



*The Ruthwell Cross (7<sup>th</sup> Century) with representations of The Dream of the Rood*

*The Dream of the Rood* – This is a very early 7<sup>th</sup> century poem that is amazingly sophisticated for its time. It is an allegory written in a way quite similar to Dante. It describes the dream of a warrior on the crucifixion. The dream is a paradoxical vision of The Rood (ie: the cross), seeing it either as a rough gallows tree or a bejeweled relic. In the dream, the Rood speaks to him, recounting in a graphic way the events of the crucifixion. Christ is no sacrificial victim in this poem. He is a hero with whom an English warrior could readily identify.

The Rood itself speaks and recounts how Christ ascended the Rood to effect humanity's salvation:

The young hero stripped himself—he, God Almighty—  
strong and stout-minded. He mounted high gallows,  
bold before many, when he would loose mankind

He is not just a hero in the poem, he is also a powerful king and war-lord (dryhten). When Nicodemus and Joseph of Aramathia come to bury him, they seem to be a numerous band of English retainers:

*Then they worked him an earth-house,  
men in the slayer's sight carved it from bright stone,  
set in it the Wielder of Victories. Then they sang him a sorrow-song,  
sad in the eventide, when they would go again  
with grief from that great Lord.*

When the Rood explains to the dreamer how it has become a bejeweled relic, it speaks like that of an English retainer who has been rewarded by his war-lord for faithful service: "Then glory's prince honored me over all trees of the wood ...". The dreamer responds to this like a English retainer looking for a war-lord to serve:

*For me now life's hope:  
that I may seek that victory-beam  
alone more often than all men,  
honor it well. My desire for that  
is much in mind, and my hope of protection  
reverts to the rood. I have not now many  
strong friends on this earth; they forth hence  
have departed from world's joys, have sought themselves glory's King;  
they live now in heaven with the High-Father,  
dwell still in glory, and I for myself expect  
each of my days the time when the Lord's rood,  
which I here on earth formerly saw,  
from this loaned life will fetch me away  
and bring me then where is much bliss,  
joy in the heavens, where the Lord's folk  
is seated at feast, where is bliss everlasting;  
and set me then where I after may  
dwell in glory, well with those saints  
delights to enjoy*