1840, Kemble published his Runes of the Anglo-Saxons, showing that the Ruthwell Cross was a Christian monument, and that the inscription was nothing less than twenty lines of a poem in Old Northumbrian or North English.

Meanwhile, in 1822, a German scholar, Dr. Friedrich Blume, had discovered in the cathedral library at Vercelli in the Milanese six Anglo-Saxon poems of the early part of the eleventh century, which discovery aroused great interest both in Germany and in England. Blume copied the manuscript, and Mr. Benjamin Thorpe printed and published it. The learned philologist Grimm again printed the longest of the poems in 1840, but it was Kemble who identified the fourth poem of the series The Dream of the Rood with the runic inscription on the Ruthwell Cross, and it was he who first suggested that all the poems in the Vercelli Codex, consisting of 135 leaves, were by Cynewulf, who like Caedmon was a Northumbrian, and lived in the second half of the eighth century. It was Kemble also who first gave The Dream of the Rood a modern English rendering.*

* A translation of the fragment in Old Northumbrian had indeed been attempted at the beginning of the nineteenth century by Mr. Repp and also by a disciple of the great Fin Magnusen, Mr. J. M. M'Caul, but the least said about these versions the better, both being wide of the mark. Being imperfectly acquainted with Old English they made the most
absurd statements regarding the purpose the monument was supposed to have served.

So far steady progress had been made, except one step which is now stated by modern Anglo-Saxon scholars to have been a false one. Professor Stephens following Haigh thought he could decipher on the top stone of the cross the words Cadmon Mae Fawed, and inferred therefrom that the Cross Lay of which fragments were inscribed on the Ruthwell monument was the work of Caedmon, "the Milton of North England in the seventh century." But according to the evidence of the latest expert who has examined the cross, Caedmon's name has never been on it, and both linguistic and archaeological considerations assign the inscription to the tenth century, and probably to the latter half of it. This critic declares that there is "no shadow of proof or probability that the inscription represents a poem written by Caedmon."

Sweet, on the other hand* describes The Dream of the Rood, in the Vercelli Book, as an introduction to the Elene or Finding of the Cross which is unmistakably claimed as Cynewulf's own by an acrostic introduced into the runic letters which form his name, and goes on to assert that the Ruthwell Cross gives a fragment of the poem in the Old Northern dialect of the seventh or eighth century, "of which the MS. text is evidently a late West Saxon transcription differing in many respects from the older one." He considers that The Dream belongs to the age of Caedmon, and that the poetry of Cynewulf was an adaptation of older compositions.


There can be now no possible doubt but that the poems in the Vercelli Codex are by Cynewulf, the controversy henceforth being as to whether The Dream of the Rood or the inscription on the cross is the older. Cynewulf, being a Northumbrian, presumably wrote in the old Northumbrian language such as is inscribed on the cross, but all his poems as they have come down to us have passed into the West Saxon tongue, and if the fragment on the Ruthwell Cross is, as modern archxologists aver, later than the Dream in the Vercelli Codex it must be a re-translation into the dialect in which it was first written. A further difficulty lies in the fact stated by Haigh that runes had passed out of date on funeral monuments as late as the year 1000, and we can indeed scarcely conceive of their use at the very eve of the Norman Conquest when the written language had long become general.

Nevertheless, as far back as 1890, Mr. A. S. Cook, professor of the English language and literature in Yale University, suggested that the inscription on the Ruthwell Cross must be as late as the tenth century and subsequent to the Lindisfarne Gospels. "A comparison of the inscription with the Dream of the Rood shows that the former is not an extract from an earlier poem written in the long Caedmonian line which is postulated by Vigfusson and Powell, and by Mr. Stopford Brooke, since the earliest dated verse is in short lines only, and since four of the lines in the cross inscription represent short lines in the Dream of the Rood, it shows that the latter is more self-consistent, more artistic, and therefore more likely to be or to represent the original; and it shows that certain of the forms of the latter seem to have been inadvertently retained by the adapter, who selected and re-arranged the lines for engraving on the cross."


The theme both of the Dream and of the Elene, another of the poems in the Vercelli Book, is the Cross, and Cynewulf, says Mr. Cook, is the first old English author, of whom we have any knowledge, to lay emphasis upon the Invention of the Cross, and Constantine's premonitory dream. "If," he continues, "we consider Bede's account of Caedmon, we are struck by one analogy at least: in each case a command is imparted to the poet to celebrate a particular theme--in the first, the creation of the world; in the second, the redemption of mankind by the death of the cross. As the one stands at the beginning of the Old Testament, the other epitomises the New. The later poet may have had the earlier in mind, and may not have been unwilling to enter into generous rivalry with him; but there is this notable difference, Caedmon does not relate his own dream, while Cynewulf, if it be Cynewulf, does."

Elsewhere he says The Dream of the Rood, apart from its present conclusion, represents Cynewulf (as we believe) in the fullest vigour of his invention and taste, probably after all his other extant poems had been composed. Admireable in itself and a precious document of our early literary history, it gains still further lustre from being indissolubly associated with that monument which Kemble has called the most beautiful as well as the most interesting relic of Teutonic antiquity."

And again, "So far from the Cross-inscription representing an earlier form of the Dream of the Rood, it seems rather to have been derived from the latter, and to have been corrupted in the process." *

* Ibid., p. xvi.

Thus the controversy remains in 1905. and until some further light is shed upon the difficult question—for it is impossible to regard Mr. Cook's solution as in all points satisfying—we must be content with the results obtained.

Let us now consider the poem itself by the help of Professor Stephens' admirable translation. Essentially a Christian composition, it preserves all the Gothic strength and virile beauty of the old pagan forms. The modern words, Saviour, Passion, Apostles, etc., do not once appear. Christ is the "Youthful Hero," He is the "Peace-God," the "Atheling," the "Frea of mankind." He is even identified with the white god, Balder the Beautiful. His friends are "Hilde-rinks" or "barons." In His crucifixion He is less crucified than shot to death with "streals," i.e., all manner of missiles which the "foemen" hurl at Him. The Rood speaks and laments; it tells the story of the last dread scene of Christ's suffering, His entombment in the "mould-house," the triumph of the Cross in His resurrection, and the entry of the "Lord of Benison" into his "old home-halls."

The doctrine is as sober as an orthodox, theological treatise, though the poem is essentially a work of the most fertile imagination, a drama with all the rich accessories that tradition offered in the matter of colouring and effect. And it is withal exquisitely simple, devout, and noble, breathing a spirituality strangely at variance with the semi-barbaric people with whom the poetry had originated.

Stephens' translation is full of poetry, the translator having retained the lilt of the original, together with many of the old English words which, if they need a glossary, is only because we have gradually lost the meaning in the substitution of weaker terms.

It is interesting to compare the fragments still legible on the Ruthwell Cross with the South Saxon rendering in the Vercelli Codex. Where the lines are worn away or mutilated the MS. may supplement them:--

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Northumbrian version to the on the Cross.</th>
<th>South Saxon version according Vercelli Codex.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Girded Him then</td>
<td>For the grapple then girded him youthful hero--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God Almighty</td>
<td>lo! the man was God Almighty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When He would</td>
<td>Strong of heart and steady-minded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step on the gallows</td>
<td>stept he on the lofty gallows;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fore all Mankind</td>
<td>fearless spite that crowd of faces;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mindfast, fearless</td>
<td>free and save man's tribes he would there.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bow me durst I not</td>
<td>Bever'd I and shook when that baron claspt me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>but dar'd I not to bow me earthward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rood was I reared now.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Rich King heaving
The Lord of Light realms
Lean me I durst not
Us both they basely mockt and handled
Was I there with blood

Gushing grievous from . . .
gushing grievous from his dear side,

... when his ghost he had uprendered.

... How on that hill

... have I threwed

... dole the direst.

... All day viewed I hanging

... the God of hosts

... Gloomy and swarthy

... clouds had cover'd

... the corse of the Waldend.*

... O'er the sheer shine-path

... shadows fell heavy

... wan 'neath the nelkin

... wept all creation

... wail'd the fall of their king.

Christ was on Rood-tree

But fast from afar

His friends hurried

Athel to the Sufferer.

Everything I saw.

Sorely was I

With sorrows harrow'd

... I inclin'd

... yet humbly I inclin'd

... to the hands of his servants,

... striving with might to aid them.

... Straight the all-ruling God they've taken

... heaving from that haried torment

... Those Hilde-rinks** now left me

... to stand there streaming with blood drops;

With streals all wounded

Down laid they Him limb-weary

O'er His lifeless Head then

stood they,

Heavily gazing at Heaven's... heavily gazing at heaven's Chieftain.

* Wielder, Lord, Ruler, Monarch,
** Hero, from Hilde the war god. Battle brave, captain
*** Anything strown or cast-a missile of any kind.

Kemble's rendering of the poem, wonderfully correct and conscientious as a translation, is inferior in poetical merit to
that of Stephens, who, as we see, instead of choosing modern words, is careful to retain many of the picturesque old rune equivalents. This we perceive at once if we compare Stephens' four lines, beginning "Christ was on Rood tree" with Kemble's:

"Christ was on the Cross
but thither hastening
men came from afar
to the noble one." *

* Poetry of the Vercelli Codex.

The runes are sharply and beautifully cut into the margin of two sides of the Cross, the inside spaces being filled with sculptured ornaments, representing a conventional, clambering vine, with leaves and fruit. Entwined among the leaves are curious birds and animals devouring the grapes. On the southeast and south-west sides are figures taken chiefly from the Bible, with Latin inscriptions instead of runes. In the middle compartment of each of these sides is the figure of our Lord with a cruciform halo. On the south-west side of the Cross He is represented as treading on the heads of two swine, His right arm upraised in blessing, a scroll being in His left hand. Around the margin is a legend in old Latin uncial letters, "Jesus Christ the judge of equity. Beasts and dragons knew in the desert the Saviour of the world."

In the corresponding panel on the south side, St. Mary Magdalen washes the feet of our Lord, who is standing nearly in the same position. The remaining subjects are--a figure which has been sometimes described as that of the Eternal Father, and again as St. John the Baptist, with the Agnus Dei; St. Paul and St. Anthony breaking a loaf in the desert; the Flight into Egypt; two figures unexplained; a man seated on the ground with a bow, taking aim; the Visitation; our Lord healing the man born blind; the Annunciation; and traces almost obliterated, of the Crucifixion, on the bottom panel of the south-west side.

On the top stone is a bird, probably meant for a dove, resting on a branch with the rune which Stephens took to be Cadmon Mae Fawed. On the reverse side of this stone are St. John and his eagle, with a partly destroyed Latin inscription, In principio erat verbum. All the subjects are explained by a legend running round the margin, but which is in parts scarcely legible.

Sir John Sinclair, in his account of the parish of Ruthwell, mentions a tradition, according to which, this column having been set up in remote times at a place called Priestwoodside (now Priestside), near the sea, it was drawn from thence by a team of oxen belonging to a widow. During the transit inland the chain broke, which accident was supposed to denote that heaven willed it to be set up in that place. This was done, and a church was built over the Cross.

But opposed to this story is the fact that the obelisk is composed of the same red and grey sandstone which abounds in that part of Dumfriesshire, and it seems far more likely that the Cross was here hewn and sculptured than that it should have been brought from a distance after having been adorned in so costly a manner and with a definite purpose. It was held in great veneration till the middle of the sixteenth century, and being specially protected by the powerful family of Murray of Cockpool, the patrons and chief proprietors of the parish, it escaped the blind fury of the iconoclasts till 1644. Then, however, it was broken into three pieces as "an object of superstition among the vulgar."

For more than a century the column apparently lay where it fell, on the site of what had once been the altar of the church, and was made to serve as a bench for members of the congregation to sit upon.

In 1722, Pennant saw it still lying inside the church, but soon after this, better accommodation being required for the congregation, it was turned out into the churchyard to make room for modern improvements! Here it suffered greatly from repeated mutilations, the churchyard being then nearly unenclosed.

In 1802, the weather-cock of opinion having again veered round, the then incumbent, Dr. Duncan, desiring to preserve
this "object of superstition," now become a precious relic, had the main shaft removed to his newly-enclosed manse garden where it remained till 1887, when an apse being added to the church, the Cross was again enclosed within the building. Meanwhile two other fragments had entirely disappeared. The cross-beam has never been recovered,* but the top-stone suddenly reappeared in the following curious manner:

* Transverse arms were supplied in 1823. A. S. Cook, The Dream of the Rood.

A poor man and his wife having died within a few days of each other, it was decided to bury them both in one grave. For this it was necessary to dig deeper than usual, and in doing so, the grave-digger came upon an obstacle which proved to be a block of red sandstone with sculptured figures upon it. This block was found to be the missing top-stone of the Cross.

One point still needs explanation. When Pennant saw the Cross in the early part of the eighteenth century, before the buried fragment had been excavated, it measured 20 feet in height. At the present day, although the top has been replaced, the height of the column does not exceed 17 feet 6 inches, a circumstance that can only be accounted for by the supposition that the obelisk may have sunk several feet into the ground in the interval.

The spirit that breathes in The Dream of the Rood is strongly imbued with national elements. The doctrine and sentiments are strictly Catholic, but the poem is at the same time an epitome of what St. Cuthbert and the monks of Lindisfarne, the royal Abbess Hilda, Caedmon, and now it appears Cynewulf also had been long doing for Northumbria, in taking what was grand and heroic in the old heathen traditions, and leading up through them to Christianity. But if this influence can be distinctly traced in the runes on the Ruthwell Cross, yet another element is seen in its ornamentation, which carries us back to the Christian tombs in the Roman catacombs where its prototypes are to be found.

On the Bewcastle Cross there is less of the national element and more of the Roman, fewer runes and more of this kind of sculpture. A few feet from the parish church, and within the precincts of a large Roman station, guarded by a double vallum, stands the shaft of what was formerly an Anglo-Saxon funeral cross of most graceful shape and design. This column, 14 feet in height, is quadrangular, and formed of one entire block of grey freestone, inserted in a broader base of blue stone. The side facing westward has suffered most from storm and rain. It bears on its surface two sculptured figures, and the principal runic inscription. The lower figure, that representing our Lord, has been much mutilated by accident or design. He stands as He is seen on the Ruthwell Cross, with His feet on the heads of swine, as trampling down all unclean things. His right hand is uplifted in blessing, in His left hand is a scroll, Above is St. John the Baptist holding the Agnus Dei, and near the top are the remains of the Latin word Christus.

The runic inscription has been translated thus:

"This slender sign-beacon set was by Hwoetred, Wothgar, Olufwolth, after Alcfrith Once King eke son of Oswin Bid (pray) for the high sin of his soul."

Beneath these runes is the figure of a man in a long robe with a hood over his head, and a bird, probably a falcon, on his left wrist. This figure is supposed to represent Alcfrid himself. Immediately below the falcon is an upright piece of wood with a transverse bar at the top, possibly meant for the bird's perch. On the east side there are no runes, but a vine is sculptured in low relief within a border. Dr. Haigh observed that the design on this side was the same as on the two sides of the Ruthwell Cross.* The north and the south sides are in a state of good preservation, and are covered with a
beautiful design in knotwork, and alternate lines of foliage, flowers, and fruit. On the north side there is a long panel fitted with chequers, which have given rise to a good deal of controversy among antiquaries. Camden thought them to be the arms of the De Vaux family, and when this theory was exploded, Mr. Howard of Corby Castle reversed it, and suggested that the chequers on the De Vaux arms were taken from this monument. But the Rev. John Maughan, B.A., rector of Bewcastle, in a note to his tract on this place, cites instances of chequers or diaper-work in Scythian, Egyptian, Gallic, and Roman art, and proves from the Book of Kings that there were "nets of chequered work" in the Temple of Solomon. After remarking that this is a natural form of ornamentation he calls attention to the frequent use made of it in mediaeval illuminations.

* Archaologia Aeliana, p. 169.

** Archaeological Journal, vol. xi.

Above this panel are the words "Myrcna Kung," and over the next piece of knot-work is seen the name "Wulflhere" (King of the Mercians). Then follows another vine, and above all are three crosses and the holy name "Jesus." On the south side runs a runic inscription thus:

In the first year
of the King
of ric (realm) this
Ecgfrith."

The last line of the inscription is so broken that it can only be guessed at.*


Fine as this obelisk is, we should be at a loss to make out that it was ever a cross, but for a slip of paper which was found in Camden's own copy of his Britannia (ed. 1607 now in the Bodleian Library. On the slip of paper was written this memorandum: "I received this morning a ston from my lord of Arundel, sent him from my lord William. It was the head of a cross at Bucastle: and the letters legable are these on one line, and I have sett to them such as I can gather out of my alphabetts: that like an A I can find in non. But wither this may be only letters or words I somewhat doubt."

Neither Camden nor any one else got much further than this for many years; and the general ignorance of runes is the more to be deplored since it led to a carelessness and want of interest in the preservation of priceless relics, even among antiquaries. The stone which thus came into Camden's possession has utterly disappeared, and the inscription which he tried in vain to decipher, and which might have thrown light on a mysterious subject, is thus lost to us.

In conclusion, we may, for the sake of clearness, recapitulate, first: that although there can no longer be any reasonable doubt that the runes on the Ruthwell obelisk are by the Northumbrian poet, Cynewulf, it has by no means been satisfactorily proved that these runes are of a subsequent date to the West-Saxon version of the poem in the Vercelli Codex, but that probability seems rather to point to an earlier date than the second half of the tenth century; and secondly, that so close a resemblance between the two Crosses does not necessarily imply that they date from absolutely the same period. The royal obelisk at Bewcastle must have been a famous monument in its day, known and celebrated far and wide, and it would not be unlikely that even a hundred years later it might be called upon to serve, to some extent, as a model for that Cross which was to immortalise the Dream of which Northumbrians were naturally proud. If, however, the runes on the Bewcastle Cross fix its date as the latter part of the seventh century, those on the Ruthwell Cross cannot be earlier than the eighth century.

Had the zeal, directed nearly four hundred years ago against our national treasures, been bestowed on their
preservation, we should have reason indeed to congratulate ourselves on the beauty of many of our public monuments. Instead of mutilated remains, we should have works of art which, but for the gentle hand of time, would be as perfect as when they left the master's hand.

But there has never been a period when the intelligent study of the past, whether in palaeography, philology, or history, has been so highly cultivated as in the present day. If we have lost the inspiration that creates, we have, at least, learned to venerate and cherish the noble works of our progenitors.

(The end)

J. M. Stone's essay: Runic Crosses Of Northumbria

By J. M. Stone