The Byzantine Silver Bowls in the Sutton Hoo Ship Burial and Tree-Worship in Anglo-Saxon England

Michael D. J. Bintley[*]

The ten Byzantine silver bowls included amongst the grave goods interred in the chamber of the Mound 1 ship burial at Sutton Hoo remain one of the most puzzling features of this site. It has been suggested that these items, which lay separated from the rest of the silver in the burial and close to the head of the body-space (where no body was found), may have had some special meaning which has never been discovered. This paper will argue that one of the possible keys to unlocking their significance may be found in the central roundel that adorns the centre of each bowl in the form of a rosette. These bowls, which are thought to have been manufactured in the eastern provinces of the Byzantine Empire in *c.* 600, entered the British Isles in unknown circumstances before coming into the possession of the man buried in (or commemorated by) the Mound 1 burial. Through comparison with contemporary sculpture and vernacular literature, I will suggest that this central rosette, which was associated with both the cross of Christ and sacred trees in Byzantine sculpture, may have served as a conventional bridge between Christian and pre-Christian religious traditions associated with sacred trees in Anglo-Saxon England. The central rosettes adorning each of these bowls may have been understood as the flower of a sacred tree. Since the latter appears to have figured in Anglian paganism it is possible that the bowls may helped to convert the Anglian aristocracy, bridging a gap between Germanic insular religious traditions and those that were being introduced to Britain at the time that the ship burial itself took place.

Burial Context

The ten silver bowls found beside the body-space most commonly identified as the burial or cenotaph of the East Anglian king Rædwald (d. 624-5; see Bruce-Mitford 1974: 33), appear somewhat obscurely at first in Rupert Bruce-Mitford's popular British Museum handbook to the Sutton Hoo ship burial:

> Three feet out from the west wall a dome-like lump, with purplish stains,

proved to be a nest of eight inverted silver bowls, one inside the other, and all except the top two perfectly preserved. Two more bowls, similar to the others, had slid off the top of the pile. One of these had almost completely disintegrated. Under the silver bowls, their handles projecting, were two silver spoons of Byzantine type…with the names 'Saulos' and 'Paulos' (Saul and Paul) in Greek characters (Bruce-Mitford 1972a: 29).

Like the so-called baptismal spoons which they were found overlapping, these bowls are

[*] UCL Department of English Language and Literature

of Eastern Mediterranean origin, and were probably manufactured in the eastern provinces of the Byzantine empire c. 600 (Harris 2003: 125). In fact, as far as Bruce-Mitford was concerned, all of the silver objects in the burial seemed to have been crafted in either eastern Europe or the Near East, and perhaps all in "outlying provinces of the Byzantine Empire" (Bruce-Mitford 1972a: 65). Each of these ten bowls, as he was later to describe them, is "circular, regularly dished and shallow", and might reasonably be described as a set, all being of the same general shape and size and, more importantly, centred by a "central roundel with some sort of nodal device, and cross-arms radiating from this to the rim" (Bruce-Mitford 1972b: 71, 111, 116; see figure 1). Another feature that may be of some significance is the instability of these bowls on their convex bases, with none being ideally suited to resting unsupported of its own accord upon a flat surface, possibly indicating that they were intended to be passed from hand to hand (Bruce-Mitford 1972b: 71; Care Evans 1986: 60).
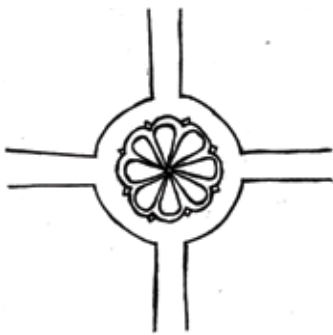
Fig. 1: Central rosette and equal-armed cross from one of the ten silver bowls (simplified design). After Bruce-Mitford (1974), Plate 2.

The deposition of the bowls has attracted special attention because of their separation from the rest of the silver in the burial chamber, and positioning beside what is reasonably assumed to be the right shoulder of the implied body space, whether or not a body was actually present. Bruce-Mitford

suggested for this reason that they may have had some special significance (Bruce-Mitford 1972b: 125), which Angela Care Evans thought to have been probably "more personal" than that of the silver included in the Anastasius dish complex at the other end of the central deposit (Care Evans 1986: 59-60). On this point, arguing in favour of a coffin within the burial chamber, Martin Carver went so far as to suggest that the bowls may originally have been perched on the lid of the casket itself (Carver 1998: 126). Although the question of whether or not there may have been a coffin in the burial assemblage is an interesting point, it is less important in this context than it is to note that these ten bowls were accorded the same apparent dignity by those who organised the grave goods as the iconic helmet positioned to the left of the body space. Additionally, it is perhaps significant that whilst the helmet and the shield, the accoutrements of defence, were orientated to the left of the body space, the bowls lay close to the ornately decorated sword and what is now catalogued as a spearhead, and may thus have been seen as more fittingly associated with the assertive and aggressive virtues of Anglo-Saxon warrior-kings.

Transmission

It is not known how these bowls came into the hands of the East Anglian aristocracy, nor indeed how they entered the British Isles; whether they arrived as diplomatic gifts or through trading seems likely to remain unknown (Harris 2003: 170). These options seem more likely, however, than the possibility that the bowls were taken as the spoils of war, arguably because of the apparent dignity afforded to them in the assemblage, but more convincingly because of their perceived relationship with the two spoons uniformly described as being "of a well-known late-classical type", beside which they were placed (Bruce-Mitford 1972a: 68; Care Evans 1986: 60). These spoons, inscribed with the names of Paul and Saul, or permutations thereof, and equally prominent in the grave

given their proximity to the head of the body-space, have been taken to offer some potential insight into the way that the bowls arrived at Sutton Hoo (see discussion in Hoggett 2010: 108-09). Whilst Anthea Harris has demonstrated that the passage of Byzantine goods into the British Isles was probably conducted along two major routes, arguing (on the basis of the distribution of similar finds) that the silver bowls are most likely to have entered the south or east of England through a route of "maritime commercial contact" which first passed through northern Italy before reaching northwards along the Rhine, she suggests that the prominence of the bowls in the assemblage indicates a formal reception context; that they were given and received rather than purchased or taken (Harris 2003: 143, 175). This was a trade route of great importance, as Hodges has noted, for 'alliance making in the north' (Hodges 1982: 31-32).

So far we have seen that the ten silver bowls may have been positioned beside the head of the body-space because they were regarded by those who constructed the mound as having been of personal significance to the man interred there, whether they were burying his body, or his memory, and that they had been given to him rather than taken. Angela Care Evans has argued that the significance of the spoons as a possible symbol of Christian baptism "should not be overstated"; in other words not taken to indicate that their owner had necessarily received Christianity himself (Care Evans 1986: 63). This must of course have depended on what being a Christian would have meant to an East Anglian aristocrat in the early seventh century which, as we know from Bede's example of Rædwald, did not prevent the baptised king from maintaining a multi-faith temple in which he worshipped both 'devils' and Christ.[1] Bede's presentation of Rædwald serves to illustrate this point well, as he described how the king *atque in eodem fano et altare haberet ad sacrificium Christi, et arulam ad uictimas daemoniorum* ('had in the same temple one altar

for Christian sacrifice, and a small altar for offering victims to devils', *HE* II.15).[2] It is not necessarily overstating the potential Christian significance of these spoons to interpret them as having passed into the possession of Mound 1's occupant in a Christian context, without overemphasizing the extent to which he would have been recognized as a good Christian by the local bishop. The cohabitation of both pagan and Christian features within the burial assemblage is in this respect wholly in accord with what we know about the way that East Anglian kings approached their religious observances at this time and is, perhaps significantly, especially in keeping with the character of Bede's Rædwald (Bruce-Mitford 1974: 33). It is plausible, if not likely, that the positioning of the spoons in close proximity to the silver bowls indicates that the two sets of items were given and received at the same time. Whilst any attempt to judge what this reception context was can only be speculative, the most immediate possibility that presents itself is that they may have been donated in a Christian context, perhaps in exchange for baptismal vows, and that they may thus have formed a part of an exchange of high-status goods in the early seventh century though which the Church may have sought to secure and reinforce its foothold in south-eastern England.

Whether they were directly supplied by representatives of the Church itself whom Dorothy Whitelock presumed to have continued their work in East Anglia at this time (Whitelock 1972: 3), or by royal godparents who were seeking to secure their relationship with a godson (perhaps Æthelberht of Kent with Rædwald) is not one of the principal foci of this paper. What is important to recognise, however, is that there were representatives of the Roman Church in Britain at this time, that the bowls and spoons in the Mound 1 ship burial had their origins in the Byzantine Empire over which the Church exerted spiritual dominance, and that they had made their way into East Anglia as a result of the wider

Christian political, cultural and religious environment, both in England and elsewhere. On these grounds it seems reasonable to conclude that there existed among the Eastern Angles in the early seventh century the necessary mechanisms for transferring, or rather explaining, the perceived symbolic significance of these objects. We might conclude on these grounds that the prominence of the Byzantine spoons may thus be taken to represent links that were established between the occupant of Mound 1 and the Roman Church, potentially via the kingdom of Kent. This person was presumably taken for a Christian, even though he was buried in a large boat, in a large mound, accompanied by numerous worldly treasures. His duty as a king to maintain and extend his power via alliances (whether or not he was Christian, pagan, or something in between) would have been reinforced by the link that these bowls represented with potent forces outside the confines of his kingdom.

Rosettes in the Byzantine World

If the so-called baptismal spoons in their most free interpretation thus represent a connection of some kind with the possibilities of trade and gift exchange that came with the Roman Church, there are some questions to answer about the function of the ten silver bowls with which they were associated. However we regard the religious affiliations of their apparent owner, we do know that kings at this time exercised a great deal of caution where both Christianity and their own native religion were concerned. Æthelberht had been distinctly wary when organising his first encounter with Augustine, refusing to meet him indoors for fear of the holy man's magic (*HE* I.25, 74), and Rædwald had apparently set up altars to both Christ and his own 'devils', as we know. It seems likely that the owner of the bowls interred in Mound 1, Sutton Hoo, would have wished to understand how these fitted into his religious world view. If this is true, it is likely that he would also have wanted to know the significance of

their decoration. As noted, each of the bowls are of the same general shape and size, but it is their central roundels, with "cross-arms radiating from this to the rim" (Bruce-Mitford 1972b: 116), which makes them a set. Whilst the equal-armed crosses decorating these bowls are not particularly revealing, having been an all but ubiquitous feature of both pre-Christian and post-conversion art in Anglo-Saxon England, the central symbol of each of the bowls, a rosette, may bear the weight of greater interpretative significance (Bruce-Mitford 1972a: 66-68). The crosses have been read as having Christian implications, as they would have done in the Byzantine sphere at this time, if not in the pre-Christian culture of those to whom they were introduced in Britain. However, no attempt has yet been made to unravel the significance of their central roundels. Rosettes, or 'mandala' symbols of this kind, are well known on a pan-global scale, appearing as frequently in Buddhist art as they do in that of the Ancient Near East. Rosettes of one kind or another had appeared on jewellery and architecture, Roman, Germanic, or otherwise, long before these bowls had made their way to Britain, and whether we interpret them as flowers, sun-wheels, or as emblems of the *sol invictus,* their symbolism is multifarious and easily transferrable.

Notwithstanding this note of caution, it is valuable to consider what we know about the Byzantine religious culture from which the bowls had emerged, and the early Anglo-Saxon religious culture of East Anglia to which they were introduced. Points of incidence between the two could produce striking cultural hybrids, as they did elsewhere in Britain at this time, that reveal much about changes in native beliefs during the inculturative process by which Anglo-Saxon England was Christianised. In Byzantine art at this time and particularly in Ravenna, the centre of the Byzantine exarchate in central Italy from *c.* 650-751, as well as in Constantinople, there are a number of instances in which this central rosette is associated with

representations of both the Christian cross and the 'sacred tree' (Vryonis 1967: 66; Harris 2003: 109). A particularly fine example is a baptismal font-head from Cividale in northern Italy, which depicts a cross flanked by trees accompanied by two rosettes. In addition, sarcophagi and grave markers from Istanbul also feature rosettes, either at the centre of an assemblage often featuring a cross, or positioned flanking a cross (see figures 2-4). The reverse of the Harbaville Triptych, that was probably manufactured in Constantinople, is similar. Although this dates to the mid-tenth century, it was a product of the revival of Byzantine art under the Macedonian dynasty, and encompasses all three of these elements, with five rosettes marking the wounds of Christ, and two flanking cypress trees entwined in vines bending inwards towards the crossing of the crucifix (Durand 1999: 140-41; and see figure 5). It is not within the scope of this study to examine the long-established symbolic structures by which these elements of rosette, cross, and sacred tree were related in the Christian world at this time. It is perhaps unreasonable to believe that the first efforts of missionaries to Anglo-Saxon England, who were encouraged by Gregory the Great to go about the process of conversion by steps rather than leaps (*HE* I.30, 106-08), could have communicated the full extent of this symbolism to a heathen aristocracy who, if not hostile to the new faith, were apparently wary. While rosettes have other known associations in Europe and the Middle East, in Christian contexts and elsewhere, it seems plausible to suggest that within the image complex formed by the cross, Christ, the tree of Jesse, and so on, rosettes may have been read in one sense as flowers on the tree of life. This is much in keeping with their appearance on the central cross of the Harbaville Triptych; as the five wounds of Christ, who identified himself as the True Vine, and was considered to have sprung from the root of Jesse.

Again, it is wise to be cautious, given what is known about the process of conversion in
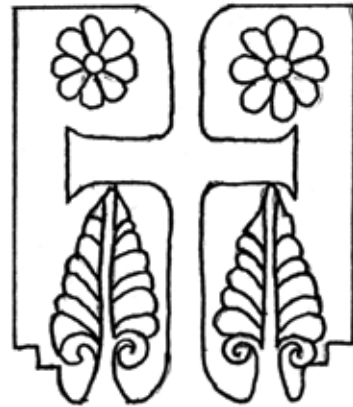
Fig. 2: Cross flanked by rosettes and trees (simplified design), from Baptismal font, Cividale, Italy. After Hawkes (2002: 92; Fig. 2.32).

Fig. 3: Sarcophagus with rosette and flanking crosses: Istanbul Arkeoloji Müzeleri, Istanbul.

Fig. 4: Sarcophagus with rosette and flanking crosses: Istanbul Arkeoloji Müzeleri, Istanbul.

Fig. 5: Cross with rosettes flanked by trees: rear central panel of the Harbaville Triptych (simplified design): Musée du Louvre, Paris.

southern and eastern England at this time. The most basic connection between the Byzantine and Anglo-Saxon worlds which I am seeking to suggest is that of the rosette and its association with a tree/cross complex, potentially as a flower upon a Christian sacred tree or tree of life. This is not to make any claims that those who received them would have understood the multiple meanings that rosettes may have had across the channel in Gaul or in Italy at this time, where the influence, understanding, and appreciation of Christian art was far more fully developed. At the same time this is not to say that some Anglo-Saxons may not have understood some of these meanings. However, a further possibility is that they were introduced to Anglo-Saxon England as part of the conversion process. Within this frame the association of the rosettes in these bowls with a sacred tree in the lands of their origin may have found a counterpart in the insular Germanic religion of the Anglo-Saxons.

Tree-worship in Anglo-Saxon England

Evidence for the active worship or veneration of trees in early medieval England through-out the Anglo-Saxon era is fairly convincing in both the pre-Christian and post-conversion periods, although what form this took is usually obscure. So it was elsewhere throughout Europe at the time; as Bernadette Filotas notes, documents of early medieval pastoral literature throughout Christendom forbid 'in almost identical terms' that the faithful should make *vota ad arbores* ('offerings to trees'), without revealing any other significant characteristics of the form this worship took from place to place (Filotas 2005: 145-48). There is no scope here to provide anything like a complete overview of the many ways in which trees figured in pre-Christian and post-conversion religion in Anglo-Saxon England, but it does seem wise to outline a few especially pertinent pieces of evidence.[3] Some of the most frequently cited passages of Anglo-Saxon law prohibiting tree-worship date to the eleventh century. One of these appears in the secular laws of Cnut, dated by Whitelock to *c.* 1020-23 (Whitelock 1979: 454):

> Be hæðenscipe. We forbeodað eornostlice ælcne hæðenscipe. Þæt bið þæt man idol weorðige, hæþne godas and sunnan oððe monan, fyr oððe flod, wæterwyllas oððe stanas oððe æniges cynnes wudutreowa, oððe wiccecræft lufie, oððe morðweorc gefremme on ænige wisan, oððe on blote, oððe on fyrhte, oððe swylcra gedwimera ænig ðing dreoge (Liebermann 1903: 312).

> Concerning heathen worship. We earnestly forbid every kind of heathen worship. That is that men worship idols, heathen gods and the sun or the moon, fire or flood, springs or stones or any kind of tree of the wood, or practice witchcraft, or brings about death by any means, either by sacrifice, or by divination, or by having any part in such nonsense.

Whilst the sense here is clear, it is less so whether this law referred to current devo-

tions or was following an older model. However, given Ælfric's complaints about exactly these sorts of practices in his late tenth century homily *De Auguriis,* it seems likely that these prohibitions indicate contemporary customs (Skeat 1881: 364-83). It is notable that the veneration of animistic cult objects such as trees and stones is here given the same short shrift as heathen gods had been in older laws such as those of Wihtred of Kent (c. 670-725), where it is written that:

> Gif ceorl buton wifes wisdome deoflum gelde, he sie ealra his æhtan scyldig healsfange. Gif butwu deoflum geldaþ, sion hio healsfange scyldigo and ealra æhtan (Liebermann: 1903, 13).

> If a husband without his wife's knowledge offers to devils, he shall give up all his goods as forfeit. If both make offerings to devils, they shall forfeit all their goods and all their possessions.

It is possible that Cnut's religious prohibitions may have been most relevant to those areas of the country that had undergone some sort of heathen revival under Norse occupation (Meaney 2004: 478), although they may equally reference the continuation of a practice predating Scandinavian influence. The fact that Cnut's laws refer specifically to the veneration of landscape features rather than named gods (such as Woden) is perhaps significant, as this characteristic may stem from ecclesiastical involvement in their creation. Here, a number of commentators have seen the hand of Archbishop Wulfstan of York. By the time of Cnut, emphasis had shifted slightly, yet noticeably, to forbid comprehensively all forms of unChristian worship. Although heathen gods were still the main public enemy, the compass of the Church was widening to include witchcraft and other animistic practices which, if they did not pose

a direct threat, were still something of a distraction. As Meaney has argued, Wulfstan's concept of heathenism at this time seems to have included anything and everything that was contrary to Christian *æ* ('law'; Meaney 2004: 495). Perhaps as a consequence of this, a rather more specific law of the eleventh century issued by the Northumbrian priesthood, and roughly contemporary with Cnut's prohibitions, stipulates that:

> Gif friðgeard sy on hwæs lande abuton stan oððe treow oððe wille oððe swilces ænigge fleard, þonne gilde se ðe hit worhte landslit, healf Criste healf landrican (Liebermann 1903: 383).

> If there is an enclosure on anyone's land around a stone or tree or a well or any such foolishness, then he who made it must pay a *landslit,* half to Christ and half to the lord of the estate.

This prohibition is unique and striking in its detail. It presupposes contemporary customs through the use of the word *friðgeard* ('sacramental-enclosure'), a sacred space within which reverence was presumably deemed fitting. Moreover, it suggests that the construction of enclosures around stones, trees, and wells was so widespread within the jurisdiction of Northumbrian churches that it required legislation, possibly in order to ensure that offerings which might otherwise have been made in churches to the relics of saints did not stray into the wrong hands. As the law stipulates, half of all fees paid to compensate for violation of this law would be due to Christ. This brought to the Church a potentially valuable source of income.

For one reason or another, the veneration of trees was perceived as a threat in later Anglo-Saxon England in ways that it may not have been at the time of Wihtred, in the seventh century, whose laws had been recorded whilst the Sutton Hoo burial ground was still

in active use. Sacred trees in Anglo-Saxon England of whatever kind, and in whatever sense they may have been venerated, did not experience the same degree of ecclesiastical hostility as they did on the continental mainland.[4] This is much in keeping with missionary efforts in Anglo-Saxon England as a whole. Henry Mayr-Harting pointed out that in this respect the conversion of Anglo-Saxon England was not rapid; whilst it took almost ninety years to convert the Anglo-Saxon kings and much of the nobility, missionary efforts in the countryside required not decades, but centuries (Mayr-Harting 1991: 29). In part, this was because rather than attempting to introduce the new faith by force, representatives of the Church in the British Isles sought to better take advantage of an inculturative method whereby points of incidence such as the Germanic spring festival and the Christian Paschal Feast celebrating the death and resurrection of Christ allowed the Church to subsume certain aspects of the old faith into the new.[5]

Inculturative Conversion and the Anglo-Saxon Rood

In this way, Anglo-Saxon England provided fertile ground for a reciprocal sharing of elements that were held in common between the Christian faith and certain native traditions. Perhaps this resulted from Gregory the Great's recommendation that those practices that did not openly contradict the teaching of the Church might – via a careful process of realignment – be actively used by those whose duty it was to spread the word of God (*HE* I.30). Having established the likelihood that trees were venerated in Anglo-Saxon England throughout the period and that, although forbidden by the Church, tree-worship was not seen quite so significant a threat as heathen gods during the early stages of the conversion, we can go on to see how efforts were made elsewhere to realign the worship of trees with the worship of Christ and the cross. Arguably the best example of a group of texts and

objects that demonstrates this exchange of ideas is *The Dream of the Rood* poetic tradition. Quotations from an original form of this poem, which seems likely to date to the late seventh century, are found in runes on the Ruthwell Cross in Dumfriesshire; a full text of the poem, in a later form (*c.* 975), survives in the Vercelli Book (Vercelli, Cathedral Library, MS CXVII), as well as on the twelfth-century Brussels Cross (Swanton 1987: 1, 9).

This poem's vivid blend of Germanic heroic elements and Christian self-sacrifice have often been studied in work on this text (Hill 2010: 9). However, an equally notable feature of the *Dream* is that the both the dreamer and what Éamonn Ó Carragáin has termed the 'humanized cross' only ever refer to the rood in terms denoting a tree, post, or gallows in Old English – never a *crux* (Ó Carragáin 2005: 7). Before the voice of the tree is introduced in the *Dream,* the Dreamer describes his vision of a *syllicre treow* [...] *beama beorhtost* ('wondrous tree [...] the brightest of beams' 4-6), a *sigebeam* ('victory tree' 13), *wuldres treow* ('glory tree' 14), *Wealdendes treow* (the 'ruler's tree' 17), and *Hælendes treow* (the 'Saviour's tree' 25).[6] After the tree has recounted its experiences during the crucifixion, it is again identified by the Dreamer as a *beame* ('beam' 122), *sigebeam* ('victory tree' 127), *rod* ('rood' 131), and *gealgtreow* ('gallows-tree' 146). As the tree speaks (28-121), it identifies itself as a *wuldres beam* ('tree of glory' 97) and (MS) *holmwudu* ('tree of the hill/(or sea- wood))' 91), recalling how it was *aheawen holtes on ende, astyred of stefne minum* ('hewn down at the holt's end, stirred from my stem' 29-30), before being erected as the *gealgan heanne* ('high gallows' 40) and *rod/rode* ('rood' 44, 56, 119) upon which the body of Christ is hung.[7] As a result, some have concluded that this presentation of the cross as a rood-tree may have had stemmed from a Germanic rather than a Christian tradition that was too deeply rooted in poetic traditions to simply be cut out. Chaney sug-

gested that the 'non-Biblical portrayal' of the cross as an aid to Christ rather than as a tool of his punishment and death must 'almost undoubtedly' have drawn upon an Anglo-Saxon account of the death of a vegetation god akin to Baldr (Chaney 1960: 206). North, exploring this possibility further, has argued that the *Dream* presents the crucifixion in the language of a myth about 'Ingui', a native dying god who may have shared common ancestry with Baldr and the myth of his sacrifice upon a World Tree (North 1997: 273, 297-303). Whilst these approaches are highly intriguing, the evidence with which they engage is fragmentary and complex, and it is not the place of this article to discuss their possibilities and potential problems with reference to the *Dream,* rather than to point out that this subject has already been the focus of detailed investigation. One point that it does seem fair and reasonable to make, without delving into the various possible relationships between Anglo-Saxon heathenism and other Germanic mythologies (which also carry their own difficulties with them), is that the cross in the *Dream* is as much a product of the bringing together of Christian and pre-Christian Germanic ideas as the warrior-Christ who appears in the poem. In this respect, whether or not we follow the arguments of those who have associated the Christ of the poem with quasi-mythological Germanic analogues, or the tree with its possible counterpart in Norse mythology (Yggdrasill), we might conclude that the repeated references to the cross as a tree in the *Dream* may have been a result of a realignment of the role of tree-worship with that of the cross in the new faith.

Inculturation did not only make use of similarities between the trees of the pre-Christian and Christian faiths where these trees appeared in works of Old English literature. A similar view can be advanced with reference to the Ruthwell Cross and indeed a multitude of other Anglo-Saxon stone crosses. The Ruthwell Cross, which preserves the longest Old English runic inscription found in stone (Cassidy 1992: 71), has, in these, four quotations which resemble lines from *The Dream of the Rood.* In both cases, the cross identifies itself as a rood, rather than a cross. This is of no small significance because it shows that the relevant process of inculturation was reliant on writing as well as on orally circulated texts.[8] The latter might be inscribed upon wood or monuments carved out of stone, a process which shows value was placed upon the role of objects in the transmission of ideas. If we are to take this idea one step further, and to examine the sculptural decoration of the cross, we can see that the vine-scroll that decorates its sides – two of the four faces of the monument – may not only be intended to recall the Tree of Jesse, the True Vine, or the Tree of Life as they appear in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, but perhaps also those trees which had been venerated in the pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon religion that were being realigned with a fuller understanding of the role of the cross in the new faith.[9] On this note North, endorsed by Ó Carragáin, has argued that this vine-scroll must have assisted in the "transition from superstition to doctrine", whereby the veneration of trees became assimilated into that of the cross of Christ (North 1997: 275, 290; Ó Carragáin 2005).

Conclusions

There is evidence to suggest that the inculturative process of conversion that took place in early medieval England made good use of points of incidence between the pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon faith and the ideas that missionaries from Rome and elsewhere were introducing from the early seventh century onwards. One such point of co-incidence may have been the veneration of trees in pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon England and their prominence in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, which produced striking cultural hybrids including a form of *The Dream of the Rood* poem that was later included in the Vercelli Book (*c.* 975), and lines from a

poem of common ancestry which were also carved on the Ruthwell Cross. This stone monument, like others at this time, was also decorated with vine-scroll patterns that may have helped to facilitate the transition from the pagan worship of sacred trees and pillars to that of the cross of Christ. On these grounds it is reasonable to suppose that similar attempts, and for the same facilitating purpose, may have been made elsewhere in Anglo-Saxon England during the heathen period to combine elements of Christian and pre-Christian concepts and traditions associated with sacred trees. In this context, if the rosettes that centre the ten silver bowls were understood to be connected with some form of sacred tree, they would have been at home in either a Christian or pagan context, and would thus have held a comfortable place in the world-view of the Anglian kings who did not object to the cohabitation of these two ideas.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 Following Kent´s dating of the Merovingian tremisses in the burial, the latest of which he dated to 620-25 (Bruce-Mitford 1975: 588-607). Rædwald and his relevance to the Sutton Hoo burial have also recently been discussed in Hoggett 2010: 28-30, 108-09. Gareth Williams, who more securely dates the hoard to between *c.* 595 and *c.* 640, and notes that it need not necessarily be linked to Rædwald any more than any other king of this period, nevertheless reinforces the point that 'this broader time frame still leaves Sutton Hoo firmly within the period in which Christianity was exetending into southern England, and the burial remains an important find for the interpretation of the conversion process' (Williams 2006: 179-80).

2 All references to Bede's *Historia* from Colgrave and Mynors 1969.

3 For the most recent comprehensive consideration of the significance of 'Trees and Groves in Pre-Christian Belief' in Anglo-Saxon England, see Hooke 2010: 3-20; see also Bintley 2009.

4 It is well known that Charlemagne felled the Irminsul or 'world-pillar' of the Saxons in c. 772, a grave offence for which, as Henry Mayr-Harting argued, they responded with brutal raids in 778 seeking not plunder but 'revenge' (Mayr-Harting 1996: 1126). St. Boniface, similarly, felled a tree in Hesse in c.722 that had been identified by local heathens as the *robor Iovis,* or 'Oak of Jupiter' (Talbot 1954: 45-46).

5 Bede tells us that the pre-Christian Easter pertained to the worship of a deity whom he identified as *Eostre,* which Page has suggested may have been something of an 'etymological fancy' on Bede's part, derived from *eosturmonath.* This word is etymologically linked to the word *ostern* ('orient, dawn'), perhaps suggesting a 'dawning-month'. See Page 1992: 129; also, Chaney 1960: 209.

6 All references to *The Dream of the Rood* from Swanton, 1987.

7 usan Irvine has shown that the description of the rood as simply a forest tree serves to distance the poem from other legends of the Holy Rood. This implies that the composer of the *Dream* was uninterested in emphasising the history of the Holy Rood despite the evidence of later sources which demonstrate Anglo-Saxon familiarity with typological links between the cross and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. See Irvine 1997: 437-39, also Ó Carragáin 2005: 314.

8 For a text of the Ruthwell Cross poem see Dobbie 1942: 114-15.

9 For further examples of this process elsewhere in Anglo-Saxon sculpture, poetic literature, and manuscript illustrations, see Bintley 2012, forthcoming.

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