‘A pillar curiously engraven; with some inscription upon it’

what is the Ruthwell Cross?

Pamela O’Neill
Between Anandale and Eskdale lyeth Wachopdale, so called from the water of Wachop running through it; and is much of the same nature with the adjacent Countries already described. The most ancient monument remarkable hereabouts is St Ruth’s Church, where is a Pillar curiously engraven; with some inscription upon it.

Camden’s Britannia
1695

Behold unexpectedly I came across a cross of wonderful height which is in the church at Ruthwell with beautiful images telling the story of Christ, decorated elegantly and splendidly with vines, animals and incised on two sides with foreign but fluent letters ascending from the base to the summit and also from the summit to the base.

Reginald Bainbrigg
c1600

As I see it, the Ruthwell cross is an inelegant thing. What passes as reconstruction is an awkward mixture of five or six carved Anglo-Saxon stones – as we will see the number is uncertain and likely to remain so – and six blocks (one of which is best described as a wedge) of convenience from the nineteenth century cemented together with crude pointing which occasionally attempts to serve as modelling.

Fred Orton
1998

Anent the report of idolatrous monuments in the Kirk of Ruthwell the Assemblie finds that the monument therein mentioned is idolatrous, and therefore recommends to the Presbytery that they carefully urge the order prescribed by the Acts of Parliament anent the abolishing of these monuments, to be put to execution.

General Assembly of the Church of Scotland
1642
This book is based on a thesis which was submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Celtic Studies at the University of Sydney in 1999.

The minimum spanning tree programme used in the statistical analysis which forms an important part of the thesis was written to my requirements by my brother David Blackman, a freelance computer programmer, using Perl. Some of the preliminary experimentation for the analysis used MV Nutshell, developed by Richard Wright of the University of Sydney. I received help in various stages of the preliminary experimentation from Michael Barry, John Clegg and Michael Coleman.

I was assisted in preparing the appendices by Stephane Bowker, whose expertise and generosity with her time and equipment contributed greatly to their technical quality. Marie Dunn kindly proof-read a draft of the thesis.

I twice travelled to the British Isles to research this work. In 1996, I benefited from advice from Peter Hill and Senga Mitchell of the Whithorn Dig and Maree-Lee Haynes of Dumfries Museum. In 1999, I received helpful comments from Éamonn Ó Carragáin of University College Cork and Dan McCarthy of Trinity College Dublin. In Ruthwell, I was assisted by the Church of Scotland minister, Jim Williamson, who gave me access to papers in his possession and talked about the monument and the church. Rene Anderson, curator of the Savings Banks Museum in Ruthwell, was extremely generous with her time, resources and local knowledge. I was able to examine and photograph stone sculpture at many churches, museums and historic sites throughout the British Isles, and was sometimes assisted by attendants or curators. My 1999 travel was assisted by a grant from the Faculty of Arts at the University of Sydney.

I wish to thank my supervisor, Aedeen Cremin of Celtic Studies, whose advice, support and friendship over many years have been very valuable to me. My associate supervisors, Lyn Olson of History and John Clegg of Archaeology, were also extremely generous with advice, knowledge and time.

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My husband Andrew O’Neill acted as research assistant, proof-reader, travel agent and housekeeper as the need arose. I am extremely grateful to him for his support and patience. This book is for my children Mairi-Ceit, Natalie and Patrick.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The Ruthwell Cross

The Ruthwell Cross is near the village of Ruthwell, Dumfriesshire, in south-west Scotland. It is inside the Ruthwell parish church, in a purpose-built semi-circular apse with a sunken floor.

It is a sculptured stone monument in the shape of a freestanding cross about 5.3m tall. It has a tall tapering rectanguloid shaft which is approximately 0.7m wide at the base. The transom is close to the top of the monument and just under 1m across. The monument is positioned with its broad faces to the north and south and its narrow faces or sides to the east and west.

The north and south faces are covered by panels which contain figural sculpture. Each panel is surrounded by a margin bearing a Latin inscription. The east and west faces each have long panels with vinescroll ornament surrounded by a margin bearing an inscription in Old English runes.

The monument has had a colourful history. It was first made in the early medieval period. It was thrown down and considerably damaged in the Reformation. Several broken pieces survived, scattered inside and outside the church. They were collected and combined by the minister in the early nineteenth century. He found insufficient fragments to complete the cross, so parts of the present monument date from the nineteenth century.

The questions

The Ruthwell Cross has attracted a considerable amount of scholarly interest and generated a great deal of literature since the eighteenth century. For the most part, recent scholars have taken one of two approaches to the study of the monument. One approach is to discuss the detail of the Ruthwell Cross in terms of workmanship, models, workshops and schools of sculpture, comparing Ruthwell with sculpture from elsewhere in Britain and overseas. Others address the question of the meaning or message of the monument, and its use within the religious life of the community for whom it was made.

To date, scholarly achievement lacks a satisfactory combination of both approaches, or a thoroughly conclusive solution to either.

Scholars have sought possible influences or sources for aspects of the Ruthwell sculpture. Comparisons have been made with possible models. Possible products of the same school or workshop have been suggested. Attempts have been made to explain some of the more unusual aspects of the sculpture. No comprehensive explanation has been offered of the artists who might have made the Ruthwell Cross, and what their influences and models were.

Any comprehensive explanation of the use and message of the monument must address the inscriptions and sculpture on all four faces. Few discussions of the meaning of the monument address all of its aspects. Perhaps most importantly, no work has been published which addresses both the workmanship issues and the issues of theme and meaning of the Ruthwell Cross.

The original form of the Ruthwell Cross has not been established. Suggestions have been made, but not pursued with any vigour, that the monument in its current form includes parts of more than one early medieval monument. The questions about workmanship and meaning cannot properly be resolved when the object under discussion has not been defined.

The book

This book aims towards a comprehensive explanation of the Ruthwell Cross. It seeks to define the form of the early medieval monument or monuments incorporated in the reconstruction. It considers the issues relating to workmanship and likeness to other sculpture. Conclusions are drawn as to the likely background of the artists, and probable sources for their models. The book also examines the questions of meaning, message and audience. Suggestions are made about the nature of the religious community for whom the monument was made. This book addresses a wide range of questions about the Ruthwell Cross and suggests why, how and for whom it was made.

The book aims to perform three distinct functions. First (Chapters 2-4), it will establish the form, condition and context of the Ruthwell Cross, and the position of current scholarship about the Ruthwell Cross. This exercise is primarily a gathering together and assessment of existing disparate sources, although it relies heavily on a careful examination of physical evidence including the monument itself, drawings and photographs, the fabric of the church, and the topography of the surrounding area.

Second (Chapters 5-8), the book will analyse four major features of the Ruthwell Cross: the vinescroll, the figural sculpture, the Latin inscriptions, and the Runic inscription. In the first three cases, this analysis will include detailed statistical analysis of the degrees of likeness between the Ruthwell Cross and other early medieval sculpture of the British Isles. The statistical analysis is a major project which contributes a new approach and some quantitative evidence based on hard data to existing discussions of the relationships between the sculpture at Ruthwell and that of other Anglo-Saxon...
centres. Such discussions have hitherto been based on observation of a small number of particular features or overall appearance. The multivariate nature of the analysis in this book allows a larger number of unweighted attributes to be considered concurrently.

Finally (Chapters 9-11), the book will consider the original form, purpose and location of the monument, and the people associated with it: artists, designer, commissioner and audience. Some of these questions have been addressed previously, with varying degrees of thoroughness. This discussion aims to present a more considered and detailed assessment of the monument’s original form, creating a new basis for future consideration of the monument. The wide-ranging discussion of the people involved in its creation and their aims and methods will present a unified approach to these questions, linking historical figures with material evidence to postulate a context for the original Ruthwell monument.

**The chapters**

Chapter 2 (‘What is the Ruthwell Cross?’) considers the form and condition of the Ruthwell Cross. It begins with a survey of the current appearance of the monument. The writings of early observers of the monument are then considered, to derive an understanding of the appearance, condition and form of the monument at various times from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. The impact on the monument of the iconoclastic activities following the Reformation and of the actions of various ministers from the Reformation until the restoration of the cross inside the church is examined. The chapter concludes by assessing the condition of the Ruthwell Cross and the damage its various parts have sustained since their manufacture. It suggests the difficulty of studying a monument of which so little of its original form survives.

Chapter 3 (‘Where is the Ruthwell Cross?’) explores the region where the Ruthwell Cross is located. It examines the political and ecclesiastical history of the region derived from contemporary sources including the writings of the venerable Bede. The role of Cuthbert, Bishop of Lindisfarne in the seventh century, is emphasised. Places of interest for the early medieval period in the region are discussed. These include Carlisle, where Bede informs us there was considerable ecclesiastical activity, and where some early medieval sculptured stone cross-heads have been found. Sites with ecclesiastical sculpture, place-names and archaeological remains are identified throughout Cumbria, the Whithorn area, and Annan district. These include substantial monastic sites at Whithorn and Hoddam. This chapter establishes that Ruthwell was located within a network of Roman sites, transport and communication routes, suggesting that it was readily accessible during the early medieval period. The excavation of apparently Roman-period remains at Ruthwell is briefly discussed. Other finds of sculptured stone from Ruthwell combine with the fabric of the church itself to suggest that Ruthwell may have had an early medieval monastery. The site may have continued in use up until the eleventh century when a stone church of considerable size was built, parts of which remain in the fabric of the modern church. This chapter concludes by suggesting that Ruthwell was not an isolated outpost of Northumbria but rather a monastic site which may have been occupied continuously from the sixth century, and which was surrounded by a network of other ecclesiastical sites.

Chapter 4 (‘Literature Review’) reviews the scholarly background to the four analysis chapters. Literature concerning the vinescroll, figural sculpture, Latin inscriptions and Runic inscription on the cross is reviewed to establish the history and current state of the study of each feature. This chapter also reviews the catalogues of early medieval sculpture from which samples are drawn for analysis.

Chapter 5 (‘Statistical Analysis of Vinescroll’) makes a detailed analysis of the vinescroll ornament on the east and west faces of the Ruthwell Cross. It begins with an overview of the occurrence of vinescroll in stone sculpture in the British Isles. It then outlines some preliminary experimentation which I carried out using multivariate analysis to compare degrees of likeness of the vinescroll at Ruthwell and on other sculpture. The major analysis work in this chapter uses a minimum spanning tree programme purpose-written for this project by David Blackman. An outline is given of the sample and attributes selected for the analysis project, and of the procedure followed. The results of the analysis are recorded and discussed. They show that the four panels of vinescroll on the Ruthwell Cross are not all of the same workmanship, and that one panel of the Ruthwell vinescroll is remarkably similar to the vinescroll at Bewcastle and Jedburgh. Apart from these links, the Ruthwell vinescroll is shown not to have a strong likeness to any other vinescroll in the sample. The chapter concludes by suggesting that the upper stone and each of the two faces of the lower stone were created by different hands.

Chapter 6 (‘Statistical Analysis of Figural Sculpture’) makes a similar detailed analysis of the figural sculpture on the north and south faces of the Ruthwell Cross. It begins with an overview of figural sculpture in the early medieval British Isles and of the panels of figural sculpture on the Ruthwell Cross. An analysis is then carried out using the same minimum spanning tree programme. The sample and attributes are outlined. The process is explained, including the generation of a fictitious sculpture to test the reliability of the method. The results of the analysis are recorded and discussed. They show that apart from Bewcastle there are no close equivalents for the figural sculpture on the Ruthwell Cross. The drapery of the clothing on the Christ figures is examined, and the implication that Christ is shown as a teacher and church leader. It is shown that there are aspects of the sculpture for which there were apparently
no models, particularly the figures of Mary Magdalene and the worshipping beasts. Possible sources for the style of these figures are discussed. The evidence shows significant differences between the north and south faces of the Ruthwell Cross.

Chapter 7 (‘Latin Inscriptions’) addresses the Latin inscriptions surrounding the figural panels on the north and south faces of the Ruthwell Cross. It begins with an overview of Latin inscriptions in the British Isles. An analysis of the letterforms and layout is then carried out using the minimum spanning tree programme. This analysis is of limited usefulness because of the fragmentary nature of much of the sample. The results are recorded and discussed. Minor differences between the forms of the inscriptions on the north and south faces are noted, as are more considerable differences between the upper and lower stones. The similarity of the letterforms to decorated manuscripts is considered. The relationship between each inscription and the figural panel it surrounds is evaluated in detail. The significance of the content of each panel and inscription is discussed.

Chapter 8 (‘Runic Inscription’) considers the Runic inscription surrounding the vinescroll on the east and west faces of the Ruthwell Cross. It begins by comparing the Ruthwell inscription to other Anglo-Saxon Runic inscriptions, noting that Ruthwell is unusual in both length and subject matter. The arrangement and workmanship of the runes are considered, noting some differences in execution between the two faces. A discussion of the futhorc used at Ruthwell shows that it is particularly developed, distinguishing between sounds to an unusual extent. The text of the inscription, although severely damaged, is clearly Old English alliterative poetry concerning the Crucifixion. The early interpretations of this text, including its resemblance to the Old English poem ‘The Dream of the Rood’, are reviewed. The resemblance of ‘The Dream of the Rood’ to other Old English poetry and to an Old English inscription on the Brussells Cross is examined, to show that the link between the Ruthwell inscription and ‘The Dream of the Rood’ is not particularly strong. The views of recent scholars on the association of the two are reviewed. An alternative interpretation is proposed, which rejects the assumption that the Ruthwell inscription is an extract from ‘The Dream of the Rood’ and proposes that it is narrated by a human witness to the Crucifixion, perhaps Mary Magdalene. The treatment of Christ in the poem is discussed in the context of early medieval doctrine concerning the nature of Christ. The chapter concludes that the poem joins the figural sculptures to illustrate the proper response to Christ’s incarnation.

Chapter 9 (‘The Upper Stone’) addresses the upper stone and its relationship to the lower stone. It begins by identifying the many differences between the two and reviewing comments by some authors on the question. The results of the multivariate analysis of the vinescroll and figural sculpture are reviewed, with particular reference to differences between the upper and lower stones. The differences in the inscriptions are discussed, with particular reference to layout of the inscriptions. The debate about the type and source of the pieces of sandstone is reviewed and the shapes of the various pieces of stone and the way they fit together are examined. The evidence that survives for how the pieces of the upper stone were fitted together is considered. This chapter questions whether the parts of what is now the upper stone were originally part of the same monument.

Chapter 10 (‘By Whose Hands?’) considers the workmanship of the Ruthwell Cross. It discusses possible traditions in which the artists or teams might have been trained and possible models for various parts of the sculpture and inscriptions. Much of the sculpture refers to models in ivory and manuscripts. There are some slight reflections of Romano-British stone sculpture. The chapter concludes that the artist was not of the Anglo-Saxon mainstream, and may have come under Pictish influence.

Chapter 11 (‘For Whose Eyes?’) addresses the themes of the cross, and the possible audiences for whom it may have been designed. The questions of doctrine and religious life are discussed. The design of the cross is considered in the light of possible religious communities in the Ruthwell area. The chapter concludes that the most likely audience would be predominantly female, because of the emphasis on women in the figural sculpture. It suggests a possible context of a female religious house in the Ruthwell area occupied by persons of Irish, British and Anglo-Saxon descent and affinity, led by a noble Anglo-Saxon abbess and influenced by Lindisfarne.

Chapter 12 (‘Epilogue’) reviews the thesis and suggests further work which might be done. It places the methods and findings of this book in their scholarly context. Suggestions are made concerning the future of the Ruthwell Cross and of its study.
Chapter 12: Epilogue

This book is part of a long tradition of attempts to construct an identity for the mass of sandstone we call the Ruthwell Cross. The first in that tradition was the unidentified early medieval person or persons who caused it to be removed from the ground, shaped and adorned with sculpture and inscription. The General Assembly of the Church of Scotland assigned it the identity of an idolatrous monument. Henry Duncan made a conscious decision to identify it as a single monument in the shape of a cross, and embellished its head with symbols of his own devising, whose meaning is now unclear. James McFarlan identified it as an ancient monument, placed it under government protection and made a place for it within the church building and community. His mason Dods constructed an altered appearance for it using mortar and an imprecise reconstruction. Many antiquaries and scholars in several centuries, of whom a few are mentioned in this book, have attempted to identify the monument as belonging to this or that tradition or as signifying one or another meaning.

The identity I have constructed for the Ruthwell Cross challenges some commonly held views. I have argued that the original form of the monument was not a cross but a pillar, terminating at the upper edge of the lower stone (see Figure A). I have asserted that the written and pictorial material on the monument combines in a unified thematic presentation to a female audience, on the nature of Christ and the appropriate religious response to his incarnation. I have specifically questioned the commonly held belief that the poem of the Old English inscription is narrated by the Cross. I have suggested that the monument was commissioned by a noble Northumbrian abbess whose spiritual guidance was in the school of Cuthbert of Lindisfarne. I have proposed that the abess employed more than one sculptor or team, and that those sculptors were not from any mainstream Northumbrian tradition of stone sculpture, but rather had some Pictish influence. I have argued that their models were mostly in the form of portable objects such as ivory panels and manuscripts, which a noble abess would normally possess. I have based my construction as much as possible on observation of the evidence, seeking to avoid assumptions.

Some of the methods used in this book are new to the study of medieval stone sculpture. The multivariate analysis methods developed in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 are derived from archaeological and statistical contexts. I have shown that they may be usefully applied to the study of early medieval stone sculpture, and indeed of other art forms. The studies carried out here were experimental, as there was no previous work using comparable methods on this body of material upon which to draw. The techniques allow of thorough study in the area of early medieval art, and I believe have a useful contribution to make to that field. Ideally, analysis should seek to eliminate the bias in the sample resulting from inaccessibility of the material. That inaccessibility is gradually being eroded as successive volumes of the Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture appear. Similar up-to-date works for Scotland and Wales would be most useful. Further analysis might also expand the range of attributes for consideration, thereby enhancing precision and reducing skew in the results.

In the course of researching this thesis, I encountered some areas where further study would make a valuable contribution to our understanding of the Ruthwell Cross and its context. I list here some areas with the potential for further investigation. I believe that the full complement of documentation for the later history of the monument has not yet been brought to notice. It is clear to me that additional documents once existed relating to the 1642 Act and these may yet be found. The fabric of the church raises several questions, including the age of the building and the precise nature of Murray’s Aisle, which have a bearing on the early location of the monument. The partial excavation of the probably Roman enclosure in the field adjacent to the church has really produced more questions than answers. Further excavation would enhance our understanding of the site and its use over what may be an extended period. Recent research into the Christian heritage of Dumfries and Galloway has been very productive and interesting, and will hopefully continue with detailed and extensive study of placenames and early Christian remains. Detailed reconsideration of the runic inscription on the monument un influenced by ‘The Dream of the Rood’ might yield fresh insights. Examination of the monument for remains of gesso or paint, and consideration of the likelihood of such substances having been part of the original treatment would be useful. Radiographic techniques might provide more information on the shapes of the separate fragments disguised by Dods’ mortar. Geological investigation of the stone types and their probable sources might provide a little more information, and could resolve uncertainty on this subject.

This book has argued that the upper stone fragments are not a part of the original Ruthwell monument. Such a contention introduces a range of questions concerning the upper stone, the circumstances of its creation, and its original form. These questions have not been addressed here, but would form the basis of a very interesting study.

The relationship of the Ruthwell monument to the Bewcastle cross has been discussed in considerable detail. If my assertion that the Ruthwell monument is not a unified creation is accepted, these discussions must be revisited. The relationship is largely based on the common juxtaposition of the Agnus Dei figure and the
worshipping beasts panel, which I argue is not an original feature at Ruthwell.

Since this research was completed in 1999, several publications have come to my attention which address some of the matters I raise. Important amongst these are Carol Farr’s work on the monument’s association with women (Farr 1997), and several of the articles in Northumbria’s golden age. The latter was not available in Australia at the time of completion of this research, although the author of one paper had kindly given me a copy of his article (Ó Carragáin 1999).

In this book, I have attempted as far as possible to return to physical and primary evidence, and not to accept unquestioningly the work of previous writers. I have found this a useful approach, and believe that while it is essential to continue reviewing previous scholarship and secondary material, it is also necessary to return to primary and physical material in the search for accurate information and new insights.

An important factor for the future study of the Ruthwell Cross is the future of the monument itself. The stone has discoloured to a whitish shade in some areas, particularly in the angles where the relief joins the background. This may indicate a concentration of salts near the surface which generally precedes the detachment of a surface layer of the stone. In several places the surface of the stone is loosened and may fall in the near future. It would be helpful if the monument were examined by conservation experts and the source of any damp identified and eliminated. I believe it is important that the monument remain associated with the church at Ruthwell, and would strongly oppose its removal from the site.

The Ruthwell Cross has provided material for many generations of scholars and is a largely unacknowledged but important part of the Ruthwell community. Those of us who have been fortunate enough to study it must ensure that our successors are also able to do so. The Ruthwell Cross formed a focus for the religious community for whom it was made. Over time, it has been a focus for various groups, including those who have worked for its preservation, the congregation at Ruthwell, and the many scholars whose interest it has caught. This book follows hundreds of years in which the Ruthwell Cross has been at the centre of thought, research and worship. It will continue to be so for many years to come, and the research presented here now forms part of the fascinating and complex history of study of the Ruthwell Cross.