

The Visionary Cross: An Experiment in the Multimedia Edition

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A reservation I should wish to express is that customarily levelled at digital projects, which is that while the technology (brilliantly, beautifully, wonderfully) enables and indeed encourages the presentation of multiple points of view, so putting the burden of interpretation onto the individual reader, there is a concomitant loss of genuine decision-making by those claiming to be responsible for the work as a whole... Editors should edit: will they?

Our epigraph comes from the report of an external assessor to the original funding application for our project. We cite it because it represents a common question asked of the Digital Humanities by traditional scholars: “Can it be as significant as it is pretty?”

For editors of text-based digital projects, the answer is increasingly clear. The last decade has seen the development of a relatively solid consensus as to basic technological and generic expectations (see O'Donnell 2004 for a summary). Best practice now expects that text-based digital projects will be encoded using XML, preferably TEI. It assumes they will contain an archive with transcriptions and full colour facsimiles of primary sources; that some means will be provided for comparing variant readings; and that users will be able to test editorial assumptions by comparing or constructing alternative editorial texts. While there is some debate as to whether text-based projects have yet lived up to their original promise (Robinson 2005), there can be little doubt they are beginning

to be recognised as important works of scholarship in their own right.

For developers of projects that depend heavily on multimedia or collaborative technologies, however, the answer to this question is far less clear. While open standards exist for the encoding of image, moving pictures, and sound, there is little agreement as to how these are to be presented to the end user: unlike text-based projects, multi- and mixed media projects still commonly rely on proprietary software or specific operating systems (e.g. Foys 2002, Reed-Kline 2000; British Library Board, n.d.). And while many digital projects propose using collaborative technology in their design, there is as yet no agreement on the fundamental issue of how such collaboration can function in a research culture based on peer review and the preservation of authorial integrity. A number of exemplary projects are beginning to show how such technologies can be applied in specific contexts or to solve specific research problems (e.g. Ó Croinin et al. [n.d.], Toth et al. [n.d.]). But we are still far from agreeing as to how they can be used more generally to support day-to-day research by working humanities scholars.

The Visionary Cross project addresses this problem by treating it as a research question. Our goal is to produce a mixed-media and extensible edition of a key group of Anglo-Saxon artefacts associated with the “Visionary Cross” tradition in Anglo-Saxon England: the eighth-century Ruthwell and Bewcastle standing stone crosses, the tenth-century Vercelli Book dream of the Rood poem, and the eleventh century Brussels Reliquary Cross (for this tradition, see Ó Carragáin 2005).

These objects include some of the best known and most studied of the period. The Ruthwell Cross is a 17 foot high stone cross erected near a former Roman military site in Dumfriesshire Scotland. It is perhaps best known to Anglo-Saxonists for a runic inscription that may be the oldest known record of an Anglo-Saxon vernacular poem, versions of which can be found in the tenth-century Vercelli Book and eleventh-century Brussels Cross (see Ó Carragáin 2005, 58-60; O'Donnell 1996, 287-288, for bibliography).

The Brussels Cross is a reliquary that once contained a fragment from the supposed True Cross. It is built on an oak core that was covered with precious metal and jewels and perhaps a crucifixion (stolen sometime before 1793; see Van Ypersele de Strihou 2000; Webster 1984; Ó Carragáin 2005). Gilt silver decoration on the cross's back and side bands bearing a vernacular inscription have survived. On the centre of the back of the cross is a depiction of the Agnus Dei; symbols of the four evangelists are found at the terminals. An Old English inscription around the edge quotes from a version of the same poem found on the Ruthwell Cross and in the Vercelli Book. A second inscription explains that the cross was made by two

brothers in memory of a third. On the back we are told the name of the artist responsible for its manufacture.

The Bewcastle Cross is a standing stone cross found, like the Ruthwell Cross, at a former Roman military site. Approximately the same size as Ruthwell and belonging perhaps to the same artistic school, the severely weathered Bewcastle Cross still stands in its original location (see Bailey and Cramp 1988). It has the remains of a sundial on its side and may have been painted and decorated with other metalwork or glass attachments. The west face is carved with three figural panels, of which two also appear on Ruthwell. The east side of the cross is decorated with a continuous vinescroll similar to Ruthwell; its north and south sides are carved with panels of interlace, geometric, and foliate ornament. The lowest panel on the west face shows a falconer wearing secular dress. This usually is understood to represent the deceased man commemorated in a now largely illegible runic inscription.

The Vercelli Book *Dream of the Rood* poem ties the members of this collection together (ed. Swanton 1996). The *Dream* poem describes an encounter with an object that is at once and alternately a tree, a beacon (a word used to describe the Cross on the Bewcastle Cross), a sign, and a cross sometimes covered with blood, and sometimes covered (as in Brussels) with gold and jewels. It ends with the Cross instructing the dreamer to tell what he or she has seen and with the dreamer reciting an expression of devotion and commemoration. The *Dream* is one of only about 25 poems and poetic fragments known to have survived the Anglo-Saxon period in more than one copy (O'Donnell 1996; see also Orton 2000). If the runic carving on Ruthwell is coeval with the rest of the monument, then the poem has a textual history that is longer and more geographically and linguistically diverse than almost any vernacular poem in the period. The citation of a couplet from the text on Brussels, moreover, suggests that it occupied a very significant place in the vernacular literary imagination: the only other known example of a similar verse citation in the period is from the translation of the Psalter.

Together, these objects form a cultural matrix whose members are associated along a number of textual, art historical, liturgical, and archaeological planes. The goal of this project is to use new technology to study these objects and their relationships in ways impossible in print—or even in person. Just as a textual edition improves upon witnesses by contributing an interpretive apparatus, so to our edition will improve on readers' knowledge of this matrix by placing it in a hypermedia apparatus that will assist in its interpretation.

The value of this approach is perhaps most obvious in the case of the crosses, which can be understood as multimedia objects in their own right. In all three cases, the monuments gain meaning from the interaction of text, image, and context. The stone crosses appear to have been “read” by walking around in

a direction determined by their geographical orientation and the order of the Liturgy. The Brussels cross—depending on one's view of the object's original function—would likely have been seen by contemporary audiences either as an altar piece or carried in procession (On this spatial aspect see especially Ó Carragáin 2005).

The new technologies also allow us to ask new questions about the objects relationships with each other. Had an Anglo-Saxon observer been lucky enough to see all four in a single lifetime (an impossible proposition given their temporal and geographic distribution), he or she would have understood them both as individual works of art and as part of a larger web of cultural traditions and references extending along various textual, art historical, and generic planes. By taking advantage of hypermedia's strength in the representation of arbitrary connections, we as editors can now represent these connections to modern scholars in a way that translates and augments the original artefacts—in our edition, linking becomes a type of hypermedia collation. In our edition, scholars will be able to both to study the individual objects as objects in their own right and follow the connections among them. In doing so they will have access both to a collection unavailable to any single Anglo-Saxon observer and the benefit of immediate access to the best of recent criticism and centuries of secondary scholarship.

By using recent developments in collaborative technologies, finally, we hope this project—like the cultural knowledge it attempts to capture and represents—will be open to augmentation as our knowledge develops. By using standoff markup, we intend to allow developers and users to anticipate connections to other objects in the matrix or discover new connections among existing objects in much the same way contributors to the Wikipedia can predict the existence of articles that have yet to be written or contribute “stubs” for subsequent elaboration while retaining intellectual ownership of their contributions (see Ore 2004 for a discussion of collaborative editing; O'Donnell 2006 discusses some strengths and weaknesses of the model for scholars).

If multimedia projects are going to answer our reviewer's question, they must learn to do more than simply display—they must also learn to *edit*. This paper discusses the approaches we are and will be taking to this important problem in developing a complex multimedia “edition” of a cultural matrix.

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