

LOCUTION BEGETS MEMORY: SPIRITUAL IMPETUS AND THE COSMIC SCOPE OF CHRISTIAN SALVATION IN *THE DREAM OF THE ROOD*

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ABSTRACT

This analysis of the Old English poem *The Dream of the Rood* and its reflexes in material culture incorporates two major pursuits. The first is a reconstruction of a potential, contemporary impetus for religious experience perceived upon an encounter with any iteration of what I term the Rood-corpus; that is, the extant manifestations of a widespread poem, both temporally and spatially, known to us as *The Dream of the Rood*. This spiritual or religious experience is chiefly predicated on the Rood's retention of memory from its personal involvement in and experience of Christ's Crucifixion. My establishment of this Rood-corpus also provides a (to my knowledge) original hypothesis regarding the a priori archetype that begat our extant versions of the poem. The second pursuit seeks to place *The Dream of the Rood* and the Rood-corpus more broadly in the context of their contemporary and nascent Cross Legends, specifically those that deal with the life of the True Cross before Christ. This second endeavor establishes a grander, more cosmic scope of the Christian salvation story encapsulated within the poem and, following the explication of memory's role in this body of literature, extends the roots of the Rood's memory back into the earliest days of the Bible. The cumulative effect of this study is to illuminate the constellation of meaning present within and surrounding the Rood-corpus and establishing the evocative milieu in which it was encountered.

The Dream of the Rood, perhaps the most famous poem of the Old-English corpus, an alluring and meditative musing on the Crucifixion of Christ, has duly carved out for itself a cherished place in scholarship and the hearts of those interested in the Anglo-Saxon and all that is germane. Laden with potential meaning and invitations to explore every semantic nuance or lexical implication, there has been an immense amount of ink scrupulously spilled over this poem. The great majority of scholarship on this text has sought to uncover the inspirations behind a single poet who composed this literary monument, with a specific focus on his choice to personify the Rood and grant it locution.¹⁴⁷ To borrow coinage from a very fine and instructive example of such scholarship, the *putative milieu* has been established.¹⁴⁸ However, there are two brief instances of the poem in material culture outside of its home in the Vercelli Book, with a nearly 300-year gap between each of their creation, complicating scholarship. One is a runic inscription on the Ruthwell Cross, a standing cross erected as early as the eighth century AD, the other is inscribed on the Brussels Cross, an ornate eleventh century reliquary purported to house a portion of the True Cross. There is a lack of synthesis between scholarship on these two crosses and literary commentary on *The Dream of the Rood*, which often glosses over them with a mere nod to their existence. The present, thus, constitutes an attempt at establishing the *evocative milieu*—that is, a reconstruction of the matrix evocations and implications that might occur to a contemporary believing Christian upon their encounter with any iteration of the Rood-corpus. Whereas most scholarship in the past has been a source study of the poem in the Vercelli Book, I seek to illuminate the constellation of meaning between the poem and these Crosses. This *modus operandi* should allow a flexibility of engagement with this corpus that its nature necessitates, given its lifespan, geographic distribution, and religious content. I seek to accomplish this by explicating two distinct features of the Rood-corpus, most visible in the poem but substantiated by its various reflexes in material culture. The first feature follows the supposition that granting the Rood speech begets a capacity for memory. This is immediately and expressly stated by the Rood in its first spoken words in the poem and substantiated by the simple fact that both the Ruthwell and Brussels Cross inscriptions are in the first-person. Highlighting the notable scholarship on Old-English poetic representations of the mind by Dr. Britt Mize, I hope to establish an impetus for religious experience based on the memory retained by the Rood. The second feature is the cosmic scope of the Christian salvation story encapsulated in the poem. The eschatological elements of *The Dream* are immediately apparent and already expounded by many scholars. However, I seek to place *The Dream of the Rood* in the context of its contemporary and nascent Cross Legends, specifically relating to the history of the Cross before Christ.

¹⁴⁷ M. Schlauch, “The Dream of the Rood as Prosopopoeia,” *Essential Articles: Old English Poetry* (1968). The classic article in this line of inquiry.

¹⁴⁸ Andy Orchard, “The Dream of the Rood: Cross-References,” *New Readings in the Vercelli Book* (2009): 225-53. This is not to say that it has been exhaustively established, there is always room for more exploration. Orchard does take *The Dream* as a product of a poem that was in wider circulation, ‘cross-referencing’ analogs like the Ruthwell and Brussels crosses, but still operates by referencing the artistry of a single poet.

Following the explication of memory's role in this body of literature, this second observation serves to extend the roots of the inanimate object's memory into the earliest books of the Bible—in some cases into apocryphal expansions of Genesis—rounding out the theological content to encompass the entirety of the Christian story. At the very least this section will serve as a foray into Cross Legends from the standpoint of *The Dream of the Rood*, as scholarship hitherto has overlooked the poem within this context.

Background

A technical point must be made here about the nature of the material at hand and what I am calling the Rood-corpus. Rood is simply the Old-English word for cross; I will use this term to refer to the cross unless referring to corpora beyond the Old-English tradition for which scholarship traditionally uses the Modern English word 'cross,' such as Cross Legends or True Crosses. As mentioned above, the Vercelli Book constitutes the focal point of scholarship on *The Dream of the Rood*. It is here that *The Dream* appears fully fleshed out in 156 lines of alliterative verse.¹⁴⁹ In brief, the poem begins in first-person narration, where the Dreamer establishes that he had a dream-vision of the Rood. Then the poem transitions into the dream, where the Rood itself speaks and narrates its journey from a tree in the forest to Christ's Crucifixion. Personified, the Rood relays its own suffering in tandem with that of Christ's. After a burial sequence, the Rood is found and glorified as a relic, evocative of its *Inventio* by St. Helena. The text then, after an homily given by the Rood, transitions back to the Dreamer with a call to Christianity and proselytization.

Regarding the Vercelli Book itself, it is housed in the Capitulary Library in Vercelli, Italy, and constitutes one of the four most significant verse manuscripts of the Old English language. Together these four manuscripts constitute nearly the entirety of the Old English poetic corpus. The Book contains 6 verse texts, 23 prose homilies, and a prose *Vita* of St. Guthlac.¹⁵⁰ Probably compiled in the second half of the tenth century, there is a debate regarding the chronology of its content's composition and how the manuscript wound up in Italy. There is no doubt that the manuscript was composed in England, but the language is standardized, preventing an exact pinpointing of location.¹⁵¹ Important to note, which will be fleshed out later, is that the poem following *The Dream of the Rood* in the manuscript is *Elene* by Cynewulf: a 1,321-verse Old English version of the *Inventio* of the Cross by St. Helena that also includes Constantine the Great's vision and conversion to Christianity in 312 AD.¹⁵² In his 1981 essay "How did the Vercelli Collector Interpret The Dream of the Rood," Éamonn Ó Carragáin emphasized that "we are forced to judge [Old-English] texts by the company they keep" as one of our few windows into how the Anglo-Saxon himself

¹⁴⁹ George Philip Krapp, ed., *The Vercelli Book*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932): 61-65.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, xi-lxxx.

¹⁵¹ Michael James Swanton, *The Dream of the Rood*, 4th ed. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016): 1-9.

¹⁵² Krapp, 66-102.

would have interpreted them.¹⁵³ This approach will be taken with the Vercelli Book in the forthcoming analysis, given the clear harmony of emphasis on eschatology displayed throughout the Book.¹⁵⁴

Regarding the Ruthwell Cross—most likely erected in the eighth century, it is one of the most famous and complete standing crosses from Anglo-Saxon England extant today. Embellished with biblical symbolism, Latin inscriptions, and inhabited vine scroll, the Cross also crucially displays a runic inscription bearing striking similarities to *The Dream of the Rood*.¹⁵⁵ Below is given a translation from a full reconstruction of the inscription by D. R. Howlett in 1972:

God Almighty stripped Himself. When He wished to ascend the gallows, brave before all men, I dared not bow, but had to stand fast.

I raised up a mighty King. I dared not tilt the Lord of Heaven. Men mocked us both together; I was drenched with blood poured from the Man's side after He sent forth His spirit.

Christ was on the Cross. Yet hastening thither from afar noble men came together; I beheld it all. I was grievously afflicted with sorrows; I bent to the men, within reach.

*They laid Him down, wounded with arrows, weary of limb; they stood (themselves) at the head of His corpse; they beheld there the Lord of Heaven, and He rested Himself there for a time. Amen.*¹⁵⁶

This four-part reconstruction corresponds to elements within lines 39-45, 48-49, and 52-53 in *The Dream*, though do not match to any specific one in its entirety. This version, like that in the Vercelli Book, exhibits the most oft explored feature of poem—personification of the Rood, or *prosopopoeia*.¹⁵⁷ For linguists and specialists on the paleography of runes, the Cross is of pertinence, as the inscription evinces the Northumbrian dialect of the Anglo-Saxon language and the runes are of a distinct variety.¹⁵⁸ Relevant for this study is that the very existence of this version of *The Dream* betrays at least a 300-year lifespan for some version of the poem, from this most nascent, dialectal manifestation to the poetic and intellectual sophistication shown in the Vercelli Book.

¹⁵³ Éamonn Ó Carrigáin, “How Did the Vercelli Collector Interpret the Dream of the Rood,” *Studies in English Language and Early Literature in Honour of Paul Christophersen* (1981): 63-104.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 66-67.

¹⁵⁵ Swanton, 9-38.

¹⁵⁶ D. R. Howlett, “A Reconstruction of the Ruthwell Crucifixion Poem,” *Studia Neophilologica* 48, no. 1 (1976): 58.

¹⁵⁷ Schlauch, “Prosopopoeia”; See Cherniss, Michael D. “The Cross as Christ's Weapon: The Influence of Heroic Literary Tradition on The Dream of the Rood.” *Anglo-Saxon England* 2 (1973): 241-52 for another example. Cherniss highlights the traditions of first-person inscriptions on Anglo-Saxon swords as another potential impetus for Prosopopoeia. Personification is equally present in both Old English and Latin riddle traditions.

¹⁵⁸ Swanton, 9-38.

Finally, regarding the Brussels Cross. It is less renowned in the context of *The Dream of the Rood*, though no less an impressive artifact of Christian and Anglo-Saxon history. It bears roughly one line of text, corresponding to lines 44 and 48 in the poem:

Rod is min nama; geo ic ricne Cyning bær byfigynde, blod bestemed.

*Rood is my name. Trembling once, I bore a powerful king, made wet with blood.*¹⁵⁹

Probably dating from the eleventh century, the Brussels Cross is purportedly a reliquary for the True Cross. The Cross is badly damaged but was once adorned in jewels and silver, and the above inscription was rendered in the Latin Alphabet along its side. There is extensive scholarly debate as to the exact origin of this relic.

Thus constitutes what I term the Rood-corpus; that is, the extant manifestations of a widespread poem, both temporally and spatially, known to us as *The Dream of the Rood*. This conception of a ‘Rood-corpus’ is in order with the conclusion put forth by Andy Orchard in his essay “*The Dream of the Rood: Cross-references*”:

There seems, then, little doubt that generations of Anglo-Saxon authors, in both Latin and Old English, both at the beginning of the period and at the end, converted artistically the matter of the Cross into pious, precious, and precocious verse and prose, and I would argue that *The Dream of the Rood* is crucial (as it were) to our understanding of that process. [...] *The Dream of the Rood* and its reflexes... provide an index of the ways in which some of the finest Old English verse that has survived could adapt and change, in the course of a lengthy journey that may have lasted up to three centuries... transmitted and transmuted... through the minds and mouths of a number of poets to the hands and hearts of a number of sculptors and scribes.¹⁶⁰

In the following analysis, then, I am not just contending with the Vercelli Book’s *Dream of the Rood*, but also with an abstraction of the poem, an *a priori* archetypal version that begat our extant manifestations forming the Rood-corpus.¹⁶¹ This archetype, reduced to its most fundamental attributes, is intended to represent the minimum of commonality present in the work of these poets, scribes, and sculptors. There are two key attributes essential to this archetype. The first attribute is the unique personification of the Rood and its ability to speak, displayed in each of our extant manifestations, evincing a retention of memory from its personal involvement and experience of the Crucifixion. This, as mentioned in the

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 49; see “Old English Poetry in Facsimile,” <https://uw.digitalmappa.org/>.

¹⁶⁰ Orchard, 253.

¹⁶¹ Swanton, *The Dream of the Rood*, 38-42. See these pages for a technical discussion on the interrelationship between the Ruthwell Cross and *The Dream*. Swanton concludes an *A priori* poem begetting all extant constituents of the Rood-corpus as the most likely explanation for their similarities across such a breadth of time.

introduction, likely represents an impetus for spiritual experience and contributed to the longevity of the Rood-corpus. The second attribute relates to the simple fact that, at all times and in each of our manifestations of the poem, it is intended for us to perceive the *real* Rood, the one which occupied a physical point in time in the Christian story, as the speaker. This, as opposed to literary echo or symbolic abstraction. This second attribute functions more as a presupposition in the forthcoming analysis, especially in the second section where the highlighted Cross Legends operate on the same presupposition, i.e., that there was a physical Rood at some point in time. For the sake of objectivity in looking at my own *modus operandi*, I echo a concern expressed by Éamonn Ó Carragáin in 2010: “the more a poet or storyteller penetrates to the core of Christian tradition, the more his or her poem will echo central Christian traditions of every other period . . . [W]e must beware of arguing that [a particular] echo constitutes a source.” This sentiment can be equally asserted regarding Christian literature surrounding the Cross, or Rood.¹⁶² Yet, it is the unique centrality of the Rood in this literature that enables analysis on these grounds. Indeed, the present is not an attempt at a source study for the Rood-corpus, rather it is to unlock the *evocative milieu* in which contemporaries encountered the corpus, not the *putative* preceding it. As such, I will take *The Dream of the Rood* as it appears in the Vercelli Book as the most poetically and theologically sophisticated manifestation of the Rood-corpus, exploring unique insights betrayed by the text, but in the sense that these sophistications are mere elaborations of features present or perceived in the archetypal version circulating the Anglo-Saxon period.¹⁶³

Spiritual Impetus—The Rood’s Memory

Hwæt! famously begins the poem, with an immediate invocation of memory. The narrator, that is the dreamer, wishes to reveal the dream that he experienced to the reader. This process of revelation is the first inkling of memory’s crucial role in the poem, introduced with a formulaic construction indicative of a fundamental element of Anglo-Saxon cosmology:

Hwæt! Ic swefna cyst secgan wylle
H[w]æt **me gemætte** to midre nihte (1-2)

Lo! I the choicest of dreams intend to tell
*what was **dreamed to me** in the middle of the night*

¹⁶² Brandon W Hawk, “‘Id est, Crux Christi’: Tracing the Old English Motif of the Celestial Rood,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 40 (2012): 44.

¹⁶³ Orchard, “Cross-references.” Orchard sees *The Dream of the Rood* as it appears in the Vercelli Book as a more sophisticated version of an archetypal poem, but he does this as he reconstructs a putative milieu for that version’s composition.

‘Me gemætte,’ the verb, often translated as “to dream,” is an impersonal verb that takes the dative.¹⁶⁴ Thus, to the Anglo-Saxon, dreams are something that happen *to* you, not products of an idle and slumbering mind as they are in modern English; rather, dreams constitute some form of revelation. This observation is expounded by Dr. Britt Mize in his body of work concerning poetic representations of the mind in Old English as a container, a container often metaphorically explicated as a trove of sapiential and spiritual treasure.¹⁶⁵ Old English literature is teeming with compound terminology describing the private possessions of the mind as a hoard or chamber, such as *wordhord*, *modhord*, *feorhlocan*, or *feorðlocan*.¹⁶⁶ Often the mental container is represented in a dichotomy between its private possessions and the public who is outside of it, unable to divine what is inside this personal, impermeable barrier. Indeed, in Mize’s essay *The Mental Container and the Cross of Christ*, he analyzes *The Dream of the Rood* as a series of confidential revelations and public disclosures between mental containers. This conception of the container however is not limited to explicit poetic vocabulary describing the mind as such, rather it is alluded to semantically in a number of instances throughout the Old English corpus. It bears reiterating a poignant example highlighted by Mize from the Exeter Riddle 42:

Ic seah wyhte wrætlice twa
 ...
 ... Hwylc þæs hordgates
 cægan cræfte þa clamme onleac
 þe þa rædellan wið ryne menn
 hygefæste heold heortan bewrigene
 orþoncbendum (1; 11b–15a)

*I saw there creatures, a wondrous pair, [...] which one has, with the mastery of a key, unlocked the bands of the hoard-gate, which had held the riddle thought-secure against secret seekers, concealed with cunning bonds of the heart.*¹⁶⁷

An elaborate expansion of the mental hoard imagery where the mind is not explicitly mentioned but implied semantically, the notion of a container is here expanded to a literal chamber of treasure, a cherished hoard which is only unlocked with “a key” of a runic play-on-words earlier revealed in the riddle and enterable via a “hoard-gate.” The subject and answer is a rooster (*hana*) and a hen (*hæn*), two animals which the author *saw* and now retains in memory. Thus, memories are also possessions of the mental container. Crucial for this study is the underlying notion that access to the contents of the mental container is

¹⁶⁴ Swanton, 103.

¹⁶⁵ Britt Mize, “The Mental Container and the Cross of Christ: Revelation and Community in *The Dream of the Rood*,” *Studies in Philology* 107, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 138. Mize has coalesced his work into a book: Mize, Britt. *Traditional Subjectivities: The Old English Poetics of Mentality*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 152, 159. Word-hoard, mind-hoard, mind-chamber, spirit-chamber.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 137. Adapted from Mize’s translation; Baum, *Riddles of the Exeter Book*.

revealed to others by language, written or spoken, specifically expressed in the first person by the possessor of the container. In the case of the riddle this is emphasized not only by the fact that the reader, regardless of time or place in which he or she encounters the passage, will have unlocked the treasure behind the original poet's hoard-gate upon solving the riddle, but also uniquely hinted at by the fact that the key to do so is itself language (the runic play-on-words). Thus, any instance of language in the first person offers a glimpse into the possessions of the speaker's mental container. The written word can reveal, in the same way that an oral retelling would, these possessions; but written language enables the possessions to be borne into the future in a disassociated manner.

Returning to the poem, following the surprisingly loaded assertion that the dream occurred to the narrator while his compeer *reordberrend* (speech-bearers) lay asleep, the narrative continues with the dreamer painting a picture of his dream.¹⁶⁸ An image of an awe-inspiring Celestial Rood is conjured, rife with metaphors describing the Rood as some form of tree and descriptions hinting at a *Crux Gemmata* appearance.¹⁶⁹ These features will be relevant to the next section. Pertinent to this section, however, is that the celestial apparition of the Rood speaks—specifically introducing its monologue by referencing its memory:

Ongan þa word sprecaŋ wudu selesta:
þæt wæs geara iu (ic þæt gyta geman) (28-29)

Then it began to speak words the best wood
“that was years ago (I that still remember)”

With this revelation, the poem now dawns a chiasmic structure of revealed memories, or more aptly, there is a nesting doll effect of mental containers.¹⁷⁰ The dreamer reveals to us a cherished treasure of his mental container—a dream-vision—a vision which is not the narration of the Crucifixion that composes the bulk of the poem's text. Rather, the dream-vision is simply and strictly the apparition of the Celestial Rood. A Rood which then offers a glimpse into its own mental possessions (arguably the most cherished of mental possessions according to the Christian story), its firsthand experience and participation in the Crucifixion.

The Rood drops into the mental container of the Dreamer, bringing its own memories into the present and revealing them through spoken language, that is, speech in the first person—functioning in the same sense as an oral retelling of Exeter Riddle 42 would. This revelation through language is the crucial link between each manifestation of

¹⁶⁸ Line 3: *reordberrend*; See Mize 143-144, Orchard 230, and Obermeyer, Dennis J. *The Relationship of Theology and Literary Form in 'The Dream of the Rood.'* PhD diss., The Catholic University of America, 2007. Ann Arbor: UMI, 2007. 23 for theories on the word-choice. An epithet for Man in an oxymoronic context, where there is complete stillness as all are asleep, within a poem where the only thing to speak is a talking Crucifix.

¹⁶⁹ Lines 3-10; *Crux Gemmata*, lit. “Jeweled Cross.”

¹⁷⁰ Mize, “The Mental Container and the Cross of Christ,” 163. Mize makes a similar observation in his section III. *The Cross as Mental Object*, in the sense that the Rood has now physically entered the Dreamer's mental container.

the Rood-corpus in material culture. Not simply for the pragmatic reason that poetry necessitates language, as do inscriptions, but that each of our extant examples are written in the first person—i.e., from the perspective of the Rood, with its mental container preserved in like manner to the written version of Exeter Riddle 42. It bears remarking here, then, that the manifestations of the Rood-corpus outside of the Vercelli Book simply relay the perspective of the Rood; there is no dreamer. One might then surmise that the archetypal poem that traversed the Anglo-Saxon period was strictly the Rood's mental container, perambulating through the epoch via written and oral preservation, until a poet's artistry inserted it into the mind of a dreamer.¹⁷¹

Language written in the first person not only provides the essential method of memory revelation, but simultaneously the bridge from lifeless text to spiritual reality. It is the nexus of the narrative world and the physical, or the evocative conduit for spiritual experience. To explicate this we need only a simple look at *The Dream of the Rood* in the context of the Vercelli Book, a manuscript constituted by a collection of seemingly disparate texts with homiletic overtones united by an emphasis on eschatology. Ó Carragáin argues on this basis that the manuscript is an example of the well-known monastic genre *florilegia*, anthologies of ascetic texts.¹⁷² Examination of *The Dream* in this context, where we imagine a pious monk poring over the poem in his dimly lit cell, renders the relationship between written first-person language and spiritual experience palpable. The aforementioned nesting doll effect of mental containers within the poem is ultimately encapsulated by the reader's own mind upon reading the text.¹⁷³ Using the nesting doll analogy, the structure of the poem is such: the dreamer opens his mental container to us and reveals his dream, wherein hovers the Rood which opens its own mental container and reveals a memory of its life—a memory centered around the Crucifixion.¹⁷⁴ After the physical joining of Christ to the Rood the two increasingly drift apart as the Rood's narration shifts from memory to homily, until the mental container of the Rood is re-encapsulated by that of the dreamer who resumes narration. Himself slowly transitioning from his reaction to the dream marked by first person singular pronouns, to a homiletic summation of the salvific results of the crucifixion for all mankind, marked by first person plural pronouns.¹⁷⁵ (“He redeemed *us* and gave *us*

¹⁷¹ Orchard, “Cross-References,” 241-242. Most essays at an archetype generally limit themselves to tangential comments on the shared lexical inventory of the Ruthwell Cross and Vercelli Book's poems. Orchard provides one such case, arguing that the Ruthwell Cross' poem, or rather the sculptor who inscribed it, decidedly focused on the “drama of the Crucifixion itself.” In this context he observes that there is no dreamer, or alternatively, that the dreamer was omitted, should he have been present in the archetype.

¹⁷² Ó Carragáin, “How did the Vercelli Collector Interpret the Dream of the Rood,” 66-67.

¹⁷³ Mize, “The Mental Container and the Cross of Christ”. Mize comes to similar conclusions but emphasizes the Rood's exhortation of the Dreamer to verbally share with his compeer *Reordberend* his confidential experience, leaving the idea in the realm of literature. In his conclusion he highlights the potential for reading the poem to induce a private revelation within one's own mental container. This is completely harmonious with my proposition, but more in the sense of abstract individual literary engagement, rather than in the contemporary monastic context vis-a-vis *florilegia*.

¹⁷⁴ Lines 1-27 for the opening of the Dreamer's mental container; lines 27-77 for the Rood's.

¹⁷⁵ Lines 77-156 for the resumption and closing of the Dreamer's enclosure.

life”).¹⁷⁶ Upon finishing reading the poem, which concludes with these inclusive and exhortative words, the contents are now enclosed within the mental container of the reader.

This lengthy exposition of the nested mental containers is intended to show how memories can be borne and transferred via both written and spoken language in the first person. That which was spoken by the Rood, which likely constitutes the archetypal version of the poem, was transferred to the Dreamer’s container by the Rood’s apparition therein; the Dreamer’s to the reader by the simple act of reading. The observation in the above outline of the poem, that the physical joining of Christ to the Rood occupies the center of Rood’s memory, is substantiated both by the Brussels and Ruthwell Crosses, but bears qualification. Barring the Rood’s theologically sophisticated closing homily, the retelling of its memory spans a brief mention of its life as a tree to its *Inventio* by St. Helena, between which is a “kaleidoscopic” and sometimes disorienting encounter between Christ and the Rood.¹⁷⁷ The narrative at this point in the poem is wending and seemingly anachronistic. There are times where we are not exactly sure where Christ is in relation to the Rood, if Christ is already nailed unto it, or he is in the process of carrying it. The Rood, “dares not bow or burst,” as if it already is bearing Christ, but five lines later Christ has only just “embraced” the Rood.¹⁷⁸ This temporal and spatial disorientation is characteristic of dreams. There is a tarrying dance between “he” and “I” and “him” and “me” within lines 33-47. For example, even when the nails are mentioned, they are mentioned by the Rood in the first person singular, referencing the pain caused to it solely.¹⁷⁹ Only upon reading the emphatic phrase “bysmeredon hie *unc butu atgædere*” (they mocked *us both together*) are we certain that the two have physically joined.¹⁸⁰ Immediately afterwards the two drift apart and we are again left with the words of the Rood in the first person singular. This crucial emphatic phrase “*unc butu atgædere*,” typically rendered in modern English as the first usage of the 1st person plural in the Rood’s monologue, is in fact a deployment of the archaic dual pronoun—this is the sole moment of joint experience between Christ and Rood in the poem.¹⁸¹ Tantalizingly, it occurs relating to language—the Rood and Christ’s collective suffering the scorn of men. The memory recounted on either end of this moment is represented as what the Rood saw and endured *solely*, highlighting the primacy given to the Rood’s personal witness to and experience of the Crucifixion. This emphatic statement of co-suffering is reiterated verbatim in the runic inscription of the Ruthwell Cross: “*bismærædu unket men ba atgad[re]*” (Men mocked *us both together*).¹⁸² On either side of this inscription is depicted the heroic Christ mounting the Rood and his removal from it, all of

¹⁷⁶ Line 147.

¹⁷⁷ Orchard, “Cross-references,” 253.

¹⁷⁸ Line 36; line 42.

¹⁷⁹ Line 47.

¹⁸⁰ Line 48.

¹⁸¹ Benjamin W Fortson, *Indo-European Language and Culture: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010): 140-152. The dual pronoun is of Indo-European provenance, its Old English reflex occurs selectively and only in literary impassioned scenes, such as in Beowulf’s pre-battle speeches.; see Sikora, Kenneth R., III. “Git vs Ge: The Importance of the Dual Pronoun in Beowulf.” *The Oswald Review* 17, no. 1 (2015).

¹⁸² Swanton, *The Dream of the Rood*, 94.

which is void of first-person plural pronouns, or any other grammatical feature denoting a collective experience. This substantiates that the Rood's personal memory, witness, and experience of the Crucifixion also holds primacy within the archetypal poem that manifested itself as the Rood-corpus. In other words, the archetypal poem *is* the Rood's mental container, revealing this cherished possession—a fact which enables the Rood to pontificate and share its memory of the Crucifixion to the beholder. Indeed, the Brussels Cross, a jeweled relic of the True Cross and chronologically the last manifestation forming the Rood-corpus, bears only the lines relating to 44b and 48 in the Vercelli Book: “Rod is min nama; geo ic ricne Cyning bær byfigynde, blod bestemed,” *Rood is my name. Trembling once, I bore a powerful king, made wet with blood.*¹⁸³ The Rood, stating its identity, tells of its personal memory and participation in the Crucifixion, this time on the physical object of Christ's Crucifixion itself, the True Cross.

The notion that language in the first person offers a glimpse into the mental container of the speaker cannot be understated regarding the Brussels Cross. Similar to the statement above that first person language is the bridge from lifeless text to spiritual reality and the nexus of the narrative world and the physical; the physical existence of the True Cross itself functions as a nexus between the abstract and overarching Christian narrative and material reality for the pious Christian. The Rood is not confined to the legends of St. Helena on stiff parchment (an Old English account of which does in fact accompany *The Dream of the Rood* in the Vercelli Book), but rather the relic is a physical attestation of the Christian narrative. For the pious believer, a True Cross relic such as the Brussels Cross carries a spiritual efficacy into the future from its encounter with Christ at the Crucifixion, in other words, *a memory*. This trait of True Cross relics, as exemplified by the many legends of its feats of healing in the medieval period, is, in the specific instance of the Brussels Cross, now intimately intertwined with a body of literature that emphasizes the personal experience and memory of the Rood. What's more is that this corpus of literature had a 300-year lifespan in Anglo-Saxon England; its dialectal and geographical distribution is equally impressive as its temporal, spanning the Northumbrian dialect to Classical West-Saxon, read, told, and retold by unknown numbers of mouths and edified countless souls.¹⁸⁴ In this context it serves to reiterate that the speaking Rood in *The Dream of the Rood* is a Celestial Rood—an abstract apparition bearing all the same scarred and sacred memories that the physical rood, a True Cross relic, endured. Thus, the abstract Rood, the archetypal Rood inhabiting the ether of Anglo-Saxon cosmology, legitimately bears the same memories resulting from physical contact with Christ at the Crucifixion as the True Cross. This is harmonious with the presupposition I proposed for the archetypal poem, where at all times the physical, True Rood, is to be perceived as the speaker.

Memory retained by the Rood at this abstract level also serves to expand the notion from a unique secondary effect of *prosopopoeia*, often glossed over in source studies seeking to establish a *putative milieu* in which *The Dream* was composed, to the *evocative milieu* of

¹⁸³ Ibid., 49.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid. 1-9 for a discussion on the language of the Vercelli book; 9-39 for the Northumbrian dialect on the Ruthwell Cross.

contemporary religious experience. One might posit that within the context of the Cult of the Cross, which flourished in Anglo-Saxon England at this time, there was a substrate of religious understanding that found it natural to perceive memory retained by the Rood.¹⁸⁵ This notion, then, might be perceived to varying degrees within each encounter with a Rood in Anglo-Saxon England: whether it be a fleeting and inarticulate understanding during the liturgy (especially during the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross), an encounter with a True Cross relic, or when one performs the “kinesthetic” cross on oneself for any multitude of reasons. The clearest indication for this idea is that this emphasis on memory has worked its way into each of our manifestations of the Rood-corpus.

In this light, a note must be said about the Ruthwell Cross. The item itself is an outstanding and highly unique piece of insular art from the eighth century, offering much in the way of art history to be explored. What is clear, however, is that the Cross is a “preaching cross.”¹⁸⁶ It is adorned not just by masterfully carved scenes from the life of Christ, these being marked by their appropriate quotations from the Vulgate, but also panels depicting feats of asceticism by the Desert Fathers and acts of the Apostles. In his overview of the object, Swanton states that the Cross’ message is “evangelical, stating the role of Christ in the world of men both historically and eternally. In particular it links the symbol of Christ’s death with the Christ of Judgement, and Nature’s recognition of his majesty.”¹⁸⁷ On the sides of the Cross is carved ornate foliage scroll, typically called the ‘inhabited vine-scroll,’ with alternating side-volutes encapsulating birds and beasts picking at the fruit on the vine. Middle Eastern in provenance, this is the so-called “Tree of Life” motif; its scriptural basis is *John XV. 1–7*, where Christ says *ego sum vitis vera...*, and is also often conflated with *Psalms CIV*, where “the trees of the Lord” are stated to be the refuge of birds and beasts.¹⁸⁸ It is around these foliage panels that the Ruthwell version of *The Dream of the Rood* appears. Swanton offers an excellent quote preceding his description of the Cross:

It is no mere chance that we should find the *Dream* associated with a carefully planned theological programme. The artist of the cross clearly understood the poem to be an integral part of his conception, underpinning and augmenting his meaning in the sculpture.¹⁸⁹

Maintaining our focus on memory and language in the first person’s ability to share it, in this context *The Dream of the Rood* and the Ruthwell Cross occupy a liminal space between several developments and offer an excellent transition to the next section. All the above explicated features of memory, locution, and notions of the Rood are here displayed on a monument intended to symbolically convey the entirety of Christian history (at least

¹⁸⁵ Ibid. Swanton offers a section on the ‘Cult of the Cross,’ which generally refers to the surge in Cross symbolism, iconography and veneration in Christian praxis spawning from Constantine the Great’s vision and conversion, and the *inventio* of the Cross by St. Helena in the early fourth century.

¹⁸⁶ Swanton, 13.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

Christian history and theology as it centers around and radiates out from the events of the New Testament—it is a proselytizing Cross). The Ruthwell Cross’ art and the foliage scroll accompanying its iteration of *The Dream* display an intimate connection between the Christian salvation story and Nature, or Creation. Indeed, the mere title, the “Tree of Life,” given to the motif displayed on the Cross, presents a unique analogy to the plethora of tree-epithets describing the Rood in the Vercelli Book’s version of *The Dream*, such as “sylvicre treow,” “Hælendes treow,” or “wuldres beam.”¹⁹⁰ These tree-epithets in *The Dream of the Rood*, as well as one tantalizing usage of “middle-earth,” the “all-father,” and the poem’s noticeably heroic Jesus have led some scholars to posit a pagan substrate fossilized within the poem.¹⁹¹ There have been several who posit the Rood is some echo of the World Tree or *Axis Mundi* conception known to have been held by pre-Christian Germans, citing terms like *gealgtreow* and the sacrifice of Odin, only copied down centuries later in far-away Iceland.¹⁹² While this notion is somewhat exotic and exciting, and I do not deny such a text’s ability to preserve archaisms from a pagan past, in the next section I would like to highlight an entirely Christian tradition which, albeit apocryphal, portrays the True Cross as a literal tree. This tradition is equally premised on the True, physical Rood, which occupied a specific point in time in history. In so doing it will broaden *The Dream’s* narrative to be more comprehensive of Christian history and theology, as well as ground this discussion of memory and locution further in the material culture of Christian Crosses.

The Cosmic Scope—The Savior’s Tree

There is a curious vein of literature regarding the Life of the Cross circulating medieval Western Europe which has many reflexes in both Latin and vernacular writing, as well as art—all of which display a fair amount of variation but agree on one general theme: that is, the life of the Cross *before* Christ. The most famous iteration of this legend and widely known in our times is from Jacobus de Voragine’s *Legenda Aurea*, written around 1260. Voragine begins the section entitled *Inventio Sanctae Crucis* by referencing the *Gospel of Nicodemus* and an unnamed “apocryphal” Greek source; he presents a few competing narratives that place the material origin Cross of the Crucifixion in the Garden of Eden itself. Adam’s son, Seth, returns to the gates of Earthly Paradise to seek aid for his ailing father. There, he is greeted by the archangel Michael and given either “a shoot from the

¹⁹⁰ “More wonderful tree,” “Lord’s Tree,” “tree of wonder.”

¹⁹¹ Obermeyer, 29-32. offers a summary of these arguments. Generally, for each posited Germanic influence, an opposing Christian influence can be identified. He highlights a particularly egregious example in M. D. Faber, “The Dream of the Rood: A Few Psychoanalytic Reflections,” *Psychoanalytic Review* 73.2 (1986): 183-90, where the Rood is seen as a coping mechanism for recently converted pagans.

¹⁹² S. G. Proskurin & П. С Геннадьевич, “Interpretations of the Mythologeme “Tree-Cross” in Old English,” *Journal of Siberian Federal University, Humanities & Social Sciences* (2020): 316-326, offers an exploration on a semiotic level of how generationally, with increasing belief in Christianity and decreasing understanding of the pagan, a pre-Christian world-tree conception might be usurped by various tree or vine symbolism in Christianity.

Tree of Mercy,” or a “branch from the tree under which Adam committed his sin.”¹⁹³ This sapling from an Edenic, primordial tree is then planted over Adam’s grave, where it survives into the time of Solomon. Solomon, who admired the tree for its beauty, felled it to incorporate it in a construction of his—yet the tree was illusive in its fit, both too short and too long, so it was cast over a creek to serve as a bridge.¹⁹⁴ There it laid until Queen Sheba one day refused to cross it, prophesying its importance to salvation history. Subsequently, Solomon had the tree removed and buried, until it was excavated and used by the Jews in the Crucifixion. After the Crucifixion, De Voragine’s narrative takes the shape of the well-known *Inventio* legends regarding St. Helena, which actually comprises the bulk of the chapter and is intended to be its focus. This story is also depicted in frescos by the renaissance painter Piero della Francesca in the Italian basilica San Francesco di Arezzo. In the nineteenth century there was extensive scholarship done on the interrelationship between the extant versions of these legends of the Cross before Christ, which range from Welsh to Old Norse, to Middle French and Middle English, as well as Latin prose and poetic adaptations.¹⁹⁵ Our first attested inkling of a life of the Cross before Christ is grounded in the *Vita Adami et Evae*, stretching as far back as the ninth or tenth centuries, but even up into the twelfth century—as seen in Voragine’s tenuous handling of the apocryphal origins of the Cross in Eden, there is a lack of agreement on the nuance of the Cross’ journey before Christ.¹⁹⁶ What is revealed by the extant versions of these Legends is a general desire to connect the mechanism of Christ’s Crucifixion to a meaningful point in the primordial past. This teleological trend culminates in connecting the True Cross back to Adam and The Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden, given it is the impetus for the entirety of the Christian story, and finds its expression in increasingly symbolic placements of the True Cross’ journey in seminal moments throughout the Old Testament—such as the purifying tree cast into the water by Moses in Exodus XV:25, or versions where there are three trees, representing the three crucifixes on Golgotha, which Solomon plants and commands to be bound together every thirty years with silver rings.¹⁹⁷

As in the *Legenda Aurea*, this literature is also intimately tied in many examples to the *Inventio* of the Cross by St. Helena. Often in these legends there is no distinction between the life of the Cross before Christ and after. The most comprehensive analysis of this material was conducted by Willhelm Meyer in his 1881 *Geschichte des Kreuzholzes vor Christus*, where he argues for vernacular iterations having their roots in a twelfth century Latin original.¹⁹⁸ Scholars since, however, have come to fine-tune Meyer’s arguments; most

¹⁹³ Jacobus De Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. William Granger Ryan, vol. 1 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993): 277.

¹⁹⁴ In the *Legenda Aurea*, Solomon seeks to use the tree for his country home, however in most other Cross Legends, the felled wood is intended for the Temple.

¹⁹⁵ Arthur S Napier, *History of the Holy Rood-tree: A Twelfth Century Version of the Cross-legend, with Notes on the Orthography of the Ormulum and a Middle English Compassio Mariae* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and, 1894): xii-xiii.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, xiii; also see Meyer, Wilhelm. “Die Geschichte des Kreuzholzes vor Christus.” *Abhandlungen der Philosophisch-Philologischen Classe der Königlich Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 16 (1882): 106.

¹⁹⁷ Napier, *Holy-rood Tree*, xxxvi; Meyer 115-116.

¹⁹⁸ Meyer, 106-112.

notably Arthur S. Napier, who in 1894 did so in his introduction to a thitherto unpublished Old English version of the Cross Legend. His arguments essentially restructure Meyer’s division of the extant Cross Legends into two categories, one remaining closer to the Latin legend and another which he calls the Rood-tree group—these share distinct characteristics with the accompanying Old English version.¹⁹⁹ Napier critiques Meyer’s conclusions that the source for all extant versions of the Cross Legend is the Latin and hypothesizes a now lost archetype from which our extant versions commonly derive. Crucial to this study on *The Dream of the Rood* is Napier’s subsequent proposition that the Old English version titled *The History of the Holy Rood-Tree*, which he publishes in facsimile version, originates from an eleventh century original—placing it in the same sunset years of the Anglo-Saxon period in which the Brussels Cross and Vercelli Book were composed.²⁰⁰ In the context of this historiography, I would like to argue that the Rood-corpus, with its 300-year life-span and unknown number of now-lost variants, represents either a nascent stage in the development of such Cross Legends, or more likely, an echo symptomatic of and fully harmonious with such nascent developments. To do so, I will again treat *The Dream of the Rood* as it appears in the Vercelli Book as an expansion of themes already present or perceived in the archetypal poem that begat the Rood-corpus. This pursuit, I believe, is intrinsically tied to the discussion of memory outlined above. By exploring the life of the Rood before the Crucifixion in the context of the eschatological elements present in *The Dream*, a congruence will emerge that encompasses the cosmic scope of the Christian salvation story lending credence to the notion that the Rood-corpus is harmonious with these Cross Legends.

The clearest reference to the life of the Rood before Christ occurs between lines 27 and 30, the same lines referenced above where the Rood’s memory is revealed by its speech:

Ongan þa word sprecað wudu selesta:
 Ðæt wæs geara iu (ic þæt gyta geman)
 þæt ic wæs aheawen holtes on ende,
 astyred of stefne minum. Genaman me ðær strange feondas,

Then it began to speak words the best wood
“that was years ago (I that still remember)
That I was ahewn at bolt’s end
Stirred from my stem strong foes seized me there,

This passage, directly referencing the life of the Rood before Christ as a tree in a forest, is paralleled by many epithets for the Rood throughout the poem calling it some form of tree, such as: “holtwudu,” “Wealdendes treow,” or “sigebeam.”²⁰¹ There is likewise in lines 90-91

¹⁹⁹ See Napier, Chapter IV, xxxv.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., lviii; Napier argues for the age of the Old English Cross Legend on the grounds of consistent and unforgeable archaisms in the language, which are synonymous with the other texts in the manuscript that are known transcriptions of eleventh century texts.

²⁰¹ “Holt-wood,” “the Lord’s Tree,” “Victory-tree.”

the statement that “the Lord of Glory honored me then over all wood of the forest.”²⁰² These constant references to the erstwhile tree-state of the Rood and memory’s primacy in the poem exhort the reader to dwell on the fact that the Rood had a life before it was called upon to fulfill its sacred duty at the Crucifixion. This is intended to have a contemplative effect on the reader, as exemplified by the Rood’s homily after the Crucifixion, where Christians are, like the Rood, called to abandon their role in the mundane and take up their crosses. Yet, relevant to this analysis, it also shows that the life of the Rood before the Crucifixion wields symbolic importance. There is also the mystifying statement in lines 37b-38a where the Rood states that “I could have felled all enemies there,” a statement which echoes the scene unique to Napier’s Rood-tree group, where a woman accidentally sits on the Rood-tree, which subsequently bursts into flames.²⁰³ At the least this statement mirrors conceptions of the Rood’s capacity to do so. Finally, there is the esoteric usage of *stefne* in this passage, where it means “trunk” or “stem,” something most foundational to the nature of a tree and is here used in the context of the Rood being uprooted from that fundament. However, the more common meaning of this word is “voice,” which is indeed employed in line 71 when the “voice of the warriors depart” after Christ is buried.²⁰⁴ This double entendraic usage is of interest given the explication of the Rood’s speech pertaining to memory in the previous section. This matrix of associations between the Rood, its life as a tree, and Cross Legends before Christ is alluring, but the evidence is disparate. One major connection between *The Dream* and these Legends is that there is an *Inventio* scene in the poem and Cross Legends often encompass the same event, not distinguishing between the Rood’s journey before and after the Crucifixion.²⁰⁵ This relationship vis-à-vis the *Inventio* by St. Helena is substantiated by the simple fact that the compiler of the Vercelli Book in which *The Dream* appears found it apropos to include *Elene* shortly after it. However, to strengthen this matrix of associations between *The Dream* and Legends regarding the life of the Rood before Christ necessitates looking at the eschatological implications of the Celestial Rood, the Rood which in *The Dream* speaks. This pursuit will substantiate the presupposition proposed above, that always the True Rood is to be perceived.

The Celestial Rood that appears to the dreamer, speaking and revealing its personal memories of the Crucifixion, is an intriguing image that has received much scholarly attention—most highlighting its eschatological implications, an example of which, *‘Id est, crux Christi:’ tracing the Old English Motif of the Celestial Rood* written by Brandon W. Hawk, presents a nuanced genealogy of the motif. The essentials of his study are that over the course of centuries, beginning in the first century after Christ’s death and finding prominent expression in second century AD apocrypha and patristic exegeses, there accumulated a consensus that the *Signum Dei* mentioned in Matthew XXIV:30 as the sign of the Parousia is

²⁰² „Hwæt, me þa geweorðode wuldres Ealdor ofer holtwudu.“

²⁰³ “Ealle ic mihte feondas gefyllan, hwæðre ic fæste stod.”; Napier, xxxv.

²⁰⁴ Orchard, “Cross-references,” 229.

²⁰⁵ Lines: 75-77.

to be the cross.²⁰⁶ Hawk demonstrates that this motif was particularly popular and widespread in Anglo-Saxon England and neighboring Celtic lands. There are two common representations of the motif found in literature, the first as a passive banner and the second as an active agent. Hawk qualifies these two versions: “In the former, the cross is carried by angels at the Judgement as a symbol of victory; in the latter, the cross itself floats ahead of Christ as an animate entity—though these two types are not mutually exclusive, and often converge.”²⁰⁷ Indeed, converge in *The Dream* they do, where semantic ambiguity, a hallmark of good and lasting poetry, allows interpretation of the statement in line 9b, “Beheoldon þær engel Dryhtnes ealle,” as either a literal Angel or an epithet for the Celestial Rood.²⁰⁸ Hawk concludes his paper by stating:

Although the earliest Christian contexts of the celestial cross are deeply rooted in apocalypticism, in turning to Old English literature we find the celestial cross within more diverse literary settings. Nonetheless, much of the imagery presented derives from Matthew XXIV-XXV, IV Ezra and a general tradition of apocalyptic and patristic thought... the image of the celestial rood derives from early Christian apocalypses and biblical interpretation and was disseminated to Anglo-Saxon England through a variety of materials, especially widely accessible liturgical hymns. As the image spread, its use in Christian materials continued to augment the motif to create a matrix of associations that affect its use in Anglo-Saxon settings; yet, as it manifests in Old English depictions, the motif retains its deep-seated eschatological connections.²⁰⁹

Hawk references Latin Hymns in Anglo-Saxon England as an important body of literature for disseminating the concept of the Celestial Rood. Specifically, he points to the hymns *Pange Lingua* and *Vexilla Regis Prodeunt* of sixth century Gallic poet Venantius Fortunatus as culprits.²¹⁰ *Vexilla Regis* is crucial for his study due to its opening lines: “Vexilla regis prodeunt, / fulgent crucis mysteria,” which paint a triumphant and shining image of a Celestial Rood.²¹¹ Hawk also notes that in the Durham Hymnal, the Old English interlinear gloss on these lines presents a close literal translation: 'gukfanan cynges forkstreppak / scinao rode geryne.’²¹² These hymns are equally cited by others for their importance in the

²⁰⁶ Matthæus XXIV:30 „et tunc parebit signum Filii hominis in cælo: et tunc plangent omnes tribus terræ: et videbunt Filium hominis venientem in nubibus cæli cum virtute multa et majestate.“ *And then the sign of the Son of Man will be seen in Heaven: and then all the tribes of the Earth will lament: and thereupon they will see the coming Son of Man in the clouds of Heaven with great strength and majesty.*

²⁰⁷ Hawk, 56.

²⁰⁸ Swanton, *The Dream of the Rood*, 107. Swanton discusses possible interpretations for *engel*, potentially it refers to Christ, but this makes no sense at this point in the poem. The best explanation is to take *engel* in the sense of “messenger” and as an epithet for the Rood, or as a part of the subject and described by *ealle*.

²⁰⁹ Hawk, 72-73.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

²¹¹ *The banners of the Lord are advancing / the mysteries of the Cross are shining.*

²¹² Hawk, 58. *The banners of the King go forth / the mystery of the Rood shines.* (Durham, Cathedral Library B. III. 32; s. xi).

putative milieu of composition for *The Dream*. As hymns sung at the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross and used as examples for teaching at Monastic Schools, their input is indispensable and likely to have influenced the highly literate poet of the Vercelli Book's *Dream of the Rood*.²¹³ For example, there is a curious stanza in *Vexilla Regis Prodeunt* that presents another extra-biblical instance of tree-language, tying this discussion back to the apocryphal Cross Legends discussed above:

Impleta sunt quae concinit
David fideli carmine,
dicendo nationibus:
regnavit a ligno Deus. (13-16)

*They are fulfilled, which
David sings with devoted song,
to be preached to nations:
God has ruled from the tree.*²¹⁴

The underlined verse above, “Regnavit a ligno Deus,” is supposedly a reference to a controversial line of disputed origin in Psalm XCV. This line is not present in any extant Hebrew version of the psalms, yet as early as St. Justin Martyr (c. 100–156 AD) it is referenced and claimed that the Jews had erased this from their scriptures due to its Christian implications.²¹⁵ It is out of the scope of this paper to claim a direct relationship between this specific line and Cross Legends, or its original authenticity (which is dubious), but the claim of Jewish conspiracy to conceal an aspect of the Rood is very reminiscent of the Jewish role portrayed in legends of St. Helena, such as in the *Legenda Aurea*, or the Old English Version *Elene* in the Vercelli Book. In these legends there is a multi-day battle of wits between St. Helena and the Jews of Jerusalem to convince them to reveal where the True Cross is buried. The Jews had supposedly hidden the crosses after the Crucifixion in anticipation of the day when Christians would come searching. In lines 75–77 in *The Dream* there is a very brief reference to the *Inventio*.²¹⁶ Thus, these sources highlighted above pertaining to the eschatological, Celestial Rood are equally relevant to the True Cross in *The Dream* and *Elene*. In fact, the very occasion of composition for the hymns cited above presents a unique tie-in not to just the True Cross as represented in literature, but the physical True Cross. That is, these hymns were composed by Venantius Fortunatus for the

²¹³ Inge B Milfull, “Hymns to the Cross: Contexts for the Reception of Vexilla Regis Prodeunt.” *The Place of the Cross in Anglo-Saxon England* 4 (2006): 54.

²¹⁴ Holderness, “The Sign of the Cross,” 355-336.

²¹⁵ See Kirkpatrick, *Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*. Commentary on Psalm 96:10. *Biblehub.com*.

²¹⁶ In these lines the Rood switches into third person. Translations available online struggle with who the plural is referring to, haphazardly reiterating the “unc butu” statement from line 48 in their translation. The simplest explanation is that when the Rood states in line 73 that “someone felled us,” it is referring to all three Crucifixes present on Golgotha and subsequently found by St. Helena.

adventus of a True Cross relic to the Poitiers convent in France, given by Emperor Justin II in 569, only a mere 250 years after the finding of the True Cross by St. Helena.²¹⁷

True Cross relics are inseparable from the *Inventio* attributed to St. Helena, who herself is inseparable from her son Constantine's vision in 312 AD at the Battle of Milvian Bridge and subsequent conversion to Christianity. Indeed, this event is the impetus for the Cross as a symbol in Christianity as a whole.²¹⁸ Despite modern scholarship's ability to nitpick the minutiae of Constantine's conversion story, or the validity of the *Inventio*'s attribution to St. Helena, to the Anglo-Saxon of eighth to eleventh century England these narratives were fact and taken wholesale. This is plainly evident in Cynewulf's *Elene* in the Vercelli Book. In this poem, there are two descriptions of the Rood that bear striking similarities. One is in fact another Celestial Rood, appearing as Cynewulf's iteration of Constantine's famed vision before battle, and the other is the True Cross itself. Both are described as a *Crux Gemmata*, i.e., "jeweled crosses." The Celestial Rood in part I lines 88–90 is said to be: "brilliant with ornate treasures, the beautiful Tree of Glory in the vault of the skies, decorated with gold, gleaming with jewels," and the reliquary for the True Cross commissioned by St. Helena in section XII lines 1022–8: "Then she commanded that the Rood be encased in gold and intricately set with gems, with the noblest of precious stones, and enclosed with locks in a silver casket. Unimpeachable as to its origin."²¹⁹ In the first quote is another example of tree-language describing the Rood, this time a Celestial Rood, showing that there is equally a tradition of calling the Rood a tree present in *Elene* as well.

Looking back at these so-called *Cruces Gemmatae*, in his essay *Constantinian Crosses in Northumbria*, Ian Wood establishes that by the fifth century in the art and literature of Western Europe the image of the *Crux Gemmata* was synonymous with the True Cross found and glorified by St. Helena. Wood brings up a poignant example of this development in the early fifth century apse mosaic in the church of Santa Pudenziana in Rome, which depicts Christ enthroned in either earthly or heavenly Jerusalem, and behind him is a hill, upon which stands an immense, golden *Crux Gemmata*. The Cross here also has a distinct Celestial Rood appearance. Wood's purpose in his essay is to explore whether a literal *Crux Gemmata* supposedly erected on Golgotha might have provided the impetus for standing crosses erected in Northumbria in the ninth century, something he deems tenuous but plausible. What he does establish however is that the *Crux Gemmata*, as a "cross of the imagination," was for the Anglo-Saxons intimately associated with the relic of the True Cross believed to have been found and glorified by St. Helena in Jerusalem. Wood states, "The *Crux Gemmata* is very closely associated with the wooden cross on which Christ was crucified, nowhere more so than in *The Dream of the Rood*, though descriptions in *Elene* and in Æthelwulf's *De abbatibus* are not far behind."²²⁰ What this means is that by the eighth century, the earliest attested date for a manifestation of the Rood-corpus, and undoubtedly

²¹⁷ Milfull, "Hymns to the Cross," 43.

²¹⁸ Swanton, *The Dream of the Rood*, 42.

²¹⁹ Ian Wood, "Constantinian Crosses in Northumbria." *The Place of the Cross in Anglo-Saxon England* 4 (2006): 6-7.

²²⁰ Wood, "Constantinian Crosses in Northumbria," 12.

by the eleventh, there was a popular consensus among Anglo-Saxons that a *Crux Gemmata* in some way represents the True, physical Rood.

Returning to *The Dream of the Rood* with this matrix of Rood implications established, it is apparent that in *The Dream*, as well as in *Elene*, the Celestial Rood is simultaneously *Crux Gemmata*. That is, the eschatological Rood, the *Signum Dei* before the Parousia first mentioned in Matthew XXIV, is the physical, True Cross. Its first appearance in *The Dream* is described “Eall þæt beacen wæs begoten mid golde; gimmas stodon fægere æt foldan sceatum,” *All that beacon was begotten with gold, gems stood fair at the corners of the Earth.*²²¹ Thus, the same Rood that physically endured Christ’s Crucifixion reveals itself to the Dreamer with a bejeweled and glorified façade, a post-*Inventio* appearance. This very Rood, uniting all of the disparate aspects of the Rood hitherto mentioned, reveals its memories in the fashion established in the previous section. However, the context of this Rood’s apparition itself connects it to the Cross Legends in which I seek to couch *The Dream of the Rood*. The teleological trend revealed by the extant versions of these Legends is the general desire to connect the mechanism of Christ’s Crucifixion to a meaningful point in the primordial past. The natural culmination of this trend in a society that perceives an active God with an active role in history, a society which recognizes the teleological in everything, is to connect the instrument of the climax of the Christian story to the beginning. Thus, the Rood that begat eternal life, in a sense, must naturally be connected to the Rood that ended it at the beginning of Creation, or in some manner to Earthly Paradise. Looking back then at the context of the Celestial Rood’s apparition in *The Dream*, it is described as appearing before an awe-inspired, idyllic, and Edenic creation. “Beheoldon þær engel Dryhtnes ealle”—this ambiguous line, cited above regarding the apparition of the Celestial Rood, has been taken two ways by editors, both of which work in this context.²²² Either “*all* [of Creation] beheld there the Angel (Rood) of the Lord,” or “*all the angels* of the Lord behold there [the Celestial Rood].” It is a choice between either the entirety of Creation, of which the Angels are a part, or an emphasis on the highest orders of Creation, the totality of the hierarchy of angels beholding there the Celestial True Cross.²²³ This clause is finished in line 10 with a reference to the eternity of the Rood, then the Edenic scene encompassing the totality of Creation is even more clearly articulated: “ac hine þær beheoldon halige gastas, men ofer moldan, ond eall þeos mære gesceaft.”²²⁴ Shortly after this comes the twice cited section where the Rood reveals its memory, lines 27–30, exposing the time when it was a living tree, the clearest parallel to the Legends of a life before Christ. Thus, in this short succession of lines we have the Celestial, eschatological Rood, represented as the True Cross, speaking to the entirety of Creation—revealing to them a time when it itself was part thereof. There is here, then, directly preceding the most explicit mention of the Rood’s life before Christ, a semantic implication thereof by this Edenic witness to the Rood’s apparition. This meaning-laden

²²¹ Lines 6b – 8a.

²²² Line 9.

²²³ Swanton, 107-108. The form of *engel* is singular, yet Swanton provides a number of ways in which past editors have argued for a plurality of angels representing the subject.

²²⁴ Lines 11-12: *But there were beholding holy spirits, men upon the Earth and all this glorious Creation.*

dream-vision is harmonious with the evolution of Cross Legends, the Edenic context of the Rood's apparition representing the general teleological magnetism placing the origins of the Rood in Eden. It is worthy of note then, that the imagery of the Rood before Creation and subjugation of Nature by the Eschatological is equally represented in the Ruthwell Cross. The Ruthwell Cross' version of *The Dream* is inscribed surrounding the east-facing panel, the one which bears the 'Tree of Life' motif, also called inhabited vine scroll. Likewise, the Eschatological subjugates Creation on the north-side, where Christ as Judge is depicted standing on two subdued, fantastical beasts.²²⁵ To round out this reference back to the Rood-corpus' material culture, the Brussels Cross is itself a *Crux Gemmata* and a True Cross. Thus, each version of the Rood in *The Dream*: the eschatological Rood, the *Crux Gemmata*, and the Rood which is tied to Creation, can all be appropriately found in the Rood-corpus' material culture.

Scholars have posited many ways of dividing the poem to dissect its meaning. Aside from the natural tendency to separate the poem by speaker, Dreamer and Rood, various fourfold and fivefold divisions have been put forth.²²⁶ In light of the above analysis, I wish to posit one more. The poem can be divided in half at line 78. The half preceding is a recounting of memory, both Dreamer's and Rood's, within which is a symbolic representation of the Christian salvation story, decreasing in abstraction until the moment of the Crucifixion when it becomes a mere narrative of events. Then, only after the *Inventio* scene, when the Rood is glorified and becomes a *Crux Gemmata*, donning the physical appearance of not just the True Cross, but the garb of the Celestial Rood that kickstarted the dream itself, does the first half end. This event encapsulates all of the versions of the Rood mentioned above into a single item. The second half, beginning manifestly with a change in tone and a direct appellation to the Dreamer by the Rood, "Nu ðu miht gehyran, hæleð min se leofa..." is not just homily, but theological explication of the symbolic events present in the first half.²²⁷ Recalling the observation above that the dream is simply and strictly a vision of the Celestial Rood before "all this glorious Creation," the Rood, after the cited exhortation, then claims in the exact same words that "men over earth, *and all this glorious creation*, will pray for themselves to this beacon."²²⁸ The subsequent theological explication it provides is a clarification of the symbolism and events of the first half:

*Now I bid you, my beloved man,
that you this sight tell unto men;
reveal with words that it is the Tree of Glory
which Almighty God suffered upon*

²²⁵ Swanton, 13-23.

²²⁶ Obermeyer, *Relationship of Theology and Rood*, 35 provides an overview. Generally, these divisions involve a synthesis of speaker and literary content, some sections being more homiletic or exhortative than others.

²²⁷ Line 78: *now you may heed, beloved man of mine...*

²²⁸ Line 13: *ond eall þeos mære gesceaft*; Lines 82-83: *menn ofer moldan ond eall þeos mære gesceaft, gebiddaþ him to byssum beacne*; Mize, „Mental Container and the Cross“ 163 observes similarly this scene before an idyllic nature, where the *Crux Gemmata* is literal Treasure in the Dreamer's Mental-board.

*for mankind's manifold sins
and Adam's ancient deeds.*

This clarification clearly contains the seeds of what would become the Cross Legends. The Rood identifies itself with Adam via the deeds performed upon it, “the Tree of Glory,” by Christ. While this point can partially be chalked up to a desire by the poet to write a theologically sound elegy, something also evident in the terminology for Christ throughout the poem that ensures an orthodox Christology, the literary structure of symbol and explication follows a paradigm laid out by St. Augustine.²²⁹ Namely, it corresponds to his discussion of *res* and *signa*, “things” and “signs,” in his *De Doctrina Christiana*. In short, St. Augustine states all signs are things, but not all things are signs. He establishes this to instruct fellow clergy on proper exegetical practices—signs are to be scrutinized properly to reveal proper theology.²³⁰ An example he provides of something that is both thing and sign is the tree Moses cast into the bitter waters to make them sweet, or the stone that Jacob used as a pillow.²³¹ In *The Dream of the Rood*, the Rood is both thing, a *Crux Gemmata* or True Cross, and sign, which in its own homily it explicates. The relation to *De Doctrina Christiana* has been made regarding the poem before, for example Dr. Calvin Kendall has used the paradigm to illuminate shared implications between *The Dream* and the Ruthwell Cross.²³² However, the observation has not been made in the sense that each of the theological elements explicated by the poem’s closing homilies were symbolically present or expected to be perceived as signs in the first half of the poem. Namely, the Rood itself—glorified through its interaction with Christ, it is *res* made *signa*.

This confluence of *res* and *signa* in the Rood strengthens its tie to Cross Legends, where the *res* of the True Cross is carried back into meaningful moments in biblical history by the scribes who wrote them to make it a *signa*. In *The Dream of the Rood*, the Rood is represented as every ‘thing’ that the True Cross was at some point in time, according to the Cross Legends: tree, crucifix, and relic. Likewise, the Rood as *res* and *signa* is in order with the presupposition laid out at the beginning of the paper, that in the archetypal poem, it was always intended that we perceive the True Cross as the speaker. That is, the Rood as sign and thing.

To conclude this section, which has sought to connect *The Dream* to a literature that emphasizes the earliest stages of Christian history, and in so doing highlight the entirety of Christian history encapsulated within the poem, I would like to bring the eschatological again to the fore. To do so necessitates one final idea from St. Augustine. That is, that words, or language, are uniquely *only* signs: “There are signs of another kind, those which are never employed except as signs: for example, words. No one uses words except as signs

²²⁹ As an example, line 39 states: “Ongyrede hine þa geong hæleð - þæt wæs God ælmihtig” *undressed himself then [the] young warrior - that was God Almighty*, ensuring both the human and divine natures of Christ are accounted for.

²³⁰ Calvin B Kendall, “From Sign to Vision: The Ruthwell Cross and *The Dream of the Rood*.” *The Place of the Cross in Anglo-Saxon England* 4 (2006): 129.

²³¹ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, liber I caput ii.

²³² Kendall, “From Sign to Vision: The Ruthwell Cross and *The Dream of the Rood*.”

of something else; and hence may be understood what I call signs.”²³³ Given the primacy of speech established in the previous section, and its ability to yield the contents of the mental container, it bears noticing that after the exhortation to proselytism by the Rood cited above, the Celestial, eschatological Rood, describes the Judgment in terms of what Christ will “say.”

*Nor may there any unafraid be
before the words that the Wielder speaks.
He asks before the many where that one is
who for God's name was willing of death's
bitterness to taste, as he there on the Tree did.
But they then are afraid, and few think
what they to Christ might begin to speak.*²³⁴

Conclusion

My chief desire is that this essay has illuminated the constellation of meaning present within and surrounding the Rood-corpus, with the cumulative effect of establishing the *evocative milieu* in which it was encountered. *The Dream of the Rood*, like the Rood itself which is the nexus between life before and after Christ, constitutes a nexus between Cross Legend and Cross *Inventio*, and a liminal space between an abstract overarching Christian narrative preserved in literature and its manifestations in material culture. It is only natural that the Rood, with its centrality in the Christian story, has wielded the immense gravitational pull that coalesced such a constellation of meanings around it. Yet this Old English literature, with its appearance on such disparate items as the Ruthwell and Brussels Crosses, presents a unique medium for this constellation's exploration. Straddling not only fascinating artifacts of material culture, but a unique emphasis on memory and speech in its literary content, it is no wonder that the Rood-corpus enjoyed such a long lifespan. Broadly speaking, this essay has sought to take the scholar out from within the mind (or mental container) of a single poet, and place them in front of the Rood, wherefrom this constellation of meaning is visible. This is partially done to resurrect a contemporary impetus for spiritual or religious experience sensed upon an encounter with the Rood-corpus, predicated on the personal memory and experience of the Rood at the Crucifixion. Moreover, the Rood's mental container, couched in the teleological trends of its contemporary Cross Legends, brings its memory faculties back to the earliest days of Creation, the days which in the Bible are most latent with meaning—where *signa* are most prevalent. This reveals a grander, more cosmic scope of the Christian salvation story elicited within the Rood-corpus, specifically shown in the dream-vision of *The Dream of the Rood*.

²³³ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, liber I caput ii.; Translation from *Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. <https://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/augustine/>.

²³⁴ Lines: 110-116.

Both angst for the end-of-days and echoes from their beginning are present in a way which is told from the perspective of one who witnessed the whole thing. This placement of the scholar in front of the Rood also enables an exploration of the fundamental features of the archetypal poem that begat the Rood-corpus. The Rood-corpus, due to its longevity and disparate attestations, is impossible to be attributed to a single poet. However, when looking at the archetype's manifestations within the context of the corpus' *evocative milieu*, it is easy to see why this poem, constituted by the mental container of the True Cross, found itself inscribed on one, the Brussels Cross, or on a "preaching-cross" like Ruthwell. It is only natural that this perambulating mental container, i.e., the archetypal poem, when inserted into a dreaming mind, a place where the impossible is possible, would develop into the hyper-dense yet kaleidoscopic summation of the Christian story known to us as *The Dream of the Rood*. I thank the reader for partaking on this winding and unconventional analysis.

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