The cross as Christ’s weapon: the influence of heroic literary tradition on *The Dream of the Rood*

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In spite of all that is known of the religious, cultural and literary background of *The Dream of the Rood* in general, the genesis of its form, and especially of its most immediately striking and unique feature, the device of the speaking cross, has so far resisted attempts at explanation and remains something of a mystery. Albert S. Cook long ago called attention to similarities between the mode of portrayal of the cross and the medieval traditions of epigram, epigraph and riddle, while not going so far as to suggest that these traditions had a direct influence on the poet. Now it is true, of course, that our earliest text of the poem is the series of inscriptions on the Ruthwell Cross, but these inscriptions are strikingly different from all others from the Anglo-Saxon period through which inanimate objects are personified and speak. The inscription on Alfred’s Jewel, ‘Ælfred mec heht gewyrcean’, for instance, and those, some of them in the first person, in Latin and English, on the blades, hilts and scabbards of various swords and knives are generally quite brief – limited to a simple statement of the object’s name, its maker’s name or that of its owner – are seldom metrical and, most important, are not couched in the kind of heroic diction used in the poem. While it is quite possible that the poet sensed an analogy between such inscriptions and his personification of the cross, what these inscriptions manifestly lack is the literary quality intrinsic to his personification – whether on the Ruthwell Cross or in the Vercelli Book. Only a literary explanation can account for this.

In 1940 Margaret Schlauch attempted to demonstrate that the source of literary influence was classical and medieval Latin poetic tradition. Pointing out that discourse by inanimate objects was a fairly common device in Latin verse and observing that formal Latin rhetoric treated prosopopoeia as one

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1 *The Dream of the Rood*, ed. Albert S. Cook (Oxford, 1901), pp. xliii–lii. More recently W. F. Bolton, ‘Tatwine’s *De Cruce Christi* and *The Dream of the Rood*’, *ASNSL* 200 (1963), 344–6, has demonstrated some rather striking correspondences between Tatwine’s Latin riddle and the Old English poem, but he admits that there is no proof of the direct influence of either poem upon the other.
of its topics, she concluded that *The Dream of the Rood* owed its form, if not to the direct influence of Latin poems employing the device of prosopopoeia, at least to the Anglo-Saxon poet's familiarity with the study of rhetoric in the medieval schools. Her view has been widely accepted. But since she found no particular source for the portrayal of the cross and, indeed, the poems which she cited as formal analogues, like *De Nuce*, are scarcely like *The Dream of the Rood* at all in tone or seriousness of purpose, it seems likely that the influence of Latin rhetoric, however vital, was only at the level of technique.

The other potential source of literary influence is, of course, vernacular heroic poetry. That the cross speaks like an Anglo-Saxon retainer in the service of a secular lord is the accepted view of the poem's style in relation to this tradition. Since, within the ancient cult of Christ as king, early Germanic poetry portrays him as the warrior chief, it certainly follows that if an Anglo-Saxon poet chose to represent the cross as a human follower of Christ, he would portray it as an Anglo-Saxon retainer. None of this, however, accounts for the poet's striking portrayal of the cross as at once inanimate object and heroic retainer. The cross is not personified as fully human, for, even as it speaks, we remain aware of its non-human nature. In this paper I should like to consider as a background to this portrayal the element of personification present in the conception of weapons and trappings of war traditional to heroic literature. There is, I think, a specific analogy between the poet's treatment of the cross and this quasi-humanizing tradition. It seems to me that the idea of the warrior-Christ coalesced in the poet's mind with certain habits of thought and diction inherent in this tradition.

In a warrior-society like that depicted in Old English heroic poetry, where a man depends upon his weapons for his survival, it is probably inevitable that a close personal relationship should exist between a warrior and his weapons and war-gear. For example, Beowulf's remark that 'Nu sceall billes ecg, hond ond heard sweord ymb hord wigan' (2508b–9) implies an alliance between a man and his weapon as they unite in a common cause. The convention of personification is extremely useful to the poet as a means of expressing this relationship; in *Beowulf* weapons and war-gear often appear to have lives and thoughts of their own. When Beowulf prepares to dive into the haunted mere, for instance, the poet briefly describes his 'warrior's garments' in such terms.

3 References are to *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. Fr. Klaeber, 3rd ed. (Boston, 1910).
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body of its wearer. The bright helmet ‘hafelan weređe’ (1448b) when it ‘. . . meregrundas mengan scolde, / secan sundgebland’ (1449-50a). The sword’s name is Hrunting; it has never failed any man in battle and this is not the first time ‘þæt hit ellenweorc æfnan scolde’ (1464). Beowulf speaks of Hrunting as if it were to be his companion in the coming battle: ‘ie me mid Hruntinge / dom gewyrce’ (1490b-1a). When Grendel’s mother attacks, Hrunting ‘. . . agol / grædig guðleoð’ (1521b-2a) upon her head, but it fails the prince at his need and for the first time its glory is diminished:

. . . se beadoleoma   bitan nolde,
aldre sceþan,   ac seo ecg gesvac
ðeodne æt þearfe;   ðolode æt fela
hondgemota,   helm oft gescær,
féges fyrdhrægl;   ða wæs forma sið
deorum madme,   þæt his dom aleg. (1523-8)

Nevertheless, when Beowulf returns the sword to Unferth, he praises it as a strong friend in battle and does not blame it for its failure: ‘. . . he pone guðwine godne teald, / wigcraftigne, nales wordum log / meces ecge’ (1810-12a).

Examples of the personification of weapons are fairly frequent in Beowulf and Neil D. Isaacs has discussed them exhaustively.¹ Such personification in Old English is not confined to Beowulf, however. In the first Waldere fragment, for instance, we hear of Waldere’s sword, Mimming, which will fail no man who can wield it and will help Waldere against Guthhere (t, 2b-4a and 24-6a).² Mimming is a famous sword; it is ‘Welande[ś] wore’ (1, 2), and a part of its history is given in the second Waldere fragment (II, 4-10). Waldere’s byrnie (II, 18-24) is also personified; should an attack come, ‘Ne bið fah wið me’ (II, 22b). In Finnsburh defensive weapons seem themselves to respond to the enemy attack: ‘scyld scefte oncwýþ’ (7a).³

In the early heroic literatures of western Europe famous swords always have proper names – Excaliber, Durendal, Gram, Tyrfing, Skofnung – and these names alone suggest that the habit of personification was widespread, even when the particular context furnishes no further information concerning a weapon’s deeds or inner nature. Hilda Ellis Davidson, in her able study of Anglo-Saxon swords, observes that it is ‘hard to determine how far the naming of swords was a literary convention only, and how far it existed as a practice among Anglo-Saxons and Vikings of an earlier period’, though she finds some

² References are to The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems, ed. E. V. K. Dobbie (New York, 1942), pp. 4-6.
³ References are to The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems, pp. 3-4.
archaeological evidence for the ‘imaginative personification of the weapon at an early date’. As a literary convention, however, there can be no question of its pervasiveness, which suggests that it is something more than a merely rhetorical device. Isaacs relates it to a habit of mind shared by Anglo-Saxon singer and audience:

This convention is accepted because it seems to have been understood by singer and audience that each thing in nature from man to stone and each thing created by man as well has a living, moving spirit of its own. Somewhere along the line there must have been a personification in the merely rhetorical sense, but this step was a mechanical, almost automatic operation within the framework of an already-established convention, not the framework upon which the convention was built. In Beowulf, Waldere and Finnsburh the poets conceive of some weapons, at least, as quasi-sentient beings with distinctive attributes and habits, and their personification follows from this conception.

Generally speaking, the weapons and armour that are personified in Old English heroic verse appear as warriors, as thanes of the lords whom they serve. Nægling fails to bite for Beowulf ‘bonne his ðiodcynge ðearfe hæðe’ (2579), just as Hrunting fails ‘ðæodne æt ðearfe’ (1525a). It is in terms of the lord–thane relationship that a poet can most forcefully express the closeness of the personal bond between a warrior and his weapons. Beowulf praises Hrunting by observing that ‘þæt wæpen duge’ (166ob); Isaacs has pointed out that dugan in Beowulf describes primarily persons, except when it is involved in personifications, and its relationship to the noun dugud ‘the collective body of tested warriors’, is obvious. Even after Hrunting proves useless to Beowulf, he still considers it a good ‘guðwine’ (181oa), as we have seen. Anglo-Saxon warriors earn glory (dom) through praiseworthy deeds (lofdeedum), and Hrunting has similarly won ‘dom’ which fails for the first time against Grendel’s mother (1527b–8). Failure in battle is ordinarily disgraceful for a warrior, which explains why Waldere speaks of his trustworthy byrnie as being ‘ealles unsende’ (11, 20a).

Swords are the weapons most frequently and fully depicted in Anglo-Saxon heroic literature. Their quasi-personalization combines the human attributes of the warrior-thane with the non-human ones of the sword itself. The ringing of the blade when it strikes is the ‘singing’ of swords like Hrunting (Beowulf 1521b–2a). A blade’s efficiency depends upon its hardness and durability, as seems to be assumed even when this is not explicitly mentioned: this actual hardness and the seasoning of the veteran warrior are blended when a dangerous sword in Beowulf is described as ‘scurheard’ (1033a) and when

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1 The Sword, p. 102.  
3 Ibid. p. 221.  
4 See, e.g., Beowulf 949–55 and Widsith 140–3.
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Hrunting is said to be ‘ahyrded heaþoswate’ (1460a). Swords sometimes possess extra-natural properties. Their beauty consists in their brightness; they shine as if the light were their own. Hrunting is ‘se beadoleoma’ (Beowulf 1523a), another sword ‘hildeleoma’ (1143b); when the battle begins in the Finnsburh fragment, ‘Swurdleoma stod, / swylce eal Finnsburuh fyrenu waren’ (35b-6). Often swords are given supernatural or legendary associations; the one in Grendel’s mother’s cave, like those of Wiglaf and Eofor, is the work of giants.¹ Hand in hand with such mysterious origins go the various curses, taboos or peculiarities of behaviour attributed to a sword such as the one in the cave.

Reliable swords and battle-gear are commonly described by Old English poets as ‘treasures’, primarily because of their usefulness to their possessors. Hrothgar gives Beowulf a ‘mære maðþumsweord’ (1023a); Scyld goes forth on the sea with a great deal of ‘madma’, ‘fraetwa’, with ‘hildewæpn num ond heaðowædum, / billum ond byrnum’ (36b-42); Waldere’s Mimming is ‘maðma cyst’ (1, 24b). I have discussed elsewhere the function of treasure in the heroic world of Beowulf as the material manifestation of the moral virtue and worth of its possessor,² and since fine swords are ordinarily ‘treasures’, their possession denotes worthiness in the warriors who have them. Thus, because of the gold-adorned sword that Beowulf gives him, the Danish shore guard is ‘on meодubence mабme by weorbra / yrfele’ (1902-33); he augments his personal honour as he adds to his store of treasure. The heroic custom of a Germanic lord’s giving rings, weapons and other valuables to his retainers represents his acknowledgement of the honour and glory that they have earned (or are expected to earn) in his service; Heremod was a bad lord because he failed to offer these physical symbols to his followers: ‘nallas beagas geaf / Denum æfter dome’ (1719b-20a).

Not only are weapons and war-gear often treasures; personified as loyal retainers they are entitled themselves to receive treasure as the symbol of their service. This takes the form of the gold and gems with which they are adorned. Anglo-Saxon warriors do not wear uniforms bedecked with medals and campaign ribbons; their valour and heroism can be seen only in their material treasures. In like manner, the durability of a good sword or helmet, its loyal service, must be reflected in its fine adornments. To decorate an object is, in heroic convention, to ‘honour’ it, to make its inherent worth apparent. Beowulf is ‘wæpn num geweoðad’ (250a), as is his troop of followers ‘wæpn num gewurþad’ (331a), while Hrothgar gives warriors ‘hordweorþunge’ for their deeds (951-3a); and by the same token Beowulf’s helmet is ‘since geweoðad’

¹ Beowulf 1538a, 1562b, 1679a, 2616a and 2979a.

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(1450b), the saddle given him by Hrothgar is ‘since gewurþad’ (1938b) and Waldere’s byrnie ‘golde geweorðod’ (11, 19b).

The Old English Riddle 20 offers the most fully developed description we have of a sword as a heroic retainer. Here a personified sword speaks, enumerating many of its essential qualities in a manner which should make its identity readily apparent. Emphasis falls upon its appearance, the service it performs and its lord’s appreciation of this service. It is a fine weapon: ‘. . . wunderlicu wiht, on gewin sceapen, / frean minum leof, fsegre gegyrwed’ (1-2). Its ‘byrnic’, probably the blade, is ‘bleofag’, and the hilt is equally brilliant (3b-4a). It wears all of the treasures with which fine swords are customarily adorned: ‘wir’ (4a and 32a), a ‘wealgin’ (4a), ‘sinc’ (6b and 10a), ‘gold’ (8a), ‘seolfor’ (10a), ‘hringas’ (23b), ‘bearngestreon’ (27a) and ‘hæleþa gestreon’ (31b). More than any human retainer it is completely subject to the will of its lord, who directs it to battle (5-6a); and again its non-human nature is implied when it is said often to kill ‘gestberend’ (8b-9a). Because it injures people, it is hated and condemned by their friends (i5b-i6a), but if it obeys its lord (‘gif ic frean hyre’), it will partake of the treasures of men (24b-7a). Its lord, in his function as ring-giver (23b), gives it the treasure it bears (3-4 and 9b-10a), and praises its deeds in the mead-hall (iob-i2). The statements that it has no avenging kinsman, may not increase its race and may not marry (17b-23 and 27b-31) are the sort of enigmatic remarks, inappropriate to a typical human warrior, which resolve themselves when this ‘warrior’ is properly identified as a sword. Finally, the sword angers a ‘wife’, either because it could take her man from her as he goes to battle or, more plausibly, because she begrudges it its gold and gems (32-5a). The sword cares nothing for such feminine ‘battle’, however (35b).

In this riddle the convention of personification has become to some degree an end in itself, apart from any role which the personified weapon might play in a narrative context. Basic aspects of a sword are presented and seem meant to be appreciated by an audience familiar with swords as they appear in heroic

1 All references to the Riddles are to the text of The Exeter Book, ed. G. P. Krapp and E. V. K. Dobbie (New York, 1916), pp. 180-210 and 229-43. It should be noted here that, while most commentators have accepted ‘sword’ as the subject of this riddle, the alternative solution ‘hawk’ has been argued, most recently by Laurence K. Shook, ‘Old English Riddle no. 20: Hearowswealtve’, Franciplegius: Medieval and Linguistic Studies in Honor of Francis Peabody Magoun, Jr., ed. Jess B. Bessinger, Jr., and Robert P. Creed (New York, 1965), pp. 194-204.

2 Davidson, The Sword, p. 153. I owe to Mrs Davidson’s discussion of this riddle the interpretation of some of its more puzzling details.

3 I suggest that the difficulty of interpreting lines 15b-17a may be resolved by repunctuating the text as follows: ‘Of ic obrum scod, / frecne æt his freonde fah eom ic wide, / waþnum awyrðeg.’ Read ‘I have often injured another [and so] I am savagely outlawed far and wide by his friend, condemned among weapons.’

4 Mrs Davidson plausibly explains lines 22-3 as meaning that if it ‘leaves’ its lord and returns to the foundry to be melted down, then, and only then, can it produce ‘offspring’.

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poetry. Whatever intellectual pleasure this little poem could have afforded as a riddle must have grown directly out of the audience's perception of the speaker as a familiar object presented in a manner familiar but at the same time, because divorced from its more usual surroundings, misleading. The accepted convention of personification has been extended from third-person description of quasi-sentient objects to an object's first-person description of itself, but the habit of mind responsible for the convention remains precisely the same. Beyond this, because it presents mostly recognizable, familiar aspects of its subject, the riddle tells us what aspects of a sword the Anglo-Saxons would single out for attention. And the same can be said for the various other Old English riddles dealing with weapons and war-gear.

The speaker in Riddle 5, a shield, dwells upon the 'wounds' which it has suffered and its continuing endurance of these wounds. It distinguishes itself from human warriors only in that it expects no aid in battle and cannot be healed by any physician. The horn of Riddle 14 presents itself as a 'waepen-wiga' (1a) and gives a full account of its functions as a battle-horn and a drinking-horn. Like the sword of Riddle 20, it refers frequently to the treasures which adorn it (2b, 3a, 7b, 9a, 11b and 15a). Riddle 53, about a battering-ram, holds particular interest here because of its structural similarity to the speech of the cross in *The Dream of the Rood*. This object lived a pleasant life as a tree in a forest, but one day it was 'deope gedolgod' (6a), 'dumb in bendum, / wriben ofer wunda' (6b~7a) and 'wonnum hyrstum / foran gefraetwed' (7b-8a). Now it fights in battles and plunders the hoard in the company of warriors (8b-11a), leading them into dangerous places (11b-13). The subject of Riddle 55, probably a sword-rack, while not in itself a weapon, is identified through its association with weapons. It resides on the floor of the hall, bearing four kinds of wood (of which it is made) and gold and silver (with which the swords are decorated) as well. It awaits those treasures which are its lord's weapons ('... oft wepen abed / his mondryhtne, maðm in healle, / goldhilted sweord'; 12b-14a). The helmet of Riddle 61 is 'færtwed' (8a) and resides in a chest until a woman fetches it for her lord. If his 'ellen dohte' (7), he places it upon his head (5~9a). Riddle 71 is fragmentary, but enough remains to identify the speaker as a sword or dagger. It speaks of its place of origin, a field - like that of the battering-ram - and of the transformation of the raw material into an artifact by 'fire and file'. Like the sword of Riddle 20, it is 'wire geweorn̄bæd' (5a) and it speaks of its 'lord' (9b) and of the injuries it causes ring-adorned

1 Frederick Tupper, *The Riddles of the Exeter Book* (Boston, 1910), pp. 188-90, solves this riddle as 'cross', but for a cross to be spoken of as 'rode tacn' (5~7a) would destroy the enigmatic quality desired in a riddle.

2 Davidson, *The Sword*, p. 155, takes the 'field' to be the anvil on which the blade is forged, but this reading seems forced.
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warriors (5b–8a).¹ Most commentators accept the solution ‘lance’ or ‘spear’ for Riddle 73. It speaks of its early life in a forest – again like that of the battering-ram – and its subsequent transformation into a weapon. It now serves a ‘frean’ (8a), ‘gif his ellen deag’ (9b). The damaged latter portion of the riddle is largely unintelligible, but the words ‘dome’ and ‘mǣ[!]bā freman’ (10a and 11b) appear to refer to its duties in battle, and a few later lines clearly refer to its appearance. Riddle 80 may be solved either as ‘horn’² or ‘sword’.³ In any event, it is a piece of war-gear, ‘...ægelinges eaxlgestealla’ (1), ‘fyrdrinces gefara’ (2a), ‘cyninges geselda’ (3a) and ‘frean minum leof’ (2b).

Riddle 30 is worth considering here, although its speaker is not a weapon but most probably a tree.⁴ Its importance for us lies in its similarity in structure to Riddles 53 and 73 and its similarity in structure and content to the speech of the cross in The Dream of the Rood. The object first describes itself growing in a forest (1–4), like the battering-ram and the lance (or spear). It then rather abruptly begins to describe its transformed condition as a cross which is worshipped by men and women for its ability ‘ycan upcyme eadignesse’ (9). The structure is thus typical of those riddles which begin with the object as raw material and move to its transformed state as an artifact for human use. If the solution ‘tree-cross’ is correct, this riddle not only exemplifies the mental habit of relating an object to its materials, but also offers a specific analogy with The Dream of the Rood, for in both poems the cross speaks of its origin as a tree and of its new life as an object of worship.

Although they probably owe their original inspiration to the Anglo-Latin riddle tradition, and although Tupper, whose attitude toward suggested resemblances to Latin enigmas was scarcely congenial, had to acknowledge some Latin influence upon many of the Old English riddles,⁵ the weapon-riddles appear typically Anglo-Saxon and heroic in their approach to their subject matter. Tupper certainly overstates his case in minimizing the importance of direct Latin influence on the Old English riddles, but nevertheless his general comments upon the ‘closeness to life’ of the entire Exeter Book collection seem to me for the most part just for the weapon-riddles:

The English poems smack far less of abstractions and of classical and biblical lore than the problems of Aldhelm; nor are they eked out with liberal borrowings from Isidore’s Entymologier, like those of Eusebius... All these riddles, whether the subject be animate or inanimate, have at least one common characteristic, their human

¹ Davidson, The Sword, p. 155, takes the gold-adorned weeper of lines 5b–6 to be a woman, but there is no indication of the sex of this figure in the text.
² Tupper, Riddles, pp. 217–18.
³ Davidson, The Sword, pp. 155–6.
⁴ See Krapp and Dobbie, The Exeter Book, pp. 337–8, for a brief summary of the proposed solutions and for further references.
⁵ See the notes to the individual riddles in his edition.
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interest . . . The riddler may neglect place and form and color of his subject, but he constantly stresses its uses to mankind. Indeed, men are in the background of every riddle-picture; and the subject is usually viewed in its relation to them. The most significant expression of this relation is found in the motif of Comitatus, or personal service of an underling to his lord and master, that forms the dominant idea in many of our poems.1

I do not wish to suggest that the poet who composed *The Dream of the Rood* was directly influenced by the Old English riddles, or that his poem and the riddles shared a particular literary influence in the form of a common source. Quite apart from the possibility of direct relationships, what is important is that these poems share certain elements which appear to have been common in Old English heroic tradition. The riddles portray those aspects of their subjects that would have been most readily apparent to their poets and audiences, and by employing the heroic diction and the convention of personification they reveal fully certain tendencies inherent in the portrayal of the same subjects in narrative contexts. The tendencies which they reveal reappear in *The Dream of the Rood*, not, I suggest, because the poet necessarily knew the riddles, but because his habits of thought and expression had been shaped by the same poetic tradition as that which shaped the habits of the riddle poets. Given his formulation of Christ as heroic warrior, the poet of *The Dream of the Rood*, I believe, would have found it easy, indeed logical, to conceive of the cross – the only inanimate object which faces Christ’s enemies with him – as the ‘weapon’ of heroic literary tradition. It would have seemed natural to him to envisage the close personal relationship between Christ and his cross as essentially the same as the intimate bond between a hero and his weapons in heroic poetry.

For one thing, I think certain obvious similarities in appearance between the cross and the favourite weapon of the Anglo-Saxon nobleman, the sword, would have presented themselves to the imagination of the poet. The basic shapes of the sword and cross are, of course, the same, and this essential similarity, however much it might be obscured by various kinds of artistic stylization in the plastic representation of crosses or by variation in the proportions of the vertical and horizontal cross-members, or by decorative embellishments of swords such as large pommels on hilts, could never be obliterated. Perhaps more immediately striking is the similar manner in which many splendid Germanic swords and equally splendid crosses are decorated: gold or silver on both is fashioned into intricate patterns, which are inlaid with enamel-work or semi-precious gems, principally garnets. The gold and

1 *Ibid.*, pp. lxxxvi and lxxxviii. Davidson, *The Sword*, pp. 156-7, comes to similar conclusions concerning the spirit of the Old English sword-riddles in comparison to the bookish products of Tatwine and Aldhelm. She finds the Latin riddles ‘products of the study, not of men who were familiar with the sword as a weapon’. A reading of Riddle 35, translated from Aldhelm’s *Lorica*, likewise gives one an impression of intellectualty quite unlike the heroic weapon-riddles.
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gems which decorate the cross in The Dream of the Rood (6b–9a and 14b–17) could equally well decorate a fine Germanic sword.

In function, as well as appearance, swords and crosses might well seem to an Anglo-Saxon to be related. Just as the cross is the symbol of the kingly power of Christ, the ‘wealdendes treow’ (17b), so the hilt of the temporal ruler’s sword appears to have been the symbol of his kingly power. The custom of swearing oaths upon one’s own sword or upon one’s King’s, reflected in the word ‘aðswæord’ in Beowulf (2064a), is traditional in heroic culture, and may owe its persistence through the centuries at least partially to Christian associations of the hilt with the cross. Further, the function of the cross, like that of any venerable weapon, is that it assists, and is in fact indispensable to, the defeat of its lord’s enemies; as our poem makes clear, it is the ‘sigebeam’ (13a and 127a) of the ‘sigora wealdend’ (67a).

More particularly, several attributes of the cross in The Dream of the Rood parallel those ascribed to weapons in Old English poetry. I have already drawn attention to the correspondence, noticed by Cook, between the cross’s description of its origin in a forest and subsequent transformation into an artifact (28–33a), and Riddles 53 (‘Battering-Ram’), 71 (‘Sword’ or ‘Dagger’) and 73 (‘Lance’ or ‘Spear’), as well as 30 (‘Tree-Cross’). The cross is ‘wudu selesta’ (27b) just as a sword may be ‘iren(n)a cyst’ (Beowulf 673a, 802b and 1697a). The brightness of the cross, ‘leohte bewunden, / beama beorhtost’ (Beowulf 670a), recalls that of virtually every good sword and helmet in Old English, and its appearance, ‘hwilum... / beswyled mid swates gange, hwilum mid since gegyrwed’ (22b–3), is analogous to the two states of a sword, bloodstained in use and bejewelled when honoured as a possession.

Above all, it is the use of the same kind of personification – partly human, partly inanimate, partly supernatural – that reveals the basic affinity of the cross to the weapons of heroic tradition. The cross calls attention to its ‘wounds’ (46–7a and 62b), as does the shield in Riddle 5. Standing firm (42b–3 and 45b) while being soaked in Christ’s blood (480–93), the cross recalls the swords hardened in the blood of battle in Beowulf. The metaphorical use of swat for ‘blood’ (20a and 23a) is shared with Beowulf, where it appears to be a traditional metaphor for blood shed in battle, often with specific reference to the blood drawn by swords (1286a, 1460a, 1569a, 1606a, 1668a and 2966b); in The Dream of the Rood this ‘sweat’ signifies ‘earmra aergewin’ (18–20a). The cross is Christ’s ‘bana’ (66a), just as weapons causing death in Beowulf are ‘banan’ (2203b and 2506b). Like the sword of Riddle 20, it is en-

References are to The Vercelli Book, ed. G. P. Krapp (New York, 1932), pp. 61–5.

2 Davidson, The Sword, pp. 76–7 and 213.


4 The Dream of the Rood, pp. xliii–li.

5 See above, p. 245.

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tirely subject to its lord’s will and is an instrument, indeed an embodiment, of that will, as a weapon is but as a human retainer can never fully be. Like a loyal retainer it has the instinct to protect its lord, and, like a weapon, it has the ability to do so, but its first duty is that of obedience: ‘Ealle ic mihte / feondas gefyllan, hwæore ic fæste stod’ (37b–8). The valour of this ‘retainer’ consists in its endurance of severe torment with and for its lord. Because of this service of suffering which it has given to Christ, and because of the spiritual service which it continues to perform for mankind, the cross is now honoured throughout the world (80b–2a). The outward manifestation of this service, of the inner virtue of the cross, is the treasure with which, like a worthy retainer or a worthy sword, it is adorned. Christ ‘geweorðode’ the cross by choosing it from the trees of the forest (90–1a); the cross served him loyally, and is now honoured by the gems that cover it: ‘gimmas hæfdon / bewrigen weorðlice wealdendes treow’ (16b–17). Moreover, quite apart from the gems and precious metals which adorn it, the cross itself is ‘beacna selest’ (118b), the token of salvation (117–21) to be honoured (‘weorðian’) by all (126b–9a), just as a fine sword may be a ‘treasure’, by virtue of its intrinsic value as an object useful to human beings. This intrinsic value of the cross, which the poet treats in the latter portion of the cross’s speech and in the closing meditation of the dreamer (78–156), is supernatural, like that of a supernaturally created and endowed weapon. Indeed the poet never loses sight of the basically non-human nature of his speaking cross. Even though he presents it as a retainer, it is only briefly a part of the comitatus on Calvary. The personification is never permitted completely to take on its human identity. Throughout, the cross remains an object at once inanimate, human and supernatural and it is as such that it stands in the closest possible relationship to Christ the ‘geong hæleð’ (39a). If we infer that the poet regarded this object as analogous to the weapons of heroes in literary tradition we can account for some of its most striking features, as we have seen, and elucidate some of the interplay of the poem’s powerful images. For instance, if ‘sigebeam’ (13a) carries implications of a victorious weapon (cf. ‘sigewæpnum’, Beowulf 804a), added point is given to the metaphorical stains and wounds of sin suffered by the dreamer (13b–14a).

Thus it appears likely that the portrayal of the cross in The Dream of the Rood had its genesis in the poet’s mental fusion of the two traditions which were his legacy as a Christian and an Anglo-Saxon. Roman Christianity advocated such fusions whenever they were practicable; it attempted, usually with great success, to assimilate whatever it could of the culture of its pagan converts to its own teachings and customs. The poet who composed our poem united aspects of the Germanic heroic and Christian traditions by drawing upon the resources of his own imagination. He drew, I suggest, upon the heroic convention of the personification of weapons for his portrayal of the cross of
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Christ: in his mind these habits of thought and diction, which he had absorbed along with his native poetic tradition, coalesced with the idea of the crucifixion, and, perhaps in a direct relationship with Old English riddles, perhaps in conjunction with the Latin rhetorical figure of prosopopoeia, or perhaps under the influence of both of these, produced his central poetic conceit, the speaking cross. In this synthesis he achieved much more than a merely rhetorical success. Christianity enabled him to transcend secular heroic ideals and heroic literary tradition enabled him to illuminate Christian ideals. In The Dream of the Rood the mystery of the resurrection, the victory of Christ over his enemies through his death at their hands, finds its Germanic heroic correlative in the paradox of a weapon-retainer which by becoming the instrument of its lord’s death becomes the instrument of his victory.

1 Cf. Peter Clemoes, Rhythm and Cosmic Order in Old English Christian Literature (Cambridge, 1970), pp. 7–11, esp. 11.