

Trinity College Cambridge
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**A (VERY BRIEF) HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY
IN BRITAIN IN 7 OBJECTS**

**The Coming of Christianity
The Bewcastle Cross, c. 725**

Ecclesiastes 3: 1–8 John 3: 25–30

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A history of Christianity in Britain – supposing it had the luxury of more than seven Sundays at its disposal – would probably have started with some other object than the Bewcastle cross. It might have started, for example, with a mosaic, now in the British Museum, which comes from a Roman villa in Hinton St Mary Dorset. The mosaic depicts Christ – it is indeed once of the earliest depictions of him that there is – and dates from some time shortly after 312 AD, the date of Constantine’s conversion to Christianity and the establishment of Christianity as the Empire’s, and thus Britain’s, favoured religion.

An excuse for passing over an object from the Roman period is, however, ready to hand. It is a matter of some uncertainty just how widely or deeply Christianity was practiced in this period. The Romans were somewhat promiscuous with their religious observances – Constantine himself seems to hedged his bets by regularly invoking the sun god even after he had made quite a fuss about his new found commitment to the Son of God. But even leaving that point to one side, however widely or otherwise Christianity was established here by 400, it declined with the departure of the Romans less than a hundred years after Constantine’s conversion, and was further diluted by waves of pagans, Saxons and Angles and Jutes exercising their right of free movement and settlement within Europe, some 1500 years before the European Union. So it was, then, that when Augustine of Canterbury – although not yet Augustine of Canterbury of course – arrived in Kent in 597, he came rather consciously as a missionary, and it is from this mission, not from the Christianity of the Roman period, that the Christianity of the next fourteen hundred years takes its real beginnings.

And Augustine’s mission was successful probably beyond any expectations he may have had – so that by the time the cross which is our first object was constructed, around a hundred years after Augustine had landed, in about 700, the Christians of Anglo-Saxon Britain whether or not they outnumbered the pagans, were certainly giving them a run for their money and had reached far beyond Kent – even to Bewcastle, more than 400 miles north from where Augustine landed – and had established a Christian culture in courts and monasteries of a highly influential and sophisticated kind, as the Bewcastle cross itself testifies.

The cross stands now where it has always stood, in the outdoors, some 20 miles north of Carlisle, within the remains of a Roman fort, itself an outpost of Hadrian's wall which lies to the south. It is a very considerable object – 14 and half feet high, even without its missing head – and, long before there was a church in the vicinity, it would have provided a focus for the community which worshipped here.

The mere presence of this object in this lonely, bleak and austere spot might impress us, but the not easily impressed and somewhat austere Nikolaus Pevsner, is impressed by something else, its quality: he opens the relevant volume of his great series *The Buildings of England* with the words: 'The crosses of Bewcastle and of Ruthwell [a similar cross, some 30 miles away to the west] are the greatest achievement of their date in the whole of Europe. The technical mastery is . . . amazing. How can it have been possible, in stone, and at so early a date?'

I will come back to that 'how could it have been possible' later – but first what more precisely should we notice about this cross which Pevsner praises so highly? Well, we see a tapered cross, near enough square in cross section, with four sides of decoration.

On the east side – greeting the rising sun – a tree or vine winds its way up the shaft, inhabited by various beasts and birds. The style of decoration is Mediterranean and the motif of a luxuriant vine or tree is pre-Christian, for vines and trees have often symbolised life, fruitfulness and prosperity. But here the symbolism has taken on Christian significance – 'I am the vine; you are the branches' says Jesus in John's Gospel, and from this vine comes the wine of the eucharist which promises life and fruitfulness to the faithful.

On the north side, panels alternate vines in the Roman or Mediterranean style, with patterns of interlacing knots and chequers of a Celtic kind, such as you can see in the Book of Kells or the Lindisfarne Gospels.

On the west side, on which the sun would shine at noon, and which faces the setting sun, we come to the most important surface – the one which would have been the focus of attention for those who stood here, facing east to pray, as was usual in the early church. There are three panels of sculpture, each with a figure 'beautifully calm, majestically sized, classically posed and dressed.' In the centre, Christ, haloed, his right hand raised in blessing, his left holding a closed scroll, his feet resting on the snouts of two very curious creatures, their paws seemingly raised in worship. Above him, John the Baptist, richly clad, holding the Lamb of God. Between those two panels, and below Christ, there are two blocks of inscription in runes – the subject of much dispute since only scattered runes are legible. They seem, however, to refer to the cross as 'this victory symbol', to name a certain Hwætred as having commissioned the work, and to ask for prayers for him and others. At the foot of the cross, either John the Evangelist with his symbol, an eagle, or possibly a secular figure, his high status signalled by his carrying a large bird on his arm.

And then, finally the south panel – more interlacing knots and vine panels, but this time with one small, but very significant addition: a small sundial, very probably the earliest surviving English sundial.

So what does this cross mean? What message does it convey? At one level, it is clear enough – this great cross is a sign of the victory of Christ, the Lamb of God, who holds the scrolls, the book of life, in which those named on the cross, and those who gazed on it, would hope to find their names inscribed. Blessed by the blessing Christ, they would pray to be incorporated into the tree of life by virtue of the wine drunk from the true vine.

But what about that sundial? Is it of any significance in understanding the meaning of the cross, or is it simply a chance addition, as if someone thought that they might as well make this great hulking object useful by adding it – just as one might say, hang a swing from a tree? Well, for reasons I will try to explain, I think the sundial is a clue to another message which the cross conveys. A sundial of course allows us to measure or count time; but here, with the other symbolism, the sundial serves to remind us that time itself has been measured out, and that as well as counting time, time must be made to count.

Let me explain. There is a popular prejudice about early Christianity which holds that Christians were especially and highly ambivalent about the body and about sex. Well that is not so – but that argument is for another occasion. But there is something about which early Christianity certainly was ambivalent – and that was time.

Think about it. Religion, any religion, must take a view about time. Is time something to be embraced, or overcome? Will our rites and rituals seek to take us out of time and put us in touch with the eternal? Will they hope to remove us from the world of change, of which time is the currency? Are minutes, hours, days or months, something which is passing away, and beneath the attention of serious religion? Should we shake off time and try to rise above it?

In the very earliest period it seems that Christians were indeed ambivalent about time – they were ambivalent and their rites and rituals may indeed have sought to locate them in an eternal present with God. They returned from this eternal present, as they inevitably had to, to the humdrum world of hours, days and weeks, only to await the end of time with whatever patience they could muster.

But at a certain point, Christianity took a decision that rather than being overcome, time was to be accepted and claimed – and it took this decision so very decisively that we can be forgiven for overlooking the fact that it was indeed a decision. One small item of evidence relevant to the dating of that decision is provided by an excited report from a pious tourist in Jerusalem in about 380 concerning what she obviously found to be a novel liturgical practice. The tourist was a certain Egeria, a nun from Galicia; and in the fourth century equivalent of a postcard back home, she tells the folks back home in Spain that the church in Jerusalem has, what was obviously unfamiliar to her, a whole round of prayer through the day (what would become the daily offices of Lauds, Vespers and so on). The origins of this practice are debated. That need not concern us. But what it signifies we should notice – for it is one important expression of the decision that Christianity should not stand above time, but should claim it. Prayers through the day, marking the passage of time, ensure that time is not overlooked, but should instead be consecrated and sanctified.

And what was happening for the day was also happening for the year. For just as Christians were claiming the day, with the daily offices, so they were claiming the seasons and the months and seasons with the invention of the Christian year. As the day would be marked out and measured Christianly, so too would be the year, with Easter (with the seasons of Lent and Pentecost on either side of it) governing one great block of time, and Christmas (with the seasons of Advent and Epiphany, before and after), governing another block. By means of this patterning of the year, time was claimed for Christ. The day, the week, the year – each of them, in different ways, were shaped and framed by the life and times of Christ. Time, about which Christians might have been ambivalent, now becomes thoroughly Christian time.

Already, by the time of the construction of the Bewcastle Cross, this claiming of calendar time as Christian time had one very striking expression, to which the Cross, in effect, refers us. For in constructing the Christian year on top of the calendar year, Christianity had written into time and its passage, with particular prominence, claims about Christ and John and about the relationship between them.

The Bible, you will recall, tells us that John the Baptist was conceived six months before Christ – to whom he will be the forerunner. But when was he conceived? – and when, adding six months to that, was Christ conceived? Well before our Cross was devised, the conception of John had been fixed as to be commemorated on September 24, and hence his birth, nine month later, on 24 June – both those in the old Julian calendar, and thus, as this learned congregation will immediately realise, John's birth is celebrated on the summer solstice, when the sun has reached its apogee, and its sway will now decrease, and his conception is remembered at the autumn equinox, the time of equal nights, when the sun gives way again, as the length of night exceeds the length of the day.

Jesus' birth and conception, related to these by being six months later, mark and mean quite different things. Counting six months back from John's conception, Christ's conception was celebrated on 25 March, and his birth, as we know, on 25 December. His birthday marks the solstice in the old calendar, the winter solstice on which the light wins out against the winter darkness; and his conception is at the spring equinox, when winter gives way to spring, and the light exceeds the darkness for the first time. 'I must decrease. He must increase' says John the Baptist in our lesson. So it is that the solar calendar from being a mute cycle of planetary motions, now, in virtue of these commemorations, comes to witness to the deeper meaning and purpose of the Christian time it serves. Time is the time of Christ, and he provides to mere calendar time a new and deeper meaning and logic – a meaning and logic unknown to the gloomy and pessimistic preacher of the book of Ecclesiastes, for whom time is just one thing after another.

In that bleak landscape, a little way north of Hadrian's wall, which itself to Roman consciousness marked the very limits of the civilised world, the passage of the sun through the day, but much more through the year, would have been noticed far more closely than we ever notice these things. As the sun passed around our cross in its daily path – as it shone on the tree of life on the east face, via time on the south face, to shine at last on Christ and his great herald on the west, it marked out a daily passage; but also

as the sun tracked a different path through the sky over the year, it bore witness to the logic and meaning of the relationship of John and Christ, and more importantly to the logic and meaning of Christ's coming. Christ faced the setting sun – and had, of course, faced it down. Conceived at the spring equinox, born at the winter solstice – his arrival marks the triumph of light over darkness, which is the great victory of which this cross is ultimately a sign.

The Christian calendar, and the Cross which makes reference to it by means of that sundial and its figures, teach us to count time – and to count it Christianly. But remember finally Pevsner's question about the Bewcastle Cross: how can it have been possible? How can this object of such superlative quality – the finest example of its type in the whole of Europe – how can this have been constructed in this out of the way place, in an out of the way region, of an out of the way country?

I take it that his question, were it to be answered as he probably intended, would be answered by an account of aesthetic influences, the development of technical competencies and the possession of material resources, and so on, which are essential for this artistic achievement. But we might be allowed to add something more to that answer by saying that whilst those elements are necessary to a satisfactory answer – they are not sufficient. For one might be possessed of the finest sensibilities, and more than adequate means both technological and material, and yet lack the will to build such a monument to faith.

So we might add another element to the answer of that question 'how is it possible' – something which is relevant to us at the beginning of a new year. When Christians learnt to count time Christianly, they were also taught to make time count. The Christian year lays over the calendar a story of salvation, but it does so not merely to add a charming pattern on top of another – in claiming calendar time as Christian time, it invites us to understand the regular time we have as belonging to Christ, and thus owned by and owed to him. This monument to faith would not have been built, would not have been possible, unless some had heard and responded to the implicit call and claim in the marking out of time – such as the great figures of this period, Bede, Cuthbert and Columba. May we hear this call claim for ourselves in our time, and respond in the time we have been graciously granted to love and serve Christ.

