THE GOSFORTH CROSS NARRATIVE AND *BEOWULF*

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The mid-tenth-century Gosforth Cross in Cumbria, England, exhibits a syncretism of Christian and northern Germanic culture. Scenes that seem to come from the Norse eschaton, or Ragnarök, appear carved on its four sides. Though most scholars agree on the source of the carved motifs, many disagree on the specifics of interpretation of the "text" of these scenes. W. S. Calverly has interpreted them exclusively in terms of Norse myths; R. Reitzenstein has supplied an account suggesting a purely Christian reading; A. B. Cook has allowed a double meaning, both Norse and Christian. Knut Berg sees only one explicitly Christian scene, the crucifixion on the east side, and views the whole as a conversion metaphor, an attempt to describe Ragnarök as a destruction of the old gods that took place with the coming of Christ and the new religion, Christianity (see Berg for a discussion of these opinions). Richard Bailey uses S. Bugge's phrase, "the pagan iconography of Christian ideas" (see Bailey 124) to suggest that the cross puts the story of Christ in terms a Nordic audience could understand, using the figures of their own mythology to present a heroically acceptable version of the death and resurrection of Christ.

Given the time and place of the sculpture, this syncretic view makes sense. Perhaps the cross represents, as Berg argues, a Tree of Life, on which the three levels of the world, the heavens, middle-earth, and the underworld, appear as Ragnarök occurs. As the viewer moves from the south, to west, to north, to east sides of the cross, a narrative appears. It shows first the beginning of the end as monsters break loose and attack the heavens, sun and men come under siege; then we observe the fall of some and survival of others in the world-fire begun during the battle against the monsters. Finally, we find the act of sacrifice and renewal that permits a new world, yet accounts for the suffering of those lost to evil in the old world. The scenes may be polysemous throughout, allowing the viewer to see the new religion in terms of the old metaphors, intended as a "side-by-side" text, as a juncture of two cultures, or as a visual aid to conversion.

Beowulf, too, is an artifact at once Christian and pagan, interlacing elements of both cultures (see, for instance, Bloomfield, Tietjen, and Parker), and the poem could have served a function parallel to that of the Gosforth Cross. As the sculpture exploits Norse symbols to acclimate viewers to the Christian world, the *Beowulf* poet used in part a "Christian iconography of pagan ideas" to reconcile converts to their pagan past or to facilitate simultaneous

consideration of two mythologies or cosmologies, so that one could be applied to understanding the other. Fred Robinson has argued the need of the *Beowulf*-poet's age to justify the contemporary world with its pagan ancestry, and James Earl has concluded that the poet made use of elements from both Christian and Germanic eschatology to lament, mourn, and finally renounce the heroic world in favor of the Christian world. Perhaps the poet opted for Judeo-Christian allusions such as Cain, the Flood, and battles with Apocalypse-like monsters placed within a Germanic world so that a converted Anglo-Saxon audience could see its past as an extension of the Christian world and retain a sense of grandeur in its forbears' exploits while maintaining an assurance of the hopelessness of the old beliefs in the light of the new ones.

Despite the difficulties of reading these time-worn texts, both give evidence of having arisen within a world familiar, if not entirely comfortable, with two mythologies and able to apply one metaphorically to understand the other. Both cosmologies exhibit a thorough concern with eschatological matters that seem central to both cultures and to the mutualized one formed from the juxtaposition of two warring but not irreconcilable worlds. Further, both cross and poem make use of polysemous images to direct the thoughts of their audiences toward end-times, as if, sermon-like, to prepare the viewer/reader for what must inevitably come. Both "texts" are, in Rothenberg's term, "janusian," looking at once into both worlds, Germanic and Christian, and yet they bear similar messages: prepare with faith and courage for what is to come.

Some recent work on the dating of *Beowulf* has tended to push the likely composition of the poem later and later, even as late as the manuscript date, circa 1025. One critic, Z. P. Thundy, in a 1986 article has suggested a date for *Beowulf* circa 930, based on the evidence of historical allusions in the poem. If that date were approximately correct, it would make *Beowulf* and the Gosforth Cross essentially contemporary. Interestingly, some scholars have dated *Völuspá*, an Old Norse poem that gives an account of Ragnarök, in the tenth century, and one, Wolfgang Butt, has made a case for *Völuspá*'s having a northern English provenance. Each of these three artifacts exhibits a tenth-century concern with eschatological matters that pervaded art of the time; their contemporaneity (and possible contiguity) might even allow for the possibility of mutual influence. And whether or not one may claim influence, a tentative reading of the text of the Gosforth Cross

suggests how such a study may inflect a reading of *Beowulf*.

If the cross does indeed represent a "pagan iconography of Christian ideas," one should perhaps try to see in its narrative the Christian story depicted through Germanic figures. Further, one should expect to find parallels to the Christian version of Ragnarök, that is, in the narrative in St. John's Apocalypse, or Revelation, and in the story of the death and resurrection of Christ. I would like to suggest that by making use of eschatological imagery, the sculptor has created a kind of parable for the understanding of Christian mysteries without derogating its Norse analogues.

Beginning with the south panel of the cross, we see, I think, a synchronic picture of the three-tiered universe just as the eschaton begins. At the bottom of the panel, the devil, or Loki in Norse terms, is still bound in hell. The horizontal interlace above him represents the separation of earth and hell. Next, reading upward, we find the horsed warrior figure, representing at once, along with the Norse figure of Oðin, Christ and the Christian soldier (seen in Germanic terms). The figure appears in middle-earth to show that Christ is God made flesh, that Christ is also a man, humanity's representative warrior on the cosmological scale, and that humanity is suspended between heaven and hell, with the potential to move either way. Above this Oðin figure a wolf or hound leaps a vertical interlace to attack a hart. The hart may be Eikþyrnir and the hound Garmur, as Berg suggests, and the vertical interlace may suggest that the division of heaven and all below is just being breached by the first attack, as the beast attacks the icon representative of Oðin and the top of the cosmological order. The beast at the top of the panel, probably, as Berg suggests, the wolf Fenrir, appears here synchronically, both before its escape and just as it attacks the sun: the lower head seems to be bound or gagged, whereas the upper head, free of bonds, can now engage in its attack upon the power of heaven. This beast also suggests imagistically the dragon of chapter twelve of Revelation, which begins the final battle before the renewal of the earth.

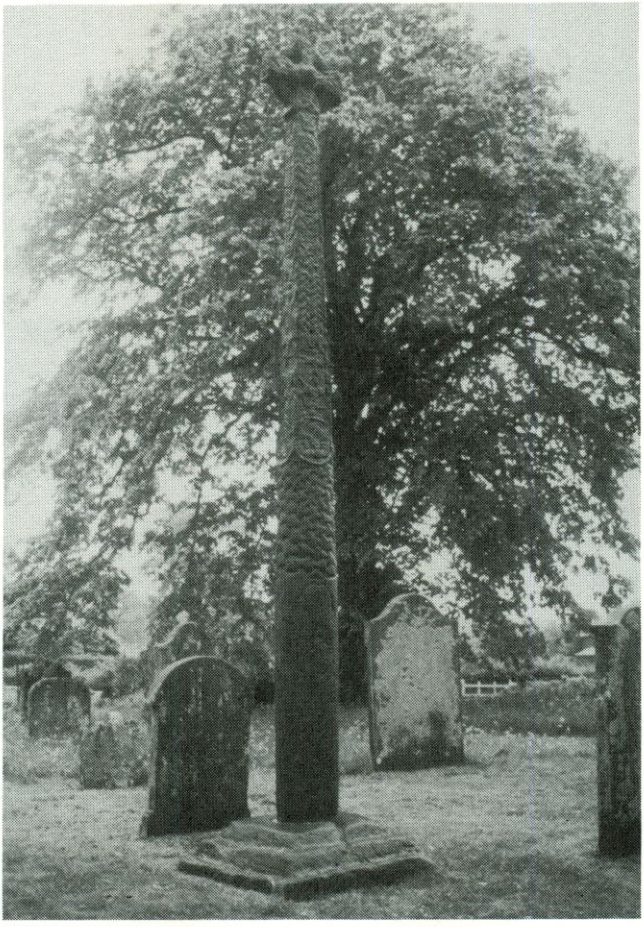
On the west side of the cross, the bottom scene presents Loki bound, suffering from the poison that drips from the serpent's fangs upon his face, as Sigyn, his wife, turns to empty the basin that she uses to catch the dripping poison. As Loki would writhe under the poison, an earthquake would occur, as Berg notes. This earthquake suggests the one in Revelation 11, though it need refer to no specific quake, since the earthquake is a standard sign of doom (e.g., Mark 13, Luke 21, Revelation 16). And Loki suggests, of course, the bound

Satan of Revelation 20. Though hell is yet unbreached, the middle of the panel shows a man with a horn holding off two attacking beasts, plus a horsed warrior sculpted upside-down. The figure with the horn, Heimdallur, guards Valhalla; the Christian analogue would be Gabriel or perhaps the final trumpet of Revelation 11, which precedes a prayer and then the appearance of the dragon in chapter 12. the two beasts may be Garmur and the Fenris-wolf; together they suggest the two beasts of Revelation 13. The rider stands upside down, I propose, to depict his fall or death. The sculptor may have intended to show Jesus's death by depicting the destruction of people and gods at Ragnarök, and he may have simultaneously sought to show the human destruction to accompany the end of the world, as in Revelation 19, when those who follow the dragon will perish. At the top of the panel the presence of the beast head continued from the south panel indicates that the heavens remain under siege, perhaps even as Jesus dies.

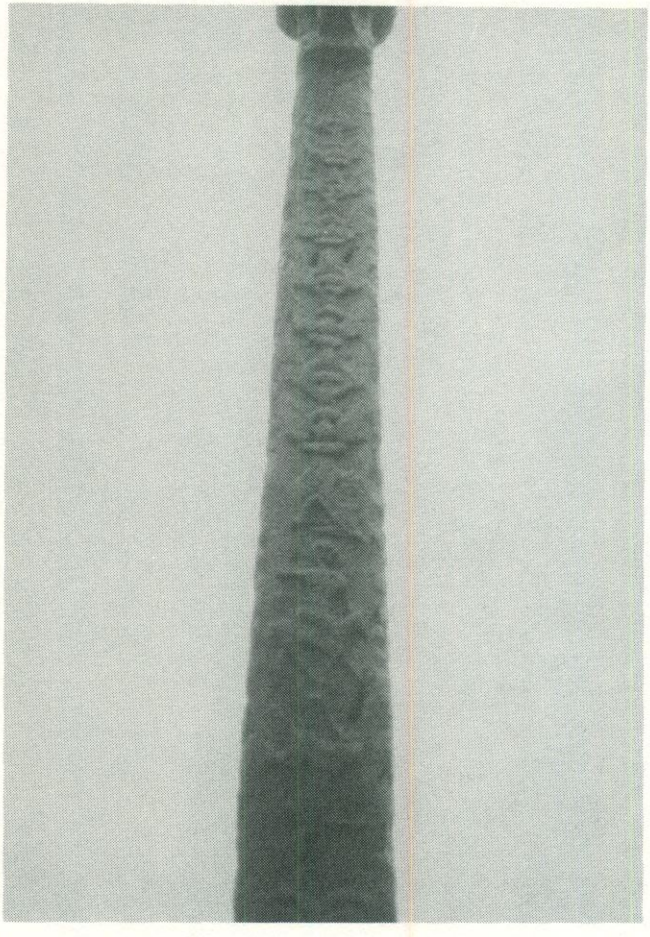
On the north panel an interlace rises up the shaft from the bottom of the cross, replacing the hell scene of the previous two panels. At this point Loki has escaped from hell, and the interlace may represent the fire that will consume the earth, or smoke from that fire, or it may be the body of one of the attacking monsters, or it may simply show that hell's inhabitants have been loosed from their bonds and hell is empty or, at this point, one with earth. Because of the consistency of the interlacing patterns, I tend to think that they represent something more than mindless decoration—normally, a particular animal, event, or relationship. Similarly, in Revelation 20 Satan is released until in the final battle he and his followers are consumed in fire. In the middle of the panel appear a warrior upright and one upside-down. I believe these icons to suggest both that in the final battle some will survive and some will fall—the children of the gods survive Ragnarök to found a new world—and that with his death on the cross, Christ is both dead and alive—dead so as to be resurrected, resurrected to promise new life for the faithful. At the top of the panel, the beast that has been facing the top of the cross is now facing the riders in the middle of the panel: it has turned its attentions to Christ, who is present on earth, and it is attacking heaven by attacking Christ.

To discuss the east side of the cross, I will begin with the crucifixion figure in the center of the panel, since it seems to me to represent the major purpose of the text as a whole. One can imagine

South Face



West Face



North Face

East Face

that the Germanic warrior-peoples had trouble accepting the idea of Christ's passive death at the hands of his enemies. The stories of Oðin's self-crucifixion and of Viðar's avenging his father's slaying by Fenrir may have provided metaphors through which the convert could make sense of and accept the sacrifice of Christ. The outline that surrounds this figure draws attention to it specifically, centralizing it in the narrative and separating it from the other figures without isolating it. In fact, blood drips from the figure's side down to the two figures standing below. These two figures do not so much represent the standard Longinus and Mary Magdalen, I think, as they do communicants: I take the line that connects the right-hand figure to the Christ-Oðin figure not to be a spear, but, by its curve and trajectory, a stream of blood. The male figure and the cup-bearing valkyrie-figure would then make sense as people of this world, suspended between heaven and hell, trying to catch the saving blood of Christ. As they do, they tread upon the heads (see Genesis 3:15) of the two-headed or self-destructive serpent in hell below. Perhaps these two figures represent Adam and Eve, whose sin established the need for Christ in the world; perhaps they wait in hell for Christ's redeeming blood. Or perhaps the valkyrie figure is the church, which offers Christ's blood even to those responsible for his death so that they too may be redeemed even as they stand at the brink of hell. These two figures may also represent the children of the Norse gods in a pose in which Christian art often depicts Christ, crushing the serpent beneath His feet. A "preoccupation with the twin themes of Doomsday and the Eucharist" typifies the time period of the cross (Backhouse, Turner, and Webster 133; see there an analogue in a photo of the Durham Cathedral House Library cross head).

Above the crucified figure one finds a clear representation of Viðar as avenging slayer of Fenrir. This scene, synchronic with the crucifixion scene, shows that Christ's death provides the redeeming act for us in this world, that Christ defeated Satan in the act of sacrifice and resurrection, and that Father and Son are one, the Son acting for the Father to redeem earth for heaven. The strangest part of this panel, given the reading I am suggesting, is the beast-head at the top of the panel, which seems still in the act of attacking the heavens. It could show that the siege of heaven by the power of evil continues even as Christ battles the devil for the soul of each one of us until the eschaton has ended and the world is renewed. Alternatively, the head does look to be disembodied, separated from its interlaced body-pattern in the center of the cross shaft. The scene

may show metaphorically that, with the crucifixion, the beasts have lost their power to harm the righteous, or it may show the death of the hound and the dragon preceding Viðar's slaying of the wolf at the conclusion of Ragnarök--the narrative maintains its polychronicity.

The interlace in the center of the east panel is of particular interest not only because it repeats the interlace of one of the beasts (probably the dragon) from the west panel, but also because it forms an interlocked *A* and ω much like that of the late-ninth/early-tenth-century Anglo-Saxon bell-mold fragment in the Gloucester City Museum (photographed in Backhouse, Turner, and Webster 138), with alpha and omega representing clearly Christian and apocalyptic allusions. The interlace of the top beast on the south panel and that of both beasts in the center of the west panel repeats one that sits above Þor in his boat on the Gosforth Fishing Stone (see the photo in Wilson 149), which depicts an incident in which Þor goes fishing for the Midgard Serpent, a "battle" to culminate at Ragnarök. I believe that a careful study of just the interlaces on the cross might turn up additional useful comparisons and show that the interlaces are not mere random decorations, but also played a part in the artist's narrative.

The east panel as a whole becomes a summary of the purpose of the first three panels, pointing to the power of Christ to save us at the time of the battle that brings the world as we know it to an end. This panel cements the conflation of the Christ story and the apocalypse into a visual parable that make sense as a conversion tool aimed at justifying a foreign but not entirely incompatible religion.

How, then, might this reading of the cross provide insight into *Beowulf*? In addition to *Beowulf*'s integration of Christian and pagan elements, it also makes use of apocalyptic or eschatological imagery, motif, and allusion, as numerous scholars have suggested. The Christian doomsday theme circulates widely through Old English poetry in general in poems such as *Judgement Day I* and *II*, *Christ*, *Christ and Satan*, and others, and the story of Christ on the cross appears seldom more beautifully than in *The Dream of the Rood*. Martin Green argues that "apocalypse articulates much of what the early Medieval world felt about the course of the world and the direction of history" (503), and, as Ursula Dronke suggests, might not the Christian poet as well as the Germanic borrow from the *native* as well as the imported mythology, especially to serve a Christian purpose? Dronke hints that some current version of something like *Völuspá* or *Muspilli* may have influenced the *Beowulf* poet, noting

that analogues to the stories of Þor's death, Baldur's death, the stolen necklace of Freyja, and the death of Elias (told in *Muspilli*) occur in *Beowulf*. Or, as Green notes, apocalyptic signs common to both Christian and Germanic worlds, such as nation rising against nation, earthquake, fire, flood, and the rising of "apocalyptic beasts," appear in the poem (517).

Dronke proposes a likely solution, that the Christian-apologist poet was using, even "diminishing the stature of, older myths for his Christian didactic purposes" (325). Or perhaps, as Earl argues, the Apocalypse provides a "myth of the end of our alienation from an ideal super-historical reality" (364), and the *Beowulf*-poet's focus on the "collapse of the heroic world" (387) allowed Anglo-Saxon readers the opportunity to mourn and discard their pagan past (370).

As does the Gosforth Cross, the *Beowulf* poet consistently made use of apocalyptic allusion and imagery. Grendel and Grendel's mother suggest the earth-beast and water-beast of Revelation as well as the two beasts attacking simultaneously on the Gosforth Cross. The dragon as the opponent of the great hero in the final battle also appears in the poem as well as in Norse mythology and Christianity. The blowing of the battle horn by one of the warriors at Grendel's mere calls to mind both Heimdallur's blowing his horn at Ragnarök and the angels' sounding their trumpets after the opening of the seven seals in the Apocalypse. The fire of the dragon recalls both that of Surtur's sword, which burns the old earth, and fire cast upon the earth in Chapter eight of the Apocalypse and the casting of death and hell into the lake of fire in Chapter twenty. And then, of course, there is the hilt of the sword that Beowulf uses to kill Grendel's mother, on which is written the story of the flood, the first Apocalypse. Images of supernatural battle and the fall of people and beasts fill all three artifacts, and each brings into question the fate of the human being after death and (by implication in *Beowulf*) the end of the world.

I tend to think that the apocalyptic/eschatological facets of the Gosforth Cross and *Beowulf* result from the attentiveness of both Christian and Germanic cultures to, even fixation with, the transience of the world and the need to come to grips with a mythology that places humanity ever at the brink of doomsday. Both artifacts make use of familiar stories or allusions to reflect upon their current purposes, one of which is to ask the audience to face up to the imminence of end-times, be they the end of the world, the fall of one's people, or one's own death. As the Gosforth Cross uses Germanic

myth and imagery to explain or reflect upon Christian mysteries, so *Beowulf* makes use of Christian references to help readers accept their pagan past so as to re-envision the pagan world view in Christian terms. Giants and Cain's kin persist in the world despite the Flood, as we find with Grendel and his mother, and apocalyptic beasts and dragons plunge the world into fear and fire, but the hero, Beowulf (as a Christ-type), arises in the midst of the pagan world to subdue them, though he, too, being human and not Christ, dies in the battle. And though Beowulf may be, as Margaret Goldsmith has argued, a proud pagan, he also exhibits, as Mary Tietjen shows, much of the "Christian ideal of the virtuous hero who rightly attributes his special powers . . . to the grace of God" (161). Beowulf the hero becomes for his Christian audience the ideal of its Germanic ancestry: though he be no Christ, he fought evil as he knew it. Thus the reader may at once reject pagan beliefs and yet revere his ancestors, as Earl argues, perhaps a necessary step in the process of conversion for a society deeply respectful of its warrior forbears. The Christian iconography helps the Anglo-Saxon make sense of and accept his pagan past and yet move on to the promise of redemption of a Christian future. Thus one may see both artifacts as conversion texts, and the reading methods one uses for one text create possibilities for reading the other, suggesting a commonality of artistic endeavor and perhaps encouraging further considerations of contemporaneity.

In addition, one gets a picture of tenth-century Christianity in England as existing in a syncretistic state with a substantial population incompletely converted and with an active conversion effort (or at least an active confusion or conflation) still taking place, an effort that did not reject the Germanic past, but used it in art and literature to teach Christian doctrine and history and to deal with the ever-present problem that *lif is læne*.

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