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Student-Centered, Interactive Teaching of the Anglo-Saxon Cult of the Cross

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Abstract

Although most Anglo-Saxonists deal with Old English texts and contexts as a matter of course in our research agendas, many of us teach relatively few specialized courses focused on our areas of expertise to highly-trained students; thus, many Old English texts and objects which are commonplace in our research lives can seem arcane and esoteric to a great many of our students. This article proposes to confront this gap, to suggest some ways of teaching a few potentially obscure texts and artifacts to undergrads, to offer some guidance about uses of technology in this endeavor, and to help fellow teachers of undergraduate Old English to develop ways to impart some transferable skills and modes of critical thinking to unsuspecting students. [*excerpt*]

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Although most Anglo-Saxonists deal with Old English texts and contexts as a matter of course in our research agendas, many of us teach relatively few specialized courses focused on our areas of expertise to highly-trained students; thus, many Old English texts and objects which are commonplace in our research lives can seem arcane and esoteric to a great many of our students. This article proposes to confront this gap, to suggest some ways of teaching a few potentially obscure texts and artifacts to undergrads, to offer some guidance about uses of technology in this endeavor, and to help fellow teachers of undergraduate Old English to develop ways to impart some transferable skills and modes of critical thinking to unsuspecting students.

How many college students wouldn't like to zoom around the top of a twenty-foot standing stone cross? Or juggle a gilded oaken reliquary fashioned to protect a sliver of the True Cross? Do they want to see something cool? Zoom in close enough so you can see the follicles on a thousand-year-old dead sheep's skin! The on-line digital *Medieval North Atlantic* (hereafter MNA) project has allowed—nay, encouraged!—such behavior since 2001.[1] Linking together over fifty archaeological sites and artifacts from Iceland to Italy, this project was designed and implemented with undergraduate, non-specialist courses in mind. It comprises hundreds of multimedia images (linked panoramic photos, static photos, digital video clips, explanatory text, etc.) of a range of materials from the North Atlantic, including Shetland, Orkney, the Isle of Man, mainland Scotland, the north of England, Iceland, and two items from continental Europe.

By completing assignments concerned with thematic aspects of medieval life grounded in particular artifacts and archaeological sites, students become conversant with some realities of life in the medieval north Atlantic which speak to their own interests and

experiences. A number of pre-law students, for instance, have utilized various *Thing* sites in the project to learn about the importance of law as an element of Norse identity. Students interested in gender roles have often focused on homestead and farm sites as part of their inquiry into gendered work and space. Viking raids and Norse mythology appeal to a wide range of students with many academic interests; notably, one of the students in the very first implementation of the MNA site combined his interest in myth and legend with his passion for comics (he is now a professional illustrator). History, pre-med, and religious studies majors, in particular, have been engaged by the MNA's interactive elements focused on the Anglo-Saxon cross. One of the most passionate students on the site to date was a creative writer who wove elements of his medieval research into a pop-culture piece referencing the spectacle elements and symbolic violence of Mexican Lucha Libre wrestling.[2]

There are, of course, challenges inherent in teaching explicitly religious material like *The Dream of the Rood* and other artifacts connected to the cult of the cross to today's students, many of whom are self-consciously secular. Indeed, with some notable exceptions, even those students who are products of years of religious instruction can go out of their way to downplay any expertise in this area. My experience is that it is generally best to take little for granted, starting with some Bible 101 background in introductory sessions, with refreshers and additions as necessary as we explore more advanced topics, always emphasizing that the goal is cultural knowledge and understanding, not conversion or belief. It is heartening to note, however, that most of the students interested in these courses are receptive to the cultural value of religious history. If we approach such topics respectfully and from a clinical, cultural perspective, we generally negotiate potentially rocky shoals with little real difficulty. The religious context is best provided in the classroom, but much of the student exploration of the Cult of the Cross takes place individually and online. As a key element in the ongoing development of the MNA, upper-level students build site content as they research particular archaeological sites and objects as part of course assignments. Each student develops a formal research report (vetted by the professor) on his or her specific topic that makes sense of and clarifies the context of the instructor-compiled interactive multimedia objects, video clips, panoramas, static images. The student also produces (on the same topic) a creative Interactive Fiction (IF) game and a related on-line quiz (which a visitor may use as a self-assessment tool).[3] This content generation process allows lower-level students the opportunity to learn in a variety of ways and on a variety of levels, with materials which engage the imagination as well as the intellect.[4]

The site pages of the MNA project most relevant to Anglo-Saxon studies include the interactive Brussels Cross [5], the interactive Ruthwell Cross [6], and the multimedia tour of Lindisfarne.[7]. Though it very much remains a work in progress and visitors are warned that components are always in various stages of completion, anyone is invited to visit

and—unless otherwise noted explicitly—to employ any and all aspects of the MNA project site. The details about specific assignments that follow are intended to be adapted and revised by *OEN*'s readers to suit their own pedagogical needs.

Confronting the Cult of the Cross in the Contemporary Liberal Arts Classroom

A decade before the forthcoming Visionary Cross project [8] promised to allow scholars easy access to impressive and detailed 3-D imaging of Anglo-Saxon objects inscribed with text, courses at Gettysburg College drew upon more rudimentary forms of digital technology in order to bring the Cult of the Cross[9] into the classroom and to breathe 21st century life into medieval texts for non-specialist American liberal arts college students. The assignments described here have allowed Gettysburg College students (as well as students at the Danish Institute for Study Abroad in Copenhagen) to engage very closely a number of priceless Anglo-Saxon artifacts, and concurrently to practice basic skills of the discipline such as paleography, transcription, transliteration, and translation.

In much the same way as students studying *Beowulf* in my classes engage aspects of the manuscript through Kevin Kiernan's ground-breaking *Electronic Beowulf* project [10], students in a variety of my medieval literature classes are required to collate electronic multimedia forms of *The Dream of the Rood* text recorded on the stone of the Ruthwell Cross, on the metal of the Brussels Cross, and on the parchment of the Vercelli Book.[11]Students use the "Rune Reader" and "Rune Navigator" functions of the MNA project to perform runic transcription and translation exercises, engage a "Vercelli Text" application to transcribe and to translate the manuscript text and thus complete a paleographical exercise, and use a "Brussels Text" link to collate the inscription on that related object.[12]

These language assignments require a combination of traditional and high-tech tools and techniques.[13] Most of my upper-level Anglo-Saxon studies courses, for example, include six straightforward translation quizzes. During class, students are given a line of text and asked to provide three things: 1) a word-for-word translation from Old English into Modern English; 2) a smooth, idiomatically correct translation into Modern English; 3) grammatical information (part of speech, function in the sentence, etc.) for some of the words or phrases in that line of text. If the students have done their ongoing translation assignments with any degree of conscientiousness, they generally don't find these quizzes difficult -- and the quizzes do tend to goad them into that conscientiousness.

The three transcription exercises associated with *The Dream of the Rood* include a Paleographical Vercelli Book Alphabet Exercise, a Paleographical Vercelli Book Transcription Exercise, and a Runic Ruthwell Cross Transcription Exercise. These are relatively simple assignments that require students to spend a few hours learning to copy original scripts and runes from Anglo-Saxon manuscripts and artifacts. I provide students

with guidelines, including in-class instructions and tutorials concerning the on-line tools, and my experience suggests that very many students, even those not particularly drawn to the medieval era, find it interesting and even fun to spend a little time on their own with ancient and alien objects.

The three translation exercises associated with *The Dream of the Rood*, on the other hand, focus specifically on the Vercelli Book text (lines 39-64), the Ruthwell Cross text (which is approximately equivalent to those Vercelli Book lines), and the short Brussels Cross text of approximately 4 lines, 2 of which correspond to the Vercelli and Ruthwell texts. I emphasize to the students that the translation exercises are more formal versions of the ongoing translations they have been doing for class. These formal assignments thus do not require much new work, but they do require students to submit clean, electronic versions of their translations made up of three parts: 1) word-for-word translation from Old English into Modern English; 2) a smooth, idiomatically correct translation into Modern English; 3) a glossary entry based on Swanton for each word of Old English in the translated selection. This last bit often proves the most time consuming, so I emphasize early on that it pays to keep track of the glossary entries as they do their initial translations for class.

The Vercelli Book exercise takes the longest, as it comprises 25 lines of poetry. They have already translated this poetry over a couple of weeks, however, and we have gone over their translations carefully in class. If they have kept careful notes, this exercise generally does not prove too onerous. The Ruthwell Cross text closely follows that of the Vercelli Book, of course, so their main task in that exercise is to distinguish where the texts deviate. The Brussels Cross text is very short, and does not prove difficult after they've done the other two; such a respite allows us to wrap up the semester in a productive but moderate way.

Articulating the Anglo-Saxon Cult of the Cross in a Voice Contemporary Students Can Hear

These assignments produce student engagement with the relationship between the objects and the texts; they consistently help students to understand some of the connections between literature and its broader cultural context. Thus, such objects and texts provide ideal tools for teaching students with little knowledge of the Middle Ages something substantive and important about Anglo-Saxon England. One of the transcendent functions of literature is to attempt the imaginative leap into the reality of another being, to try to render the subjective experience of the Other into the objective fact of the Self; some theorists might argue, conversely, that the leap is that of the reader projecting personal experience into the text. In either scenario, these versions of *The Dream of the Rood* offer an extraordinary opportunity for undergraduate students to see how texts prime readers for such an imaginative, transcendent leap. The texts do not merely outline

the theological and personal implications of the crucifixion to the faithful (and to the millennial undergraduate), but make the Cross itself give voice to an agenda of fashioning Christ's pain. These assignments provide opportunities for students to ground theoretical literary interpretation in concrete objects from an unfamiliar age.

This variety of activities focused on the MNA project—the close language study, the student-generated content, the combinations of textual, visual, and auditory materials—can inform the discussion of the place of (digital?) humanities in an ever-evolving curriculum and culture. The MNA project grounds study of the Middle Ages and renders its seemingly archaic and arcane texts and objects relevant and approachable to our students, teaching them how to analyze and appreciate a multiplicity of expressions, medieval or modern.

1. A project overview, complete with Objectives, Rationale, and a complete list of Existing Components, is available here The many objects, images, and places in the collection may be selected by means of pull-down menus on the left-hand side of the screen. One may select these by name, location, or type. Visitors are forewarned that the text is largely student-generated and—although edited—subject to errors, while the technical components have been developed on a shoe-string budget. Those caveats aside, we hope that readers might find some of them of some use. Direct corrections and queries to cfee@gettysburg.edu.

2. Each instructor can best assess what courses and materials work best for that instructor's students. I can assert, however, that in a world of *Game of Thrones* and *World of Warcraft*, these materials and approaches have proven very popular with students of varying levels from a wide range of majors in courses as disparate as Torture & Text in Anglo-Saxon England, In Search of Beowulf, The Vikings in Britain, Medieval Epic, Medieval Mythology, and sophomore-level surveys of Medieval & Renaissance Literature.

3. For example, see the student-generated content about the Kirk Andreas on the Isle of Man here.

4. Colleagues interested in having their students contribute to this content-generation process should contact the author, cfee@gettysburg.edu

5. View our interactive Brussels Cross here. With a letter of introduction kindly provided by Catherine Karkov, in June 2005 James Rutkowski and Christopher Fee travelled to Belgium with Dan O'Donnell, Martin Foys, and two student technicians, Oliver Gibbon and Michael Howells. There we captured some 5000 digital images of the Brussels Cross, utilizing a custom-built rig designed and implemented by Oliver Gibbon. Our Brussels Cross is fully interactive, allowing a viewer to spin the cross and view it from any angle, and to examine in detail not only the four main faces of the object, but also the angled shots between these faces.

6. View our interactive Ruthwell Cross here. James Rutkowski and Christopher Fee captured the images for this component in Ruthwell in June 2004; the image on the screen is only 1% of full size, and a user may zoom in to more than 100% of the actual size of the Ruthwell Cross; at 100% the image is high-resolution and quite sharp, despite the glitches in stitching and some editing flaws, but the viewer will of course notice a loss of this clarity as magnification exceeds life-size. All the shots were taken face-on from a foot or so away using a twenty-foot camera rig aligned with the face of the Cross. Due to budgetary and space/weight constraints (the entire rig had to fit into one airline-friendly bag) our apparatus allowed for slight vibration; we compensated for this movement by taking multiple shots of each 6-8 inch segment of each face. Keeping the segment size small also allowed for a generous overlap during stitching, and thus we also smoothed out a lot of bumps through that process. Another obstacle was the irregular shape of the pit in which the Cross is mounted, which forced us to improvise shot distances. Moreover, it's obvious from a glance at the overall image that the irregular lighting in the Ruthwell Kirk provided its own challenges, and our version of the cross is much darker at the base than it is at the top. Time constraints limited us further, and we only were able to take images of the four main faces of the Cross; although these four faces look very good and offer opportunities for fine close-up views of the object, they can't compare with the new 3-D model of the Cross. The real advantage of our cross is that it has allowed in-depth study of stitched photographic images by students for the last decade, and that the entire project was cost- and time-effective in the extreme.

7. To access our interactive tour of Lindisfarne, visit this link.

8. Learn about the Visionary Cross project, spear-headed by Catherine Karkov, Dan O'Donnell, and Roberto Rosselli Del Turco here. A recent article discusses the far-ranging implications of this ground-breaking project here.

9. For overview and analysis of the Anglo-Saxon cult of the cross, see Catherine E. Karkov, Sarah Larratt Keefer, and Karen Louise Jolly, eds., *The Place of the Cross in Anglo-Saxon England*, (Suffolk, UK: Boydell Press, 2006).

10. For more information, see http://ebeowulf.uky.edu/

11. The images of the relevant folia of the Vercelli Book are password-protected for copyright reasons; some images of the manuscript are available here

12. For extensive overview, analysis, and synthesis of these three texts (and others), as well as comprehensive bibliography, see Eamonn O'Carragain's *Ritual and the Rood: Liturgical Images and the Old English Poems of the Dream of the Rood Tradition* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

13. Insofar as is practical, I use *The Electronic Introduction to Old English*, the on-line analogue of Peter Baker's *Introduction to Old English*, 3rd ed. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012. [LINK]