

**XXIII. THE CROSS IN THE
LIFE AND LITERATURE OF
THE ANGLO-SAXONS**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649451913

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THE ANGLO-SAXONS**

YALE STUDIES IN ENGLISH

ALBERT S. COOK, Editor

XXIII

THE CROSS IN THE LIFE AND
LITERATURE OF THE
ANGLO-SAXONS

BY

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A Portion of a Thesis presented to the Philosophical Faculty
of Yale University in Candidacy for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy



NEW YORK

HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY

1904

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The Lord Baltimore Press
THE FRISDENWALD COMPANY
BALTIMORE, MD., U. S. A.

129210

PREFACE

The Old English poems, *Elene*, the *Dream of the Rood*, and the Doomsday Vision in the *Christ*, express a remarkable spirit of veneration for the Cross. The purpose of this study is to furnish a setting for these poems with respect to this devotion to the Cross. It is to find what were the ideas of the Cross inherited with Christianity; how much these ideas entered into the life and thought of the Anglo-Saxons; whether, in brief, this sentiment must be regarded as peculiar to Cynewulf and the poet of the *Dream of the Rood*, or whether it was more or less characteristic of the civilization to which these poems belong. It is also to discover whether this spirit found expression in forms other than poetry, whether it was more predominant at one time than another, and to account, if possible, for its existence.

These questions, and others suggested by them, will be taken up in the following pages; and, in attempting to provide a background for the Old English poetry of the Cross, I hope that some light may be thrown on the cultural history of this early and comparatively obscure period.

The translations of Old English prose that I have used are frequently quoted direct from the versions that accompany the texts in the editions cited. In the case of the poetry I have used Garnett's translation of the *Elene*, Whitman's of the *Christ*, and the *Translations from Old English Poetry*, edited by Cook and Tinker, which includes a translation of the *Dream of the Rood* by Miss Iddings.

In the references to texts and authorities, the abbreviations in the foot-notes should be recognized without special mention. Where the name of an author only is cited, the work is the only work facing his name in the bibliography, in the edition there mentioned. Some texts of the *Patrologia Latina* are reprints from other editions. In these the paging of the original is preserved by black-faced numerals. As the references in the indices of these volumes is to the original rather than to the actual paging, I have followed that system here.

CONTENTS

	PAGE
CHAPTER I. <i>Varieties of Cross-Worship</i>	7
I. <i>The Cross in Legend</i> : (a) The wood of the Cross, p. 8; (b) The relics of the True Cross in England, p. 11; (c) The Vision of Constantine, p. 12; (d) The Invention of the Cross, p. 14; (e) The Exaltation of the Cross, p. 14.	
II. <i>The Cross in the Church</i> : (a) The Church Edifice, p. 15; (b) The Altar-Cross, p. 16; (c) The Altar-Cross as a Crucifix, p. 17; (d) The Crozier as a crucifix, p. 18; (e) The Crucifix, p. 19; (f) Ceremonial Honoring of the Cross, p. 23; (g) Private Worship, p. 25; (h) The Nature of the Adoration, p. 26.	
III. <i>The Sign of the Cross</i> , p. 26: (a) The Sign in Ritual, p. 28; (b) As an Oath, p. 32; (c) Other Uses of the Cross-Sign in Documents, p. 34; (d) The Cross on Coins, p. 35.	
IV. <i>The Cross in Art</i> : (a) The Monogram, p. 37; (b) Monumental Crosses, p. 39; 1. Pillar Stones, p. 40; 2. Interlaced Crosses, p. 41; 3. Pictorial, p. 43; 4. Date of the Interlaced Crosses, p. 44; (c) The Use of the Monumental Cross; 1. Memorial, p. 54; 2. Mortuary, p. 56; 3. Boundary, p. 57; 4. Sanctuary, p. 58; 5. The Standard Cross, p. 58; 6. Oratory Crosses, p. 60; (d) The Cross in other Arts, p. 61.	
V. <i>Literary Aspects of the Cross</i> : (a) Theological Mysticism, p. 63; (b) In Poetry, (1) Latin, p. 66; (2) Old English, p. 70. Summary, p. 76.	
CHAPTER II. <i>The Anglo-Saxon Cross in its Historical Setting</i> : 79	
(I) The Influence of Ireland, p. 83. (II) Customs of Teutonic Paganism, p. 85. (III) The Iconoclastic Controversy, p. 91.	
BIBLIOGRAPHY	100
I. General References, p. 100. II. Latin Texts, p. 102. Old English Texts, p. 103.	

CHAPTER I

VARIETIES OF CROSS-WORSHIP

The event of supreme importance in the history of the worship of the cross as an emblem of the Christian faith was the conversion of Constantine, which occurred in the year 312. This was the starting-point for all the adoration of the cross in the Middle Ages, and the one event which at a bound lifted the emblem from disgrace, and crowned it with glory and honor.

Up to that time the cross had been the Christian's reproach. While to him it was associated with the sacrifice of his Redeemer, to the world it meant only shame and misery. And because, with Paul, he gloried in the cross of Christ, he was taunted with being a 'worshiper of the cross' (*crucicolus*), a term which the Fathers resented and repudiated. So, to avoid the charge of staurolatry, and to save the symbol of the faith from the sport and malice of the pagans, the early Christians as a rule refrained from open representations of the cross. Instead, they used emblems, the '*cruces dissimulatee*,' such as the letter Chi, the anchor, the so-called Swastika cross, and, chief of all, the famous Chi Rho monogram.

But after the vision of the cross in the heavens, and the subsequent conversion of the Emperor, the cross needed no longer to remain in hiding. Shortly after his conversion Constantine forbade magistrates or great land-owners any longer to use the cross as an instrument of punishment. So, while at first the ideas of ignominy were yet too freshly associated with the cross for it to be exalted publicly, and the monogram remained the favorite emblem, it came to pass that, as actual scenes of crucifixion faded from memory, the monogram steadily receded, and the cross came to the front. By the time of the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons