The Ruthwell Cross

The Early History of the Cross:
The story of the Ruthwell Cross begins in the last quarter of the 7th century AD, in the period historians call the 'Dark Ages.' Civilisation, brought in the wake of the Roman Legions that had conquered Southern Britain had quickly disappeared after they had withdrawn in the 4th century and what we now know as the separate kingdoms of England and Scotland had not yet come into being. The area to the north of the Solway was a part of the Anglian Kingdom of Northumbria known as Bernicia. Missionaries from Lindisfarne and Iona would have passed through this area and the origins of this monument are credited to them. Some writers have gone as far as to attribute the work to missionaries under the authority of Colman, Bishop of Lindisfarne, in about the year 680 AD. The Synod of Whitby had decreed that the Celtic Church of Columba, which had come from Ireland and the west, should adopt the Roman rule that had come in through the south. Colman and a number other Columban churchmen did not agree with this.

The Message of the Cross:
The purpose of the Cross is totally consistent throughout. The remaining picture panels (there were probably fourteen originally) on the front and back broad face of the Cross and the Latin inscriptions tell the story of the Life and Passion of Christ.

The panel opposite depicts the story from Luke's Gospel 'The Washing of the Saviour's Feet' vii, 37-38. The inscribed in Latin text is from the Vulgate version of the Bible. Translated it reads thus: "... standing at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head."

The opposite face of the Cross carries the tallest and best preserved of all of the remaining panels. It has been given the title "Christ in Majesty." The nimbus around the head of Christ closely matches that of the opposite panel but the delicate treatment of the garments is noticeably different.

The inscription, again in Latin, translates thus: "Jesus Christ, the Judge of Equity. Beasts and Dragons knew, in the desert, the Saviour of the world."

The narrower sides of the shaft, bordering the tracery of vine, bird, and animal symbols, carries an incised script of Runic characters. These columns of characters turned out to be the earliest known copy of an Anglo-Saxon poem, "The Dream of the Rood."

This poem or song is attributed to Caedmon, a monk from Whitby. Scholars had been totally baffled by the text until the 19th century. The discovery of a 10th century manuscript at Vercelli near Milan provided the key to the translation.
Edges damage has caused some of the text, both Latin and Runic, to be lost. Enough remains, however, to allow full translations. The Cross today still attracts the attention of scholars and tourists alike.
Ruthwell Cross - Early History:
An exact date for the Cross is not known. As far as can be determined, the story of this Preaching Cross begins in the last quarter of the 7th century. It is believed that Missionaries working between the early Christian centres on the islands of Lindisfarne in the East, Iona in the North West and Ireland travelled through Galloway bringing their Christian message to the pagan tribes of the area. They are credited with having designed, quarried and sculpted this great sermon in stone. Scotland and England were not yet Nations when this Celtic Cross was first set up to tell its message.

17th Century Events:
The more recent history of the Cross, and how it survived the excesses of the Reformation, is a fascinating story. But for the far-sightedness of one man, Rev. Gavin Young, this priceless relic would have been lost forever.

The Covenanting Assembly of the Church of Scotland, meeting in Aberdeen in 1640, decreed that this 'Idolatrous Monument' should be cast-down and destroyed. Unable to ignore the clear instruction of his Religious Superiors, but after some risky prevarication the Minister of the Parish, Gavin Young, did obey.

As one writer has put it, he contrived a solution which 'kept the word of promise to the ear and broke it to the hope.' The Cross was indeed cast-down but it was not destroyed. Some resulting damage most certainly occurred. The Cross probably broke or was deliberately divided into three pieces. The two largest picture panels nearest the base also suffered serious damage. One, which is the first panel of this narrative sequence in the 'Life and Passion of Christ' shows crude chisel marks which suggests it was deliberately obliterated.

The scene it depicts has been totally lost. It has been suggested that it could have been the 'Nativity Scene.' That would fit the overall scenario since the opposite panel, the last one of the narrative, which was not totally obliterated, shows 'The Crucifixion.' When this damage occurred is not certain. One writer has suggested that this was token destruction to appease those who advocated total destruction. Personally, I doubt that but can't offer a better answer! What would be the reason for destroying the 'Nativity Scene?'

The cross lay in a trench in the clay floor of the church for most of the next 300 years sometimes serving as seats for the congregation.

Church renovation in the late 18th century necessitated the removal of the Cross to allow a new floor to be laid. The transom beam near the top went missing around this time and has never been recovered.

Some twenty years later and now lying half-buried in the churchyard, the Cross attracted the interest of an equally far-sighted Parish Minister, Rev. Henry Duncan. He was a very industrious Parish Minister, whose work ably demonstrates how he held the total welfare of his Parish and its heritage close to his heart. Henry Duncan set about studying and preserving this sacred relic he had inherited. In
1823, he had it restored and set-up in the entrance to the grounds of the Manse and only a short distance from the public road. So once again this great 'Preaching Cross' proclaimed its Christian message for all to see. Thus displayed it became a focus of much academic study.

The credit for finally restoring the Cross to within the church goes to the Rev. James McFarlan who came to Ruthwell in 1871. Advised by friends that exposure to the weather was causing serious deterioration to the fine detail of the stone carving he resolved to restore the Cross to its former place within the church. Moving it was no small task and housing the Cross within the church would involve some not inconsiderable costs and major structural changes.

The Cross and its church setting, as we see it today, is the result of work carried out in the summer of 1887.

~Photographs and text courtesy of Sandy Pittendreigh of Dumfries, Scotland.

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