

Ruthwell Cross Factsheet

- The Ruthwell Cross is one of the few artistic treasures to have survived from the Angles' conquest and settlement of southern Scotland.
- The Angles who carved out the Kingdom of Bernicia were pagans, worshipping Gods like Woden, similar to the Odin of Norse mythology. All this changed, however, when, in 635AD, two brothers, Oswald and Oswui, returning from exile at the monastery on the holy Isle of Iona, reclaimed their kingdom and brought Gaelic missionaries with them.
- Since the mid 6th century the Angles had slowly been pushing westwards to the Solway and the rich trade routes of the Irish Sea. Oswui furthered this expansion - taking the lands around Ruthwell as far as Galloway from the Britons in the mid 7th century.
- The Ruthwell Cross is a symbol of the Angles' control of this area, but also of their Christian faith and cultural contacts. The cross stands 5.2 metres tall and is beautifully carved with sophisticated imagery. It was probably erected in the reigns of King Aldfrith or Osred around 700AD, and it would have originally stood outside an Anglian church on the site.



- It was designed as a preaching cross: using the carvings as a picture book for the 'humble'. The on the broad faces of the cross are carved scenes that illustrate Christ's divinity, the Holy Trinity and the four Evangelists who wrote the gospels - Mathew, Mark, Luke and John.
- Latin inscriptions around the carvings tell the story of what is pictured on the cross, although this was probably for the use of monks - the only people who would have had a Latin education.
- A second set of inscriptions are carved in runes, used by Germanic peoples like the Angles and Vikings. These are fragmentary quotations from one of oldest of Old English poems ever written: 'The Dream of the Rood' - where 'rood' means cross, as in Holyrood in Edinburgh.
- The cult of the Holy Cross was one of the newest Christian devotional cults to emerge out of the Mediterranean in the late 7th century.
- The runes may have been for those with no knowledge of Latin, but who possibly knew the poem by heart. They tell the story of the Crucifixion from the perspective of the Cross. It mixes bloody warrior imagery, of a kind the Angles would have appreciated, with an understanding of Christ's suffering.



'Dream of the Rood', c700 AD

'God almighty stripped himself,
when he wished to climb the Cross
bold before all men.
to bow (I dare not,
but had to stand firm.)

I held high the great King,
heaven's Lord. I dare not bend.
Men mocked us both together. I was slick with blood
sprung from the Man's side...)

Christ was on the Cross.
But then quick ones came from afar,
nobles, all together. I beheld it all.
I bowed (to warrior hands.)

Wounded with spears,
they laid him, limb weary. At his body's head they stood.
They that looked to (heaven's Lord...)

Ruthwell Cross

Ruthwell Parish Kirk, Ruthwell, Dumfriesshire.

Off B724, 8.5 miles SE of Dumfries, at Ruthwell.

The Monument is located in Ruthwell Parish Church and the key for entry can be obtained from the nearby modern house.