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THE VIRGIN MARY AND *THE DREAM OF THE ROOD*

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A striking aspect of *The Dream of the Rood* is the Cross's comparison of itself, in lines 90–94, to the Blessed Virgin Mary:

Hwæt, me þa geweorðode wuldres Ealdor
ofer holmwudu, heofonrices Weard,
swylce swa he his modor eac, Marian sylfe,
æلميhtig God, for ealle menn
geweorðode ofer eall wifa cynn.

That is, “Lo, the lord of glory, the guardian of the heavenly kingdom, then honoured me over the hill trees, just as he, almighty God, honoured his mother also, Mary herself, over all women for the sake of all mankind.”¹

Comment here has been various. On the Cross exalted above other trees, M.J. Swanton cites *inter omnes arbor una nobilis* “among all trees the only noble tree” from the hymn “Pange lingua” by Venantius Fortunatus (d. 609?), and *Super omnia ligna cedrorum tu sola excelsior* from the York Breviary. Swanton also mentions a link of Virgin and Cross in the second-century *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* by St Irenaeus (1970 128–29).²

B.F. Huppé tries to relate the passage to *Paschale carmen* ii.30–39 by Caelius Sedulius (c. 450), which says that as Christ cast off Adam's stain, so “the blessed Mary springing from the root of Eve” atoned for Eve's sin.

But Sedulius can hardly be a source for the English poem, since he does not mention the Cross, and the *Dream* does not mention Eve. Huppé's claims that *The Dream of the Rood* 90–94 declares all women are honoured in the Virgin, and that the Virgin/tree parallel derives from play on *virgo*, *virga*, and *radix Jesse*, also fails to persuade (101–02).

Finally, papers by A.D. Horgan and Éamonn Ó Carragáin have been discussed by Mary Clayton (206–07). She rejects Horgan's notion that the *Dream* here refers to the Virgin's Assumption, on the grounds that while the Virgin ascended to heaven body and soul, the Cross remained on earth. But she accepts in part Ó Carragáin's linking of the *Dream* with the Annunciation, because the poem echoes Gabriel's "Blessed art thou among women" (Luke 1:28), and Crucifixion and Annunciation were both traditionally dated to 25 March. An implication unique in Old English literature has also been seen here: that, as the Cross began as a tree like any other, the Virgin was also chosen arbitrarily, "honoured for no special reason."³ But this suggestion shows a curious understanding of mediaeval Christianity, where the choice of Mary would be seen, not in modern terms as "random" or "accidental," but as part of God's pre-ordained plan, Mary having been chosen for her destiny before the foundation of the world to fulfil the prophecies of the Old Testament.

Despite the above, *The Dream of the Rood* has never been properly related to patristic teaching on Virgin and Cross in the plan of Redemption. This is an early theme, distinct from those popular in the later middle ages of *Planctus Mariae* and the Virgin's Sorrows by the Cross (deriving from John 19:25–27, and familiar from the thirteenth-century "Stabat mater dolorosa").⁴ The idea of Virgin and Cross as agents in Man's salvation, contrasted with Eve and the Tree of Knowledge as agents in Man's fall, has a continuous history from the second century onwards. The theme of lines 90–94 of *The Dream of the Rood* is thus not as anomalous or aberrant as it seems. It can be related to a tradition going back to early Christian times.

The theme first appears in v.19 of *Adversus haereses* by St Irenaeus of Lyon (c. 130–c. 202). As a boy, Irenaeus knew St Polycarp of Smyrna (?72–?157), a disciple of St John the Evangelist, traditional guardian of the Virgin Mary in her last years on earth. So the links of Irenaeus with the Blessed Virgin herself were not distant. Irenaeus says of Christ, "if he has summed up, by his obedience on the tree, the disobedience perpetrated by means of the tree; if that deception of which Eve (a virgin espoused to a man) has been a miserable victim, has been dispelled by the good news of truth magnificently announced by the angel to Mary, also a virgin espoused

to a man" (PG 7.1175), then the bonds fastening mankind to death are now unloosed.⁵ Irenaeus uses similar language in his *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, as Swanton notes:

Adam had necessarily to be restored in Christ, that mortality be absorbed in immortality, and Eve in Mary, that a virgin, become the advocate of a virgin, should undo and destroy virginal disobedience by virginal obedience. And the sin that was wrought through the tree was undone by the obedience of the tree, obedience to God whereby the Son of Man was nailed to the Tree. (Irenaeus 69; cf. Casagrande 50–51)

The Anglo-Saxons could hardly have read these passages for themselves. Irenaeus was almost unknown in the middle ages, and *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* was thought lost until 1904, when an Armenian version turned up in Yerevan (capital of former Soviet Armenia). But the work of Irenaeus circulated widely in early times, so that many later writers echo his association of Mary and the Cross in undoing the work of Eve and the Tree of Knowledge.

Some examples of this are curious. *De resurrectione*, by St Ephraem of Syria (306–373), declares of Christ "From on high he descended as a stream, and from Mary he came as a root; from a tree he came down as fruit, and as a first offering he rose again to heaven." Severian of Gabala (d. c. 408), in a sermon on the Cross, associates the Virgin with its mystery: "Virginity is the root of the Cross, that is, the Virgin who bore him who suffered, giving birth not by the law of nature, but by the power and virtue of the Creator of nature" (Cignelli 95–96).

More characteristic is a sermon preached on Christmas Day 386, where St Gregory of Nyssa (c. 330–c. 395) opposes Eve and Mary: "that woman by means of a tree brought about sin; this woman by means of a tree restored good" (PG 46.1148).⁶ His contemporary St Ambrose (339–397), commenting on the text "Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, being forty days tempted of the Devil" (Luke 4:1–2), contrasts Adam with Christ, and goes on to contrast Eve with Mary, and the Tree of Knowledge with Christ's Cross: *per mulierem stultitia, per virginem sapientia, mors per arborem, vita per crucem* (PL 15.1698).⁷ Ambrose's commentary, used by Bede for his own commentary on Luke, was certainly known to the Anglo-Saxons (Mayr-Harting 210–11).

A variant of this theme occurs in pseudo-Ambrose sermon 45: *Eva nos damnari fecit per arboris pomum, Maria absolvit per arboris donum; quia et Christus in ligno pependit, ut fructus* (PL 17.715; Casagrande 378). This figures in such late manuscripts as Milan, Archivio Capella della Basilica,

M35 (of the eleventh or twelfth century), and Salamanca, Biblioteca de la Universidad, C.81 (fourteenth or fifteenth century), but also appears as an interpolation in a sermon of African provenance in Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica, MS lat. 5758, an early seventh-century uncial manuscript from Bobbio. As Bobbio was an Irish foundation, maintaining close links with Ireland, it is possible that pseudo-Ambrose sermon 45 (of the sixth century or earlier) was known in the British Isles.⁸

In Eastern Christianity the theme is well attested. One instance appears in a Christmas sermon of before 359 attributed to Eusebius of Emesa (now Homs, in Syria), surviving only in an Armenian translation. Declaring that Adam was created on a Friday and fell on a Friday, and that it was therefore necessary that Christ should suffer torment on that day and, at the sixth hour, taste the fruit of death, for Man to be victorious at the hour he met destruction, Eusebius continues, "For the Tree in Paradise, lo, the Tree of the Cross. There is the woman, who brought sin into the world; here is the Virgin, who heard the words *Behold your mother*. Adam on that evil day stretched forth his hand; Jesus stretched out his fair and holy arms" (Cignelli 96).

The theme occurs again in the preaching of St John Chrysostom (354–407), bishop of Constantinople. "A virgin, a beam, and a death were the symbols of our defeat. The virgin was Eve; the beam, the Tree of Knowledge; the death, the punishment of Adam. But wait; a Virgin, a beam and a death are also the symbols of victory. In the place of Eve is Mary; for the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, the beam of the Cross; and for the death of Adam, the death of Christ. Do you see now how the Devil has been defeated by the very things with which before he triumphed?" (PG 49.396).⁹

Chrysostom's works, often translated into Latin, were known in Anglo-Saxon England. His *De reparatione lapsi* and *De compunctione cordis* survive in a manuscript of English provenance, and Alcuin mentions his writings in the library of York.¹⁰ Despite the fact that no Latin translation of the above survives (though we have one in Armenian), Chrysostom's words show that the redeeming power of the Blessed Virgin and the Cross was a familiar theme in Greek Christianity. The identical passage appears in an Easter homily (known in Greek and Bulgarian) probably by him, and in any case showing his influence (PG 52.768).¹¹ A similar passage appears in a Christmas homily attributed to him: "Long ago the Devil deceived the virgin Eve, because of which Gabriel brought the good news to the Virgin Mary. Eve, having been deceived, brought forth a word that brings death; Mary, having heard the good news, conceived within her the Word which

has obtained eternal life. Eve's word indicated the Tree which exiled Adam from Paradise; but the Word born of the Virgin revealed the Cross, which gave the Good Thief, representative of Adam, a place in Paradise" (PG 56.392-93).¹² These passages thus reveal an unexpected link between *The Dream of the Rood* and Eastern Christianity in its widest sense, because the last sermon is known in Greek, Bulgarian, Armenian, Syriac, Georgian, and Arabic versions.

In Latin Christianity, a variant of the motif occurs in number 163 (on the Blessed Virgin's Nativity) of the second series of homilies written by Hrabanus Maurus (c. 780-856) shortly before his death. This declares, "per quatuor fuit perditio mundi: per mulierem, per virum, per lignum, per serpentem; per quatuor restauratur: per Mariam, per Christum, per crucem, per Joseph." These sermons had almost no influence. Homily 163, original in expression and using varied sources (PL 110.466), is known only from an edition published at Cologne in 1617.¹³ Yet it provides evidence for knowledge of our theme in Anglo-German circles, since Hrabanus was a pupil of Alcuin of York.

Further light on this point comes from slightly earlier Irish sources. In the Marian hymn "Cantemus in omni die," Cú Chuimne of Iona (d. 747) declares "By a woman and a tree the world first perished; by the virtue of a woman it returned to salvation."

Per mulierem et lignum mundus prius periit;
per mulieris virtutem ad salutem rediit.¹⁴

The reference to *mulier* and *lignum* proves a link with the theme as expressed by Hrabanus. Though it does not actually mention the Cross as second *lignum*, the poem (dated to between 693 and 704, and probably earlier than later) suggests the present motif was known in Irish circles at the time the Ruthwell Cross was carved.¹⁵ Irish influence did not cease in Northumbria after the Synod of Whitby; and, since the question of the structural integrity of *The Dream of the Rood* remains unsolved, if the English poem's latter part were written about 700, lines 92-94 of it would be echoed in Cú Chuimne's hymn.¹⁶ The association of Blessed Virgin and Cross in Man's Redemption could thus be seen as a theme familiar both in Iona and in early Christian Northumbria.

The evidence set out above shows texts, ranging from as far apart as Scotland and Syria, that bring together the Blessed Virgin and the Cross in the plan of Redemption. Because such an association can be shown to have been known throughout Christendom from very early times, we can

see *The Dream of the Rood* here as part of a great tradition. At the same time, the patristic texts indicate the originality of the Old English poet. He refers, not to Eve and the Tree of Knowledge, but to the Cross as honoured among other trees as Mary was blessed among women, echoing the words of Gabriel and Elizabeth at Luke 1:28, 42. If it was he who first brought together that scriptural source with the patristic tradition of Virgin and Cross in Man's Redemption (implicit, as we have seen, in Cú Chuimne of Iona's Marian hymn), it would be a further tribute to his genius.

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NOTES

- ¹ Clayton, p. 206, n. 103. The writer thanks Dr Clayton for help on this point.
- ² See *The Oxford Book of Medieval Latin Verse*, p. 74; cf. Allen and Calder, pp. 52, 55.
- ³ Horgan, p. 17; Ó Carrigáin, pp. 487–505; see also Swanton 1987, p. 97.
- ⁴ Cf. *A Selection of Religious Lyrics*, p. 111.
- ⁵ *Contre les hérésies: livre V*, ii.249; Casagrande, p. 49.
- ⁶ See also Quasten, iii.277; Altenburger and Mann, pp. 301–02.
- ⁷ See also *Sancti Ambrosii Mediolanensis Opera*, iv. 108.
- ⁸ See Barré 1955, pp. 92, 94–95; *Clavis patrum latinorum*, p. 39; Lowe, p. 309; Machielsen, i.30–31.
- ⁹ See also Geerard, ii, 280, 479.
- ¹⁰ See Farmer, p. 94; Geerard, ii, 502; Alcuin, *The Bishops, Kings and Saints of York*.
- ¹¹ See de Aldama, pp. 53–54; Geerard, ii, 517.
- ¹² See Cignelli, p. 96; Geerard, ii, 558–59.
- ¹³ See Barré, “La nouvelle Ève dans la pensée médiévale d’Ambroise Autpert au pseudo-Albert,” p. 21, and his *Les homéliaires carolingiens de l’école d’Auzerre*, pp. 13–17; Longère, pp. 41–42.
- ¹⁴ *Ein Jahrtausend lateinischer Hymnendichtung*, ii.266; cf. Kenney, pp. 269–70; Breeze, pp. 269–71.
- ¹⁵ Murphy, p. 22; see also Anderson, p. 16, n. 68; Byrne, pp. 247, 257.
- ¹⁶ Mayr-Harting, pp. 110–11. On the integrity of the *Dream*, cf. the comments of G.T. Shepherd in *Continuations and Beginnings*, p. 17; Alexander, p. 177; Swanton 1987, pp. 94–101 (where the poem is discussed as the work of one man), 311; and the open verdict of Barbara Raw in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, p. 239.

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