The Dream of the Rood is a poem which effectively fuses vital elements of the heroic code with one of the most conventional themes in Latin Christian poetry, the crucifixion and its significance for mankind. Several critical essays have noted the distinctly Germanic features of the poem, specifically the use of heroic concepts with regard to Christ and the cross. Christ is not the merciful, loving, meek man of affliction whose victory over sin and death seem to be a defeat rather than a triumph. Instead, he is cast in the role of a bold, strong, courageous king whose salvific act appears to be a deed of heroic prowess. The cross itself is portrayed as his lord’s retainer whose most outstanding characteristic is that of unwavering loyalty.

While the synthesis of Germanic heroic tradition and Christian doctrine has often been observed in the extant criticism, one significant ingredient of the Germanic code of conduct, which is often alluded to in the poem, has so far been overlooked. Repeatedly, the poet refers to the practice of gift exchange, which prevailed in Anglo-Saxon society. Literary sources, in particular the Old English Maxims and Beowulf, as well as historical and contemporary anthropological studies, reveal that gift giving played an important role. In Anglo-Saxon society, the gift serves as a means of creating a firm bond between lord and retainer. While the lord recognizes his retainer’s service by the gift of gold, the retainer is bound by his honor to reciprocate by unfaltering service. The Rood poet applies this moral principle, which contributes to the stability and cohesion of secular society, to the spiritual realm. Gift giving plays a crucial role in the relationship
between the heavenly Father and his Son, as well as in the relationship between Christ and his retainer, the cross. The principle of reciprocity governing these relationships inspires the dreamer. He finally comes to realize that the vision of the gold-adorned cross is a gift from God which he is called upon to reciprocate by composing the poem. The poem, in turn, can be interpreted as a gift to the audience, so that the people who listen to it may render Christ the gift of faith that his act of salvation demands.

The theme of gift giving in *The Dream of the Rood* serves a double purpose. First, it emphasizes the magnitude of God's gift of redemption to mankind and the duty of each believer to reciprocate by a countergift. The poet makes clear that the redemption offered by God needs to be actively embraced by each individual who wants to enjoy eternal happiness. Second, the poet probably deliberately uses the theme of gift giving in order to establish the continuity of pre-Christian and Christian values. He does not limit himself to using epithets and collocations characterizing Christ as a Germanic hero along side with terms showing the divine nature of Christ. As Fred C. Robinson notes, the Old English "appositive style" enables the poet to place old concepts side by side with new ones and to fuse traditional Anglo-Saxon cultural values with Christian ideas. In addition, the *Rood* poet also refers to moral principles prevalent in Anglo-Saxon culture in order to accentuate that the values with which his people were familiar in a pre-Christian, secular world are basically identical with those in a Christian setting. As John Hill states in *The Cultural World in 'Beowulf,'* the use of notions encompassing both pre-Christian past and Christian present serves to "mark out a great sameness of values" (62). Given the early date of the poem (probably mid-ninth century), this interpretation seems reasonable. Building on well-established social and cultural mores among his people, the *Rood* poet fights a sense of alienation from the new ideas and expectations of Christianity. In the same way as, according to Bede, early missionaries were exhorted to use traditional mores as a foundation for Christian concepts, the *Rood* poet employs the traditional practice of gift exchange between lord and retainer as a model for the mutual relationship between God and man.

Before situating *The Dream of the Rood* in this relationship, its context merits consideration. In Anglo-Saxon society, most so-
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cial relations are defined by a feudal system: the peasant is subject to a landowner, who, in turn, is a member of a *comitatus* headed by a lord. This lord, usually a nobleman, is a retainer of the king. All these relationships are strengthened and maintained by means of gift giving. Unfortunately, there are not historical records that bear direct witness to the practice of gift exchange in Anglo-Saxon culture. In the absence of extensive historical records, we have to rely on literary sources and analogous studies to arrive at an approximation of what gift exchange must have meant for the Anglo-Saxon audience of the *Rood* poet.

The Old English *Beowulf* is a poem which refers repeatedly to the custom of gift giving between kings and their nobles or lords and their retainers. As a matter of fact, gift exchange plays such an important role in *Beowulf* that it functions as a controlling theme in the poem.4 Similarly, the gnomic literature of the Anglo-Saxon period, especially *Maxims I* and *II*, place major emphasis on the significance of proper gift exchange. In varying contexts, the *Maxims*, which articulate the accumulated wisdom of the culture that produced them, accentuate the importance of gift giving with respect to rulers and the obligation of the retainers to reciprocate the gifts received. *Maxims I*, ll. 154a–55 ("Mappum oþres weorþ, / gold mon sceal gifan" [One rich gift rewards another: gold is meant for giving]) or ll. 69a–70b ("Gifre bip se þam golde onfeh8, / guma þæs on heahsetle geneah; // lean sceal, gif we leogan nella6, / þam þe us þas lisse geteode" [There must needs be a return, if we do not mean to deceive, to the one who afforded us these favours])5, for example, emphasize that reciprocating the gold received from the lord is necessary for a smoothly functioning social order.

In order to understand fully the ethical implications associated with gift exchange in Anglo-Saxon society, a contemporary reader of *The Dream of the Rood* will also benefit from the works of Vilhelm Grønbech, Marcel Mauss, and other researchers in the area of gift culture theory.6 Looking at cultures in the historical past, among the Germanic peoples, or in contemporary societies, for example in Africa, Melanesia, or Alaska, all cultural theorists come to the conclusion that cultures using extensive gift exchange operate according to the same principles.7 Gifts serve not only to express the greatness and power of the giver, but also to ennoble the recipient and forge a relationship be-
tween donor and recipient. Since each gift needs to be reciprocated, it establishes a bond between donor and recipient. The overall consequence and purpose of gift exchange are the reinforcement of social ties among the members of a society. It is not inconceivable, however, that the recipient of a gift chooses not to reciprocate the gift received. In that case, the gift, which has the power to work towards the benefit of the social group, loses its beneficent effect. Since correct behavior in gift giving contributes essentially to the welfare of society, it forms a crucial element of the moral code.

The *Rood* poet incorporates concepts of proper gift exchange, which are a vital ingredient of Anglo-Saxon secular life, into his poem when he portrays the relationship between Christ and the cross not only as one between a Germanic hero and his retainer, but also as one between donor and recipient in a gift giving relationship. The cross prides itself that Christ’s servants, at their lord’s behest, “gyredon me / golde ond seolfre” (ll. 77) [adorned me with gold and with silver]. Elevated to its high position, which is visibly expressed by its precious ornaments (ll. 5b–9a; 23b), the cross is empowered to act as a lord itself. The *Rood* poet, who casts himself in the role of a lordless exile, is glad to accept the cross as his lord, his “mundbora,” who provides protection or support (“mundbyrd” [l. 130]). While, in the heroic context, a retainer would have to serve his lord by faithful military service, the dreamer understands that his new lord, the cross, demands a special kind of service in return for “mundbyrd.” The dreamer perceives the vision of the splendidly adorned cross as a gift which he needs to reciprocate by sharing his vision. The dreamer considers it his duty, as the cross’s and Christ’s loyal retainer, to inspire the faithful to respond to the divine gift of salvation by the only countergift acceptable to God, namely unconditional obedience and fervent devotion.

Emphasizing the interrelation of gift and countergift, the *Rood* poet draws on principles with which his audience is thoroughly familiar. The contribution that the poet makes to enhancing his audience’s understanding of Christian doctrine is comparable to that of Caedmon. According to Bede, Caedmon received, in a dream, the gift of expressing scripture passages in songs, using the vernacular. Employing the language of ordinary people uninstructed in the Latin tongue, Caedmon “sought to turn his hear-
ers away from delight in sin and arouse in them the love and practice of good works." In a similar way, also in a dream, the Rood poet is inspired to express in typical Anglo-Saxon concepts the significance of the crucifixion for mankind. Drawing on the cultural norms of his people, he expounds that they need to respond to the divine gift of salvation with loyal, loving service.

The understanding that the fullness of God's grace is accessible only to the individual who serves the Lord with unfailing loyalty and true dedication comes to the poet in a dream vision. The dreamer vividly recalls an experience in which he is awed by the sight of a most beautifully adorned cross. The rood attracts the dreamer's interest because, despite its conspicuous magnificence, it displays traces of strife and suffering. Unable to reconcile the splendor and unsightliness simultaneously exhibited by the cross, the dreamer listens attentively to the words that the cross utters. Immediately recognizing the jewels and the gold as tokens of rank and authority, the dreamer carefully heeds the words with which the rood explains its striking appearance. The cross expounds that the gleaming treasures are a reward for the wounds which it has contracted in the service of a most worthy lord, aspects of which in the poem will be discussed below.

The picture that the Rood poet draws of Christ stands curiously detached from the many devotional expressions accompanying the crucifixion from the fourth century on (Swanton 42–52). Unlike Christ in Venantius Fortunatus' hymn "Sing, Tongue," who is characterized as "the Lamb [that] surrenders voluntarily to His Passion" (Allen and Calder 54–55), Christ in The Dream of the Rood is portrayed in a manner strongly reminiscent of the way heroes are pictured in secular heroic poems. Christ in The Dream of the Rood resembles more the warrior-king of Ambrose's "Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke" (Allen and Calder 57–58). As Peter Clemoes notes, the cult of Christ as king had been a dominant force in the church since the fourth century, and, as a consequence, was part and parcel of Anglo-Saxon devotion from the start. Thus, in a Latin Ascensiontide hymn by Bede, Christ was celebrated as "rex gloriae," "rex saeculi," "rex altithronus," "rex regum," and "rex gloriae, virtutis atque gratiae" (317).

While allowing for the divine nature of Christ, using terms like "Hæland" (l. 25) [savior] and "God ælmihtig" (l. 39) [al-
mighty God], the *Rood* poet mainly uses epithets similar to those applied to the heroes in *Beowulf*. Thus Christ is called a young man (“geong hæleð” [l. 39]), a powerful king (“ricne Cyning” [l. 44]), a prince (“æðelingæ” [l. 58]), and a glorious prince (“mæran þeodne” [l. 69]). The adjectives employed with respect to Christ likewise underscore the notion that Christ is a strong and invincible warrior. The description of him as strong and unflinching (“strang ond stibmod” [l. 40]) and courageous (“modig” [l. 41]) marks him as a heroic figure. As he prepares himself for the crucifixion, which, typically enough, is called a fight (“gewinne” [l. 65]), and eagerly ascends the cross, he appears not as a victim who endures the agonies of death, but as a powerful lord who exhibits the traditional heroic qualities of strength, resolution, and boldness.¹⁰

Like an exemplary Germanic hero, Christ excels by his virtues as well as his loyalty. In *The Dream of the Rood*, Christ rules not in his own right, but subjects himself to the Father. Christ submitting himself to the Father and carrying out the divine plan of man’s salvation is comparable to Beowulf, who submits himself to Hygelac and employs his strengths for the benefit of his lord’s realm. Just as Beowulf is richly rewarded for his faithful service, Christ receives a great recompense for his dedication. After he has carried out the Father’s will, he is rewarded for his excellent retainership by an elevated position at his heavenly Father’s side and the right of judgment over all mankind at his Second Com- ing (ll. 103b–109b).

As the resplendent rood depicts Christ’s heroic conduct and his honorable reward, it sets up Christ as a model to be emulated by all believers. In the same way as Christ faithfully served God, Christians ought to devote themselves to Christ’s service. They can rightly hope that Christ will grant eternal bliss to his loyal servants, just as he himself was rewarded for his obedience by a superior position and supreme power. The rood suggests that God’s gift of redemption and everlasting happiness is contingent on the readiness of the believer to give God the only countergift that He demands, namely whole-hearted devotion and loyal ser- vice. Narrating its own part in the crucifixion, the cross presents itself as Christ’s retainer who eagerly follows his lord’s example. The rood itself is, as Baird observes, “the perfect embodiment of
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the *imitatio Christi* and thus a perfect exemplar for the conduct of man*" (44).

As the rood recalls its participation in the horrors of the crucifixion, it repeatedly emphasizes its absolute fidelity to Christ's orders and its unconditional obedience, the most important marks of a dutiful *comitatus* member. Again and again, almost compulsively, the rood returns to the necessity of having had to restrain its natural instincts in order to fulfill the wishes of its lord. The repetition of the phrase "ic ne dorste" in lines 35–38 and 42–47 reinforces the notion that the service required of the rood ran counter to its normal inclinations.

In order to follow its master's instructions, the rood needs to control its innermost urges. What is required of the rood is an inversion of the usual contents of retainership. Instead of engaging in action and defending or avenging its lord, the rood must look on passively while its lord is tortured by vile human beings and even facilitate that torture. Since its lord has willingly chosen to give himself into the hands of cruel torturers, it is not allowed to fight back or at least crush the evil-doers with the sheer bulk of its weight. Contrary to the earth, which expresses its revulsion against the horrors of the crucifixion, the cross must restrain itself and stand firm to bear its dying lord. In its function as a retainer, the cross desires nothing more than saving its lord's life. At his behest, however, it must agree to becoming its lord's slayer ("ban" [l. 66]). As Del Mastro notes, "the usual content of retainership has been drained and a diametrically opposed reality substituted. . . . For the Germanic *comitatus* member the situation would mean the highest treason, the deepest shame. For the rood, the 'treason is absolute fidelity, perfect loyalty, and the only service demanded of it'" (176–77).

The question arises why the rood is required to act counter to the service which is typically demanded of a Germanic retainer. Or, in other words, why is it that the *Rood* poet twists the theme of a retainer's service? The *Rood* poet probably has a good reason for picturing the rood as going against the Germanic definition of service. By manipulating this theme, the poet imparts a crucial element of the Christian faith to his Anglo-Saxon audience. He stresses the notion that the gift of salvation is so great that it transcends human understanding. The gift of redemption, which assures man pardon of his sins and never-ending happiness in
the presence of his creator, is so immense that it cannot be fully understood in human terms. On the basis of cultural and ethical concepts valid in this life, man may be able to comprehend part of the mystery of Christ's self-sacrifice, but not the fullness of God's grace. By twisting the theme of service, the poet urges his audience to give to God the return gift that he demands, absolute faith, and to serve him in all humility, accepting what Isaiah states in chapter 55:8: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not my ways. This is the very word of the Lord." God requires man to serve him with utter obedience, even if this runs counter to normal human expectations.

The rood communicates to the dreamer that God recognizes this type of faith. For its tremendous self-discipline and unequivocal submission to its lord's will, the rood reaps a rich reward. Just as Christ's obedience to his Father was recognized by God, the rood's faithfulness is duly acknowledged. Like a worthy Anglo-Saxon retainer who has excelled in the service of his lord, the rood receives valuable treasures as a token of its merits. It is

\[
\text{begoten mid golde, gimmas stodon}
\]
\[
\text{fægere æt foldan sceatum, swylce þær fife wæron}
\]
\[
\text{uppe on þam eaxlegespanne (6b–9a)}
\]

[all covered with gold; beautiful gems appeared at the corners of the earth and there were also five upon the crossbeam.]

After having been despised and neglected for a long time, the rood ultimately comes to experience glory and honor in much the same way as the cross in Elene. Studded with beautiful gems and decked in gold and silver, it is transformed into a trophy of victory. No longer a sign of shame and defeat, it gleams in splendor as a sign of triumph. With great pride, the rood points out to the dreamer that like Mary, the mother of Christ, it has received its precious adornments as a recompense for its unfailing obedience:

\[
\text{Hwæt, me þa geweorðode wuldres Ealdor}
\]
\[
\text{osfer holmwudu, heofonrices Weard,}
\]
Lo! the Lord of glory, Guardian of heaven-kingdom, then honoured me above the trees of the forest, just as he, the almighty God, in the sight of all men, also honored his mother, Mary herself, above all womankind.]

Just as Mary is raised above all other women by the superior status accorded to her in heaven, the rood is henceforth elevated above all other trees by these treasures. The rood acquires a higher status, which is expressed by the treasures with which it is adorned. For its service, it reaps immortal fame, the most coveted fruit of labor that a retainer could possibly expect.

The treasures of which the rood conceives as a visible sign of recognition on the part of its divine lord are simultaneously tokens of gratitude on the part of the disciples. Since the rood has played a major role in the act of redemption, it deserves special honor from those who believe that Christ's death on the cross will lead them to eternal life:

Is nu sæl cumen
þæt me weorðiaþ  wide ond side
menn ofer moldan, ond eall þeos mære gesceafþ,
egbiddæþ him to þyssum beacne. (80b-83a)

[Now a time has come when people far and wide throughout the earth, and all this glorious creation honour me and worship this sign.]

If God has sacrificed his only and beloved son to rescue mankind from death, the believers can only reciprocate for this supreme gift by a worthy countergift. In accordance with the concept valid in gift economies that only the most precious material objects are appropriate means of expressing esteem and reverence, the disciples bestow on the holy rood, the lord's visible servant on earth, their very best. The gold and silver used to adorn the cross are the most valuable metals available. Encrusting the
cross with these precious metals requires a great deal of skill and workmanship on the part of the artists. The jewels, precious and rare stones that are hard to come by, are carefully cut and set. They are thoughtfully arranged at the four corners of the cross and on the cross-beam to symbolize the deeper significance of the rood.

In the extant scholarly criticism of *The Dream of the Rood*, the symbolic import of the jewels has attracted a great deal of attention. As Huppé notes, the four jewels at the extensions of the cross "represent the universality of the cross, its participation in the quadripartite creation, with its four dimensions, four directions, four seasons and four elements" (78). Cook quotes a different interpretation of the four gems from the *Legenda Aurea*: "And in sign of these four virtues the four corners of the cross be adorned with precious gems and stones. And in the most apparent place is charity, and on the right side is obedience, and on the left side is patience, and beneath is humility, the root of all virtues" (15). The five gems on the cross-beam are generally taken to be transfigurations of the five wounds of Christ. The magnificent adornment of the cross, which has assisted in opening the kingdom of heaven for mankind, also invites association with the scriptural account of the new Jerusalem. In the Book of Revelation (21: 18–21), the celestial city is described as of pure gold and studded with different kinds of precious stones.

All these significances of the cross's ornamentation, whether they are representational, moral, or eschatological, are conjured up as the dreamer beholds the splendidly decorated cross. What the cross emphasizes in its address to the dreamer, however, is that its gleaming beauty is a gift from God for which it needs to reciprocate. After having assisted the son of God in redeeming mankind, its mission is not completed. Like a dutiful retainer who has been abundantly rewarded for his achievements in a highly demanding situation, the cross feels the obligation to persevere in its service. It regards its shining appearance not only as a gift to be savored as a token of honor and glory, but also as a means of guiding the human beings for whose sake Christ performed the act of salvation. Due to its special merits, the cross has the authority to function as a lord, mentor, and mediator who makes the redemption accessible to the human believer. By dint of its luster, it is able to function as a beacon, a shining
luminary that leads Christians to understand the mystery of their redemption as well as the necessity of their own participation in the process of salvation.

After evoking the greatness of Christ’s salvific act, the cross suggests to the dreamer that he can reap the fruit of Christ’s victory only if he associates himself closely with Christ. The cross, the tried and experienced retainer of Christ, elevated to the rank of a lord who grants “mundbyrd” (l. 130), enjoins the dreamer to become a member of Christ’s comitatus under its leadership. Although the rood couches the participation required on the part of the dreamer in terms easily comprehensible to an Anglo-Saxon audience, drawing on the Germanic notion of service for gift, the ideas expressed are in keeping with scripture. Thus, in the letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul repeatedly emphasizes the importance of faith: “he shall gain life who is justified through faith” (1:17) or “God . . . justifies any man who puts his faith in Jesus” (3:26). The dreamer needs to accept as truth that Christ’s death has meaning for him as an individual. He must acknowledge his own sinfulness and his dire need of salvation. In the light of the resplendent cross, the dreamer becomes aware of his stained ego. No matter how much he may strive to reform his life and abstain from sin, he will fall short of perfection and be unworthy of God’s kingdom. Yet his hope grows strong that he will be saved by worshiping and imitating the cross, the symbol of redemption which he is allowed to approach in his vision. The dreamer trusts in the saving power of the cross which proclaims that it is enabled to heal everyone who holds it in awe (“ond ic hælan mæg // æghwylcne anra / þra þe him bið egesa to me” [ll. 85a–86b]).

The cross suggests, however, that, in addition to repentance and faith, God requires active deeds on the part of the Christian. Making use of his own individual God-given faculties, each and everyone is obliged to become a witness of Christ. Since the dreamer is blessed with the gift of poetry, the cross orders its retainer to use his talent for the purpose of evangelization:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Nu ic þe hate,} & \quad \text{hæleð min se leofa,} \\
\text{þæt ðu þas gesyhðe} & \quad \text{secge mannum,} \\
\text{onwreoh wordum} & \quad \text{þæt hit is wuldres beam,} \\
\text{se ðe ælmihtig god} & \quad \text{on þrowode}
\end{align*}
\]
[Now, my beloved man, I enjoin you to declare this vision to people; make it plain by your words that it is the tree of glory on which almighty God suffered for the many sins of mankind and for the old deeds of Adam.]

Meditating on God’s redeeming grace and, in poetic language, reflecting the cultural concepts of his Anglo-Saxon audience, the dreamer can render God a most pleasing gift. Again, the rood’s command is reminiscent of Romans 12: 7–8, where Paul enjoins his readers to exercise the gifts allotted to them by God’s grace. Inspired by the cross, the dreamer should employ his gift in teaching and stirring his hearers. The dreamer-poet decides to use to power of his words to lead more people to Christ. Thus, the poem The Dream of the Rood becomes a gift that the dreamer gives to God, who has enlightened him by sending him the vision of the rood, and also to his audience.

The Rood poet pictures, in typically Germanic terms, the final divine gift for which he yearns and for which he wants his audience to yearn. Since the gift of God, who permits his creatures to see him face to face, is ineffable, it can best be expressed by what represents the most perfect joy for an Anglo-Saxon warrior. Therefore, the dreamer evokes the pleasures of heaven in terms of a victory banquet in a Germanic mead-hall:

```
don ic wene me
  daga gehwylce hwænne me Dryhtnes rod,
  þe ic her on eordan ær sceawode,
  on þysson lænan life gefetige
  ond me þonne gebringe þær is blis mycel,
  dream on heofonum, þær is Dryhtnes folc
  geseted to symle, þær is singal blis;
  ond he þonne asette þær ic syþan mot
  wunian on wuldre, well mid þam halgum
  dreames brucan. (135b–44a)
```
[and I hope each day for the time when the Cross of the Lord, which I once gazed upon here on earth, will fetch me from this transitory life and then bring me to where there is great happiness, joy in heaven, where the Lord's people are placed at the banquet, where there is unceasing happiness; and will then place me where I may afterwards dwell in glory and fully partake of joy with the saints.]

The delights of the messianic banquet are crystallized in the word "dream" which an Anglo-Saxon audience would have associated with feasting, convivial consumption of mead, music, companionship, and, above all, gift giving. "Dream" implies for the retainer dignity, honor, and acceptance by his lord and his fellow retainers. The dreamer imagines a state of bliss which is perfect not only because it is provided by the most generous and gracious of all lords, but also because it is absolutely stable and secure. Although he is presently suffering the hardships of exile, he is content in anticipation of the honorable status which he will enjoy in the communion of saints and the treasures which he will receive from his celestial gift giver.

Employing the concept of gift exchange as a pervasive theme, the Rood poet creates a connection between the cultural mores of his people and essential elements of Christian doctrine. On the background of their own cultural world, the Anglo-Saxon listeners are instructed in basic tenets of the Christian faith. As a consequence, the Christian faith appears as a set not of alien, but of familiar ideas compatible with the secular Anglo-Saxon experience. The Rood poet advises his audience to practise in the spiritual context what is a proven beneficial custom in the secular context. Proper gift exchange, which is a life-giving activity in the secular world, will lead to ever-lasting life in the spiritual realm.14

Notes

Robinson explains the adaptation of pre-Christian vocabulary to Christian concepts as a matter "not of the displacement of pre-Christian meanings by Christian meanings but rather of the extension of pre-Christian meanings to include Christian concepts" ('Beowulf' and the Appositive Style, 35).

D. H. Green reminds us in The Carolingian Lord, 289–91, that several scholars have noted the analogy between the Christianization of the Old English vocabulary and the early missionaries' conversion of the pagan shrines to Christian uses, following the advice that Pope Gregory gave to Abbot Mellitus. For Pope Gregory's letter, see Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People, Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, eds., 106–109.


Textual citations are from The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, eds. George Philip Krapp and Elliott van Kirk Dobbie. The prose translation is S. A. J. Bradley's in Anglo-Saxon Poetry.


Textual quotations are from Michael Swanton's edition of The Dream of the Rood. The modern English version is that of S. A. J. Bradley in Anglo-Saxon Poetry.


The Anglo-Saxon conception of Christ may have influenced the figure of Baldr in the Scandinavian Eddic poems. In the Old Norse tradition, Baldr, son of the highest god Odin, is represented as pure and spotless, as the god of innocence in the midst of the other gods. Like Christ, he was offered as a bloody sacrifice. The term "bealdor," as Christ is called in the Anglo-Saxon poem Andreas (547), is etymologically related to the name of Baldr (Sophus Bugge, The Home of the Eddic Poems, xlii, lii).

This interpretation was common in Anglo-Saxon times. See Ælfric's homily for Palm Sunday, The Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church, 254–56: "Drihten was gefæstnod mid feower næglum, to westæle awend; and his [s]ynstra heolde.
done scynendan suð-dæl; and his swiðra north-dæl, east-dæl his hnoł; and he ealle alysede middengeardes hwemmas swa hangiende.”

12 Most scholars agree that the five jewels represent the five wounds. See, for example: William O. Stevens, The Cross in the Life and Literature of the Anglo-Saxons, 43; Howard R. Patch, “Liturgical Influences in The Dream of the Rood.”


14 I would like to thank Andrew Galloway, for his helpful comments and suggestions.

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