The Devotional Significance of the Cross in Medieval Literature

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THE DEVOTIONAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CROSS IN MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of English
The University of Mississippi

by

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ABSTRACT

The cross is the most widely recognized symbol of Christianity. The necessary instrument of Christ’s crucifixion, the cornerstone of Christian belief, the cross’s basic form and shape has been easily adapted to various uses, media, and symbolism. It exists throughout the medieval period as a symbol of Christ, his crucifixion, and his sacrifice celebrated in the consecration of the Eucharist. The cross, then, is not only a symbol of the crucifixion and redemption, but it invokes Christ through its physical proximity to his crucified body and its role as a relic of the crucifixion, almost as a relic of Christ himself.

This diachronic study of the role of the cross argues that both the physical and symbolic changes of the cross demonstrate a gradual move toward the cross’s symbolism of the Eucharistic mysteries by using the Old English poem *The Dream of the Rood*, Jacobus de Voragine’s *Legenda Aurea*, and the York *Play of the Crucifixion*. 
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I. INTRODUCTION

The cross is the most widely recognized symbol of Christianity: the necessary instrument of Christ’s crucifixion and the cornerstone of Christian belief. Its basic form and shape has been easily adapted to various uses, media, and symbolism. The cross itself developed its own mythology in the form of legends, which continuously evolve from the fourth century onward, that tell of the cross’s life before and after Christ’s crucifixion. It exists throughout the medieval period as a symbol of Christ, his crucifixion, and his sacrifice celebrated in the consecration of the Eucharist. The cross, then, is not only a symbol of the crucifixion and redemption, but it invokes Christ through its physical proximity to his crucified body and its role as a relic of the crucifixion, almost as a relic of Christ himself.

As the medieval religious landscape evolves with the Fourth Lateran Council’s establishment of the doctrine of transubstantiation, the Eucharist becomes increasingly iconic. Depicted in paintings and miracles legends, the Eucharist, Christ’s body present in the bread and wine of the mass, signifies the crucifixion’s sacramental symbolism, and the Cross, though not the Body of Christ as the Eucharist is, signifies the crucifixion. The potential for the cross to signify various devotional moments shows its essential changeability, for it simultaneously points to its origins as tree, its function in the crucifixion, its use as a relic, and its symbolic and devotional roles as a gesture or internalized sign. Indeed, the cross appears in medieval literature as a tree, a bloodied cross, a golden relic, a speaking figure in the sky, and an internalized symbol. The physical transformations of the cross in medieval popular literature indicate its varying symbolism and devotional significance that illuminate changing lay piety from a
devotion relying on physical, material objects toward a devotion that invokes Eucharistic mysteries. This continual change of the cross begins with Anglo-Saxon emphasis on material devotional culture. Devotional symbolism is not entirely absent in this period, but lay emphasis on the devotional symbolism of material objects does increase toward the later Middle Ages. Caroline Walker Bynum argues that late medieval objects point to their material nature and are not entirely focused on their symbolic functions: “the piety of the later period might be characterized as a turn to, rather than away from, the object.”\(^1\) The symbolism of a material object changes with the changing of popular and institutional piety, and this is most clearly seen in a study that spans the Middle Ages, engaging in how the material cross symbolizes different devotional moments.

The cross itself has been treated by few scholars, who mostly focus on Anglo-Saxon representations of the cross at very specific cultural moments. *The Place of the Cross in Anglo-Saxon England*, an essay collection edited by Catherine E. Karkov, Sarah Larratt Keefer, and Karen Louise Jolly, covers Anglo-Saxon representations of the cross in art, literature, ritual, architecture, and material culture. This collection’s essays are very narrow in focus; however, as a whole, it is the most thorough study of the roles and uses of the Anglo-Saxon cross. Focusing on crucifixion iconography in Anglo-Saxon monastic settings, Barbara C. Raw’s work provides insight into the cross’s religious and liturgical contexts that Karkov, Keefer, and Jolly’s collection lacks. Raw catalogues numerous iconographic motifs, connecting each to literary or religious moments, to demonstrate the devotional importance of crosses in monastic settings. Similarly, Éamonn Ó Carragáin’s *Ritual and the Rood* centers on literary and material analogues of *The Dream of the Rood* tradition in order to demonstrate their function as the locus of

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monastic and liturgical devotional practices. The only other analogous scholarship is Barbara
Baert’s *A Heritage of Holy Wood* that investigates, for the first time, the legends of the cross and
their influence on literary and iconographic traditions. These critics contribute valuable details to
extant scholarship about the Anglo-Saxon representations of and devotion to the cross; however,
extant scholarship lacks an approach that tracks and evaluates the cross’s continually changing
devotional significance diachronically.

The goal of this thesis is to unpack the layered symbolism of the cross in three devotional
works that present the cross as signifying various moments of the cross’s identity and its
significance in Eucharistic devotion. My work builds upon and expands the great wealth of
scholarship on Eucharistic piety. The works of Godefridus J. C. Snoek, Eamon Duffy, and Miri
Rubin illustrate the complexities and changes of Eucharistic piety, particularly in the late Middle
Ages. Snoek marks the devotional progression toward the Eucharist from saints’ relics and the
popular appropriations of liturgical ritual. Duffy illustrates the vitality of late medieval religion
particularly through visual imagery available to the clergy and laity alike, including the
Eucharist. Most focused on the Eucharist, Rubin’s *Corpus Christi* tracks the processes that create
meaning for the Eucharist as a symbol and material object. What these three critics do for the
Eucharist, mapping its changes within the medieval Church, I will do for the cross by using a
small sample of Anglo-Saxon and late medieval religious texts.

Though these studies on the early medieval cross and on the Eucharist provide
comprehensive examinations of their respective subjects, there is a paucity of scholarship on the
cross’s development toward Eucharistic devotion, the central focus of late medieval devotion.
Early medieval representations of the cross invoke Christ and the Eucharist, though not directly
or consciously. Anglo-Saxon texts, images, and objects reflect the importance of the physical
nature of the cross, its connection to nature as a tree, and its salvific function as a golden reliquary cross. As the Church formally establishes the doctrine of transubstantiation, the cross’s physical features are less emphasized as its symbolism of the crucifixion is heightened. It is no longer of paramount importance that the cross as a relic is gold, but it is important that the cross, as an essential instrument of the crucifixion, contains within it Christ’s blood from his death because this same blood implies the sacrifice celebrated in the Eucharist.

The cross is so inextricably bound to the Eucharist that it often goes unnoticed by modern critics in studies of Eucharistic symbolism. Bynum charts the roles the medieval cross that implicate both Christ and the Eucharist:

In a sense, the cross, as revered in the Middle Ages, is both image and object, both representation and relic, both animate and inanimate stuff (body and wood). Present in reliquaries all over Christendom, it is the material on which Christ hung, its wood impregnated with his blood. And in legends of its origins, which circulated widely, it was understood to have sprung from a branch planted on Adam’s grave; thus it is also an Old Testament relic. As the crucifix, a devotional object found on innumerable altars, it is a depiction, a representation of the moment that saved the human race. It thus conflates the categories of relic and image, which medieval theologians (like some modern historians) struggled to keep distinct, and blurs the line between object and reproduction/representation.²

The cross most clearly represents the crucifixion, the cornerstone of Christianity and the event that is reenacted in the consecration of the Eucharist. The cross’s inseparability from the crucifixion ties it also to the Eucharist, making the cross the best index of a changing devotional landscape. Its significance is easily changed to match particular liturgical situations, and its form is easily transferred to stone, metal, parchment or vellum, ivory, and frescoes. The cross’s versatility demonstrates the gradual move from physical to sacramental symbolism of Christ’s sacrifice. In addition, the wealth of medieval Eucharistic doctrine makes the doctrine itself

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difficult; therefore, the cross and its various literary and material manifestations are a coded way of discussing Eucharistic doctrine.

This thesis is a diachronic study that charts the devotional significance of the cross in Old and Middle English literature. As discussed earlier, most scholarly works on the cross or the Eucharist focus on one particular historical moment without sufficiently acknowledging the development of symbols that lead into that moment. This might seem to imply a distinct divide between Anglo-Saxon and high medieval depictions of the cross; however, this change is present in earlier forms and develops alongside medieval devotion. Though Anglo-Saxon texts do not make an apparent connection between the cross and the Eucharist, the connections are there tenuously and must be known to understand their impact on late medieval representations of the cross.

Early medieval representations of the cross show it in a variety of physical forms. As will be discussed in Chapter One, The Dream of the Rood shows its change from tree to wooden beam to cross to relic. In addition, the cross takes material form in archeological evidence such as the Ruthwell and Brussels Reliquary crosses. Unlike these physical crosses that are accessible only to those in certain locations and of particular socioeconomic conditions, the Dream of the Rood allows a personalized access to the symbol of the cross. The symbolism of the early medieval cross does not point directly to the Eucharist, but instead reminds the audience of Christ’s victory at the crucifixion and redemption at Judgment Day by using contrasting material descriptions in the poem and in extant material variants. The physical transformation of the cross as a relic demonstrates the gradual move toward late medieval cross symbolism: that the cross is not necessarily a physical object, but a symbol to keep within as a hope for coming salvation.
The symbolism of the cross treated in Chapter One is expanded by popular legends of the cross in Chapter Two. These legends of the material origins and construction of the cross are narrated amid subtle discussions of their symbolism. Jacobus de Voragine’s *Legenda Aurea* narrates the cross’s life before and after Christ, excluding the crucifixion but demonstrating Christ’s absent-presence in the growth of the tree of the cross and in the discovery of the cross by Saint Helena. The apex of this thesis is the cross’s Eucharistic symbolism in the York *Play of the Crucifixion*, which I treat at the end of this thesis. The play points to the sacrament without emphasizing the material of the cross too highly, as in the Old English *Dream of the Rood*. This accommodates increasing Eucharistic devotion within a play of the original defining event.

The cross is ubiquitous in material objects and images; however, literary representations use the physical appearance and role of the cross to demonstrate its changing devotional symbolism. To do this, my work draws from Caroline Walker Bynum’s *Christian Materiality* as a framework for theoretical discussion of medieval objects. Bynum’s discussion hinges on defining an object as active, not inert, because its mere construction calls attention to the inherent transformative nature of devotional objects. Additionally, Kellie Robertson, in a seminal essay on medieval materiality, asks literary critics to “be aware of the potentially active nature of medieval matter as well as its resistance to being reduced to mere physicality.”

Across the medieval period, the cross and its related objects “transform before our eyes into transparent windows onto an ‘actual’ historical moment”; inversely, in order to explain the physical and symbolic transformation of material objects, we must understand how they function within and shed critical light upon “an ‘actual’ historical moment.”

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4 Ibid., 101.
Many might believe, as pointed out by Bynum, that material culture existed solely in the Anglo-Saxon period while thought and faith alone inhabited the late period. During the late Middle Ages, “the way in which such objects were constructed came to call attention to their materiality by means both obvious and subtle.” The physical features of a late medieval object are not disregarded by its contemporaries, but rather viewed as a part of the object’s devotional significance, particularly its relationship with the Eucharist. The early Middle Ages was not yet rife with Eucharistic symbolism; however, the cross still signified Christ’s crucifixion by emphasis on the cross’s physical origins and transformations from tree to cross. What the early medieval writers suggest about the cross’s essential changeability, its potential to simultaneously signify various devotional symbols, is made more devotionally significant by late medieval writers as they introduce and connect the object to theological doctrine.

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II. THE ANGLO-SAXON CROSS IN *THE DREAM OF THE ROOD*

The cross in Anglo-Saxon England “was so ubiquitous that it has become invisible to the modern eye, and yet it played an innovative role in Anglo-Saxon culture.” ⁶ Scholarship is just now coming to fully appreciate the cross’s place in Anglo-Saxon society. The cross is present in stone crosses throughout Ireland and Britain and is depicted in extant manuscripts and found in archaeological dig sites; therefore, the cross in all its manifestations “represented one of the most powerful relics, emblems, and images in medieval culture because it could be replicated in many forms and was accessible to every layer of society.” ⁷ The cross’s devotional use and symbolism as depicted in the Old English poem *The Dream of the Rood* demonstrates the essential changeability of the cross as an index for the cross’s gradual transformation toward late medieval Eucharistic devotion.

*The Dream of the Rood* opens and closes as the dreamer offers contrasting visual descriptions of an image both golden and jeweled while also covered and stained with blood and sweat. The speaking cross or Rood (Old English: *rōd*) delivers a monologue that takes up the majority of the poem. It briefly discusses its origins as a tree and as a cross for common criminals before narrating its experience of Christ’s crucifixion and its life after Christ’s resurrection and ascension. In both the dreamer’s descriptions and the Rood’s monologue, physical changes mark the various devotionally significant manifestations of the True Cross in Anglo-Saxon culture. The Rood implicates Christ in its resurrection from its burial site and its

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⁷ Ibid., xviii.
ascension to status as relic after the crucifixion, mirroring Christ’s resurrection and ascension into Heaven. This inherent changeability of the cross provides a basis for its gradual change toward Eucharistic symbolism.

The Dream’s style and themes are reflected in Anglo-Saxon material and literary culture, suggesting a wide recognition of the significance of the cross itself. Since the mid-nineteenth-century, critics have fruitfully compared the Old English poem to the Ruthwell cross because of the similarity of its first-person runic inscriptions to the Rood’s monologue in the Dream. Critics include the Brussels Reliquary cross as another material artifact that closely resembles a few lines of the Rood’s narrative. The poem draws on common themes and styles of Anglo-Saxon poetry, particularly from the poem Elene, which follows the Dream in the Vercelli Book. In addition to the poem’s internal description and narration of the Rood’s physical changes, Anglo-Saxon material and literary culture reflect a broad understanding and acceptance of the True Cross as a dynamic object of devotional significance for medieval Christianity which marks the cross’s victorious, redemptory, and salvific functions.

The Rood is the clear focus of most critical work on the Dream, but seldom have critics investigated the Rood’s function as the terminus a quo in a diachronic study of cross symbolism in the Middle Ages. Volume Two of Catherine E. Karkov, Sarah Larratt Keefer, and Karen Louise Jolly’s essay collection, The Place of the Cross in Anglo-Saxon England, presents an interdisciplinary study of the cross at various points in Anglo-Saxon art, literature, ritual, and architecture; however, only two of the eleven essays in the second volume of the collection discuss The Dream of the Rood. The unique nature of the Dream poem would seem to merit more attention in a collection of the Anglo-Saxon cross, for few works of literature from this period feature the cross itself as the speaker and narrator. Thomas Hill briefly discusses this
unique portrayal of the cross and argues that it is a symbol for the body of Christ since it demonstrates the physical nature of Christ as a man while the poem’s Christ-figure can represent the separate divinity of the Son of God.\(^8\) This chapter argues for a more comprehensive view of Anglo-Saxon reception and understanding of the *Dream*’s themes and images of the True Cross by focusing on literary and material variants that would have been familiar to a lay audience and that signal the cross’s gradual change toward Eucharistic symbolism.

The material transformations narrated by both the dreamer and the Rood demonstrate the varying functions of the figure of the cross in Anglo-Saxon devotional culture. The dreamer’s contrasting description of an object that is at once “begoten mid golde” (“covered with gold,” 7)\(^9\) while also “beswyled mid swātes gange” (“soaked with the flow of blood,” 23) shows a reconciled view of the Rood as both a relic and an instrument of crucifixion. The Rood narrates its own physical changes from tree to cross and alludes to the devotional significance of these transformations. When viewed alongside contemporary literary, material, and religious artifacts, the dreamer’s and Rood’s narrations of change highlight the devotional function of the cross in Anglo-Saxon England as both a physical and symbolic sign of victory over sin and death, of redemption, and of salvation at the Second Coming.

“Ic wæs āhēawen holtes on ende” (“I was hewn down from the edge of the forest,” 29): the first words of the Rood outline its arboreal origins and significance in Anglo-Saxon devotional culture, though much of the criticism of *The Dream of the Rood* is concerned not with the Rood’s past as a tree but with the gold, jeweled cross’s status as a relic and symbol. Historian John Blair argues that the use of the Old English *trēow*, instead of the Latin *crux* or Old English

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suggests a connection to the pagan past in which sacred areas were often marked by trees. Arguments that consider the Anglo-Saxon connection to pagan tree worship often draw from Pope Gregory’s letter urging the creation of Christian alternatives from extant pagan objects and practices, thus changing tree worship into tree symbolism and veneration of the cross:

The temples of idols in that nation should not be destroyed, but that the idols themselves that are in them should be. Let blessed water be prepared, and sprinkled in these temples, and altars constructed, and relics deposited, since, if these same temples are well built, it is needful that they should be transferred from the worship of idols to the service of the true God; that, when the people themselves see that these temples are not destroyed, they may put away error from their heart, and, knowing and adoring the true God, may have recourse with the more familiarity to the places they have been accustomed to.

Although trees are prevalent in pagan traditions, it is outside the scope and purpose of this chapter to connect this much larger tradition to the Christian veneration of the cross. What is significant to the devotional significance of the cross is the way the Dream brings attention to the life and spirit of the Rood by repeatedly referring to it as trēow, even after it is made into a cross.

The start of the Rood’s monologue creates distance between the narrative present and its arboreal past in order to separate itself from its violent removal from the forest. The Rood begins “þæt wæs geāru iū, (ic þæt gȳta geman)” (“that was very long ago, [that I still remember],” 28) Beginning with geāru iū doubly emphasizes the temporal distance, for both words independently mean “long ago.” By repeating this element, the force of the opening phrase is “that was very long ago,” yet the Rood emphasizes that it still remembers this past. This precedes the Rood’s violent removal from the forest before being forced to bear the execution of criminals. The great amount of time placed between this point and the Rood’s narrative present temporally situates the upcoming crucifixion events for the audience. The Rood’s insistence that it remembers this

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13 The word iū is used once more in the poem (line 87) to note a more recent past.
distant past prompts the audience to consider the relevance of the crucifixion in their own lives. By reminding the audience of the Rood’s origins as a tree, the poem emphasizes various simultaneous significations of the Rood, for even after its removal from the forest, the Rood continues to signify its material origins while also pointing toward its gradual transformation into relic of the crucifixion.

The dreamer’s first description of the Rood as “sylicre trēow” (“more wondrous tree” or “exceedingly rare tree,” 4) demonstrates the arboreal materiality of the dream-object. In the first twenty-seven lines of description, the dreamer describes this dream-object using trēow (tree), bēam (beam), bēacen (beacon), eaxlegespann (crossbeam/shoulder span), sigebēam (beam of victory), and wudu (wood); the word for cross, rōd, is not present until the Rood identifies itself as the cross of Christ: “Rōd wæs ic ārǣred” (“I was raised up a cross,” 44). For Barbara C. Raw, these terms are used to signal what they literally signify, since she sees no indication that they are meant to signify anything else, meaning trēow invokes images of a simple tree and bēam invokes images of a beam or post. 14 Blair argues quite the opposite, that these words indicate a pre-Christian past: “the fact that the Old English words for ‘cross’ are rōd, trēow, and bēam, rather than some loan-word from crux, may suggest that the first crosses were perceived as of like kind to the sacred landmarks which they replaced.”15 Raw’s and Blair’s conflicting explanations of the dreamer’s vocabulary fail to discuss what the invocation of trēow and related words would mean to an Anglo-Saxon audience.

These variations of the Rood’s arborescence are indicative of the physical and symbolic transformation that will occur in the poem. They also signal the literary and material variants that would have been known to the Anglo-Saxon audience. By beginning with trēow as the first

description, the dreamer’s introduction prepares the audience for the Rood’s introduction of itself as a tree hewn down from its place in the forest. This description also enlivens the Rood as a relic or symbol, allowing it to take on a dynamic function as a living object of devotion. The dreamer’s progression of vocabulary from the concrete trēow to the more abstract sigebēam demonstrates the Rood’s functional use as a common cross and its devotional symbolism. As a bēacen, the Rood noticeably marks its changing symbolism; as a jeweled crossbeam, eaxlegespamm, the Rood indicates its materiality as both a cross and relic; as a beam of victory, sigebēam, the Rood demonstrates its connection to the victorious Christ and to Christian victory at the Second Coming. Though these words connote the cross in the Anglo-Saxon mind, their simple meanings hold great symbolic significance for the changing Rood. The gradual changes of the Rood are an appropriate index for the cross’s essential changeability as devotional symbolism shifts toward the Eucharist. The dreamer’s last description of the object, wudu sēlestas, offers a natural shift into the Rood’s being chosen from the forest, hewn down, and taken away to be made into a cross. The violence by which the Rood is taken from its forest home continues as it is forced to function as a criminal’s gallows, gealgan heanne.

As a cross for criminals, the Rood demonstrates both its purpose in common executions and its involuntary role later in Christ’s crucifixion: “Genāman mē ðær strange fēondas, / geworhton him þær tō wæfersyne, hēton mē heora wergas hebban” (“Then the strong fiends seized me away, made a spectacle of me, commanded me to lift up their criminals,” 30-31). Just as the Rood is violently removed from the forest, it is forced to bear criminals, putting itself in opposition to Christ who later zealously and courageously ascends and embraces the Rood. The Rood’s bearing multiple wergas before Christ marks it as the instrument of a shameful, not triumphant, death. This involuntary role also extends to the Rood’s selection as the cross for
Christ. Though Christ is the last person executed on the Rood, the monologue makes clear that there were others crucified on it previously. The Rood is therefore selected by Christ, not specially cultivated for Christ, as the legends of the cross in the next chapter will illustrate.

The role of the Rood as instrument of execution continues into Christ’s crucifixion, as it narrates Christ’s voluntary mounting of the “gealgan hēanne,” glossed both as high gallows and as shameful gallows. This description is repeated again when the dreamer refers to the Rood as a gallows-tree, gealgatreowe, referencing the place where Christ suffered. Though not a physical change, the movement of the Rood from common criminal gallows to the gallows for Christ marks a shift in its devotional significance, though still fused to its involuntary participation in violence. In addition, the shift from common cross to the cross of Christ indicates the Rood’s inherent physical relationship to Christ, which will become more apparent as it becomes a relic of the crucifixion made devotionally significant through its connection with Christ’s sacrificial body.

The Rood’s identification as the cross of Christ comes with assertions of loyalty to Christ and insistence upon standing firm, “suggesting a desire to disassociate itself from the cruel tragedy to which it served as instrument….Just as the voluntary character of Christ’s sacrifice is underscored in certain locutions, so the involuntary function of the cross appears.” These phrases—“hwæðre ic fæste stōd” (“nevertheless I stood firmly,” 38) and “hyldan mē ne dorste” (“I dared not bend,” 45)—emphasize the Rood’s reluctantly cooperative role in Christ’s crucifixion. Almost every critic acknowledges that these assertions are indicative of the heroic themes familiar to the Anglo-Saxon audience in which the Rood is the loyal retainer to Christ as

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lord; however, the Rood’s insistent cooperation with Christ’s crucifixion further transforms this criminal’s gallows into the holy cross, physically as well as symbolically.

“Rōd wæs ic āræred”: the Rood truly becomes the cross, not shameful gallows, after Christ has zealously ascended the Rood, though before the nails pierce them together. This “separates the voluntary ascent from the obverse version in which the cross raises Christ.”17 It is the direct contact with Christ that allows the Rood to surpass its forced role as shameful gallows and to become the True Cross. Though its status as a relic does not begin until after its own resurrection, the contact with Christ is what finally makes it holy. Since it is impossible to have corporeal relics of Christ, contact relics are the closest one can get, and the True Cross is the contact relic of the highest importance.18 The Rood’s self-identification as the True Cross is a symbolic transformation bringing it closer to the physical transformation into relic.

The Rood’s narration is consistently in the first-person, repeatedly emphasized through first-person pronoun usage, yet there are two shifts when the Rood refers to itself in the third-person: “gestāh hē on gealgan hēanne” (“he mounted on the lofty gallows,” 40) and “Crīst wæs on rōde” (“Christ was on the cross,” 56). By referring to itself as gealgan hēanne, the Rood shows its transition from gallows to cross. It is not simply a criminal’s gallows because Christ is courageously approaching and preparing his voluntary ascent, unlike the criminals the Rood has borne before. Yet Christ has not fully embraced the Rood to make it the True Cross through contact. This transitional phase forces the Rood to speak of itself from a distance. “Crīst wæs on rōde” is a definitive statement of Christ’s death, though it is not framed as such. This statement

18 Besides the Instruments of the Passion such as the Crown of Thorns, other first-class relics of Christ are thought to include the Holy Umbilical Cord (housed in San Giovanni in Laterano in Rome) and the Holy Prepuce, or Holy Foreskin (all have been lost).
follows “not Christ’s actions but the cross’s sympathetic observation and creation’s sorrow.”

By referring to itself in the third person, the Rood separates itself from the final scene of the crucifixion, Christ’s dead body still hanging on the cross. These two small shifts function to distance the Rood from itself and from the event, emphasizing its involuntary but cooperative role.

This shifting perspective of a dream-vision is not unique to *The Dream of the Rood*, for its presence in other Old English elegies illustrates its function in the *Dream*. In *The Wanderer*, a shift in perspective occurs that has sparked much critical debate. The speaker uses first-person throughout the poem, frequently using *ic*. The debate hinges on two instances of *swa cwæð* which some editors separate as if spoken by a narrator and some editors include as the Wanderer’s internal dialogue. Stanley B. Greenfield notes that elegiac laments like *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, and *The Wife’s Lament* all begin immediately with the first person, marking any third-person change as outside of the monologue. In the case of *The Wanderer*, the first *swa cwæð* marks the introduction of the Wanderer’s monologue. The second *swa cwæð* at line 111 serves “a summary function,” so that the two *swa cwæð* phrases “furnish a good envelope pattern for the monologue.”

The two points in *The Dream of the Rood* that slip out of clear first-person narration serve not as an outside narrator’s commentary, as in *The Wanderer*, but as the Rood standing outside itself to comment as a narrator on the events occurring.

No extant material cross more closely resembles the first-person crucifixion narration written in *The Dream of the Rood* than the Ruthwell cross. A damaged but mostly complete stone cross from approximately the eighth century now stands in a Presbyterian church at Ruthwell in modern-day Scotland. On two opposite sides of the cross are visible the runic *tituli*

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that closely resemble the verses of the Vercelli Dream. In addition to various carved images, the text inscribed on the opposing sides of the Ruthwell cross offers a first-person speech about the details of Christ’s crucifixion. Éamonn Ó Carragáin translates the runic inscription on the North side that now faces East:

Ahof ic ricinæ kyninc.
Heafunæs hlaford hælda ic ni dorste
Bismæradu unket men ba ætgadre ic wæs miþ blodi bistemid
Bigoten of þæs gumu sida

(“I lifted up a powerful king. The lord of heaven I dared not tilt. Men insulted the pair of us together; I was drenched with blood, poured from the man’s side.”)

Compared to the Vercelli Dream, this scene marks the Rood’s official transformation into the True Cross after declaring “Rōd wæs ic āræred.” This text is appropriate for inscription on the Ruthwell cross since it signifies the cross’s devotional significance by identifying its Eucharistic symbolism as it becomes covered in Christ’s blood at the crucifixion:

Ahof ic ricne cyning,
heofona hlaford, hyldan me ne dorste.
[…]
Bysmeredon hie unc butu ætgædere. Eall ic wæs mid blode bestemed,
bigoten of þæs guman sidan.

(I lifted up the powerful King, the Lord of the heavens; I dared not bend….They insulted us both together. I was made all wet with blood, sprinkled from the man’s side. 44b-45, 48-49a)

The dating of these two artifacts is still an issue of debate, though their connection is so strong that each is used to complete missing or confusing portions of the other. Had the Ruthwell cross been created before the Vercelli poem, The Dream of the Rood would seem to be a literary expansion on the images and runic inscriptions of the cross. Had the Dream been written before

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22 Ó Carragáin, Ritual and the Rood, xxiii.
the Ruthwell cross was created, then it would seem that the Ruthwell cross is a physical manifestation of the themes and images presented in the poem; however, as a stone object, the Ruthwell cross does not contain the complexity exhibited by the Rood of the *Dream* poem. The two speaking crosses demonstrate the physical presence of the cross in Anglo-Saxon devotional culture, though the poem’s Rood is the only speaking cross to display its essential changeability and gradual transformation from tree to cross to relic.

The Ruthwell cross reminds the viewer of the True Cross, since the True Cross itself is unable to be viewed, yet the eleventh-century Brussels Reliquary cross was meant to contain a piece of the True Cross, serving not only as a reminder but becoming a relic of the True Cross itself through contact.\(^{23}\) The Brussels cross shares “the inscription and voice” of *The Dream of the Rood*, but the inscriptions “are rather more complex in language and function,”\(^ {24}\) for there are three types of inscription, or a verse distich followed by a dedication, in which the cross names itself, its patrons, and its dedicatees Christ and Ælfric:

\[
\text{+ROD IS MIN NAMA GEO IC RICNE CŷNING BÆR BŷFIGŷNDE BLODE BESTEMED: ŽAS RODE HET ÆPLMÆR ŽYRICAN 7 AĎEPOLD HYS BEROPOR CRISTE TO LOFE FOR ÆLFRIES SAVLE HYRA BEROPOR}
\]

\((+\text{cross is my name: once I bore the mighty King, trembling and drenched with blood. This cross Æthelmer, and Æthelwold his brother, ordered to be made for the glory of Christ [and] for the soul of Ælfric their brother).}\(^ {25}\)

Because the Brussels cross may have contained a piece of the True Cross, the inscription “would certainly have taken on a reality that we can only speculate might have been achieved at Ruthwell,” particularly by its use of the word *rōd* to identify itself.\(^ {26}\) As a reliquary, the Brussels

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cross’s self-identification takes on a similar significance to the Rood of the *Dream*, for the Brussels cross becomes devotionally significant through contact. Its enclosure of a relic of the True Cross and its self-identification as *rōd* further demonstrates the intimate relationship of the cross and Christ. The Rood of the *Dream*, though, must wait for this contact, but the Brussels cross can make this statement immediately because of the cross-relic it holds within.

If the Ruthwell cross is indeed a physical manifestation of the themes of *The Dream of the Rood*, then the Brussels Reliquary cross almost revives the speaking Rood, bringing it back to life through “an elaborate cross-shaped ostensorium of silver-gilt and enamel” that housed the cross in the early 1600s. The inscriptions of the Brussels Reliquary cross are very similar to the Rood’s monologue of the Vercelli *Dream*. The Brussels cross separates itself temporally from the crucifixion by noting that long ago, *geo*, it bore Christ in the crucifixion, just as the *Dream’s* Rood does to separate itself from violence. The Rood of the *Dream* repeats that it bears or lifts up a powerful king, and the Brussels cross similarly asserts “IC RICNE CYNING BÆR.” Not only does the Rood or the Brussels cross bear the body of Christ, but it is meant to be borne by Christians in preparation for *domdæge*, demonstrating a symbolic transition from Christ’s cross into a devotional relic and symbol. Of course, the transformations of the cross are only visible in *The Dream of the Rood*, for the stone and metal crosses are already transformed and can signify very little change.

Direct contact with Christ transforms the *Dream’s* Rood, the Ruthwell cross, and the Brussels Reliquary cross into a relic, though it is only after the Rood is exhumed from its grave that it is *physically* transformed into a gold, bejeweled relic. It is the Rood, “not Christ, that

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28 Ibid., 350-351.
experiences deposition, burial, exhumation, resurrection, and even ascension into divine glory.”

The Rood is buried and abandoned after Christ’s deposition and burial, and with its discovery by the servants of the Lord, the Rood is resurrected as a holy relic. This resurrection or recovery of the Rood may remind the lay audience of the legend of Saint Helena’s discovery of the True Cross.

Immediately following The Dream of the Rood in the Vercelli manuscript, the Old English poem Elene chronicles the fourth-century discovery of the True Cross by Saint Helena. When Helena and her company come to the place where the cross is buried, they find it in þeostorcofan, a dark chamber where the crosses of Christ and the two thieves are buried. After bringing it out of its grave, the cross is adorned with gold and jewels for veneration by all Christians:

Heo þa rode heht
golde beweorcean ond gимcynnnum,
mid þam æделestum eорcnанstanum
besettan seørocгефтум ond þa in seolfren faэ locum belucan.30

(She commanded that the cross be adorned with gold and with gems and adorned with precious stones, set around it with artistic skill, and then enclosed with locks in a chest of silver)

The Rood in both poems is buried and forgotten in its earthly tomb as a common criminal’s gallows, but it is resurrected as an adorned object of veneration when discovered by worthy Christians. This legend, included in the thirteenth-century Legenda Aurea, is further explored in the next chapter.

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A symbolic burial and resurrection of the cross occurs during Good Friday Adoratio Crucis and Easter Sunday Visitatio Seulchri to physically imitate the burial and resurrection of Christ. Thomas Hill argues that this ritual ceremony may have inspired the Dream-poet to portray the Rood as the victim while Christ is the victorious hero. The tenth-century Regularis Concordia instructs the clergy on Good Friday to bury the cross in imitation of Christ’s burial:

On that part of the altar where there is a space for it there shall be a representation as it were of a sepulchre, hung about with a curtain, in which the holy cross, when it has been venerated shall be placed in the following manner: the deacons who carried the cross before shall come forward and, having wrapped the cross in a napkin there where it was venerated, they shall bear it thence…to the place of the sepulchre. When they have laid the cross therein, in imitation as it were of the burial of the Body of our Lord Jesus Christ, they shall sing….In that same place the holy cross shall be guarded with all reverence until the night of the Lord’s Resurrection.

On Easter Sunday, the tomb is shown to be empty by displaying the empty sepulchre and the linen in which the cross was previously wrapped. These displays use the cross to represent the Body of Christ, as often the Eucharist was buried in place of or in conjunction with a wooden cross. In fact, over two hundred documents record the burial of the cross as the most frequent, followed by both the cross and the Eucharist, and the Eucharist alone as the least frequent. In Anglo-Saxon culture, even before Eucharistic devotion became the pinnacle of lay religious experience, the cross represents Christ’s body in the Eucharist. Therefore, the poet of the Dream of the Rood “was struck by the symbolic association implicit in the ritual, and that a source of the symbolic pattern at the center of the poem was thus some version of this quasi-dramatic ritual.”

The symbolism of the Rood’s burial and exhumation is not only a rebirth that reveals a holy relic but a reminder of Christ’s burial and resurrection.

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34 Hill, The Cross as Symbolic Body,” 300.
The dreamer’s introductory description of the Rood is the only indication of its jeweled manifestation, and the jewels’ symbolic connection to the wounds and blood of Christ is made clear in further descriptions within and outside the poem. The dreamer describes a gold-covered beacon—“gimmas stōdon…swylce þær fīfe wæron” (“gems shone forth…likewise there were five,” 7-8)—in which its five stones represent the five bleeding wounds of Christ. This contrast presents the gold and jewels as glorified forms of the wood and blood. These precious materials are chosen for their high value, but the garnets’ red color symbolizes the blood of the five wounds. The Blickling homilist makes this association between garnets and Christ’s blood in the homily on the Annunciation of the Virgin: “He sealde his þone readan gim, þæt wæs his þæt halige blod” (“He gave his red gem, that was his holy blood”).

Even the Brussels Reliquary cross was meant to display 24 rubies and 14 diamonds, though French revolutionaries removed these in 1793. The connection of gems to blood indicates a lay understanding of the symbolism of gold, decorated reliquary crosses and of the Rood’s description in the dreamer’s introduction.

This beautifully adorned image of the cross in the sky directly alludes to the vision of Constantine that led to his conversion in 312, a well-known legend of the early Middle Ages. The legend of this vision and conversion is included with Saint Helena’s discovery of the True Cross in the Old English poem Elene. Fourth-century historian and bishop Eusebius records the vision:

A long spear, overlaid with gold, formed the figure of the cross by means of a transverse bar laid over it. On the top of the whole was fixed a wreath of gold and precious stones; and within this, the symbol of the Saviour's name…From the cross-bar of the spear was suspended a cloth, a royal piece, covered with a profuse embroidery of most brilliant

36 Ó Carragáin, Ritual and the Rood, 342.
precious stones; and which, being also richly interlaced with gold, presented an indescribable degree of beauty to the beholder.\textsuperscript{38}

The \textit{Dream}'s introduction is very similar, as the dreamer describes a bright beam lifted in the air, covered in gold and gems. The prevalence of this image in various literary and historical accounts indicates the familiarity an audience would have with this image. Furthermore, the image seen by the dreamer ultimately functions as a victorious, salvific symbol, and just as it aids Constantine in victory against his opponent, it will aid Christians in the Second Coming.

The conclusion of the Rood's monologue takes a homiletic turn in asking the dreamer “\( \text{þæt ðū þās gesyhðe secge mannum} \)” (“that you tell men this vision,” 96) in order to prepare mankind for Christ’s Second Coming and \textit{dōmdege} or Judgment Day. The Rood continues: “Ne þearf ðær þonne ænig unforht wesan / þe him ær in brēostum bereð bēacna sēlest” (“Then there need not be any [one] very afraid which before him in/on his breast bear the great symbol,” 117-118). This change, physical or symbolic, from the golden relic to great symbol marks a devotional turn toward the salvific symbolism of the Rood, yet the cross as a physical or internalized symbol of salvation still signifies Christ in its ability to offer redemption at Judgment Day. This invective to the dreamer uses \textit{bēam} and \textit{bēacne} to describe the Rood, demonstrating the significance of the Rood’s symbolic function over its materiality signaled with \textit{trēow} and \textit{wudu}.

The final portion of the Rood’s monologue resembles Old English elegies as the Rood stops narration of the crucifixion and considers larger spiritual ideas. This turn outward to a contemplation of eternal life and more philosophical ideas of religion are also present in \textit{The Wife’s Lament}, \textit{The Wanderer}, and \textit{The Seafarer}. In these elegies, the speakers demonstrate “a progress towards consolation,” opening with a biographical account of the speaker then

concluding with “an extended homiletic admonition” or “a laconic bit of gnomic wisdom.” The *Dream* is not a typical elegy in that the speaker is inanimate, though the form would be familiar to a literate audience in particular. In imitation of an elegy, *The Dream of the Rood*, after opening with the Rood’s biography, asks its audience to not only contemplate the events of the Passion but their significant role at Judgment Day. It is this portion of the Rood’s monologue where the Rood transforms more symbolically than physically.

The *bēacna sēlest* that men must bear *in brēostum* has been glossed as either a physical cross that one wears over his breast, a pectoral cross, or as the symbolic Sign of the Cross. Graham Holderness suggests that the Rood may speak of a physical cross, particularly because the burial, resurrection, and ascension narrated in the poem are those of the Rood, not Christ. He also suggests that this *bēacen* operates in various roles for the Anglo-Saxon audience: “it can function, in the form either of material object of veneration, or of abstract sign, as a ritual profession of faith, a liturgical focus of devotion, or a potent accessory to prayer.” As a “material object of veneration,” Anglo-Saxon culture venerated the True Cross not only with relic crosses but with similarly decorated pectoral crosses, which have been discovered in twenty-first century archeological excavations.

Catherine Karkov notes that some Anglo-Saxons wore decorated pectoral crosses as “signs of their hoped-for salvation,” as suggested by the Rood. Evidence of these crosses has been found in graves and hoards uncovered in the twenty-first century, giving evidence of personal devotion using a material cross. In 2011 near Cambridge University, a team of archaeologists discovered the corpse of a seventh-century teenage girl buried with gold and

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42 The cited studies by Raw, Karkov, and Ó Carragáin contain numerous other crosses discovered.
garnet pectoral cross at her neck. The cross, worn smooth on the back side from rubbing against the girl’s clothes, shows its frequent use, though the cross itself more precisely demonstrates the girl’s high economic and social status than her religious devotion. As “Christianity became increasingly apparent in female burials as the seventh century progressed,” scholars believe the cross was not purely decorative. Uncovered in 2009, the Staffordshire Hoard contains two crosses among numerous seventh- and eighth-century martial artifacts: one a possible processional or altar cross and the other a pectoral cross. The pectoral cross measures approximately 2.6 x 2.0 inches with a loop for a rope or string to that it may be worn. This cross, and the one buried near Cambridge University, demonstrates the personal use of this material symbol, just as suggested by the *Dream*.

It is more likely that the Rood speaks not of a material cross but the symbolic, invisible Sign of the Cross. The phrase *in brēostum* is more generally understood to mean “inside the breast” instead of “on the breast,” since the preposition *in* most frequently is used to mean “in, inside, within.” Though material crosses were prevalent, use of the Sign of the Cross “became ubiquitous, accompanying almost every action.” While this interpretation of the Rood’s final words excludes material evidence, it is significant that pectoral crosses symbolize a person who “in brēostum bereð bēacna sēlest.” Regardless, this transformation demonstrates a move from physical tree and wooden cross to a more theological understanding of what the cross represents.

As a physically and symbolically changing object, the Rood of the *Dream* expresses a dynamic role in Anglo-Saxon devotional culture. Its change from tree to bloodied cross to jeweled relic to internalized symbol of salvation mark the essential changeability of the cross as

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45 *Staffordshire Hoard*, http://www.staffordshirehoard.org.uk/.
a material object and as a signifier. The literary analogues containing the same style as the
*Dream* poem demonstrate broader lay understanding of literary themes, and physical evidence in
crosses demonstrates the poem’s themes that are prevalent in all areas of Anglo-Saxon life. The
physical transformations of the Rood continue to be present in the legends of the cross that
develop between the fourth and fourteenth centuries and that are discussed at length in the next
chapter.
III. FROM PARADISE TO GOLGOTHA: THE JOURNEY OF THE CROSS IN JACOBUS DE VORAGINE’S *LEGENDA AUREA*

The Rood’s monologue in *The Dream of the Rood* includes details also found in Legends of the True Cross, such as its origins as tree and its discovery and ornamentation after the crucifixion. These legends develop the cross’s material and symbolic changes of the Anglo-Saxon period and adapt them to the gradual development of Eucharistic devotion. Of the various manifestations of these legends, the most popular is the *Legenda Aurea* by thirteenth-century Dominican friar Jacobus de Voragine. The *Legenda’s* two legends—the Finding of the True Cross and the Exaltation of the True Cross—reconcile three different legend traditions and bring attention to the developing Eucharistic symbolism of the cross by focusing on its origins and its life as a relic. Even by excluding the cross’s role in the crucifixion, these legends implicate Christ’s absent-presence through the inherent connection of the wood of the cross and the body of Christ, ultimately implicating a strong connection between the cross and the Eucharist.

By the fourteenth century, a standard version of the Legend of the True Cross had grown from three distinct traditions developed between the fourth and fourteenth centuries: the Finding or Invention of the True Cross or the *Inventio* legend, the Exaltation of the True Cross or the *Exaltatio* legend, and the Legend of the Wood of the True Cross or the *Lignum crucis* legend.47 The *Inventio* legend narrates Saint Helena’s search for and discovery of the True Cross at the behest of her son Emperor Constantine, whose vision of the cross led to military victory and his conversion to Christianity. Later versions of the *Inventio* legend, including Jacobus’s version in

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the *Legenda Aurea*, combine the *Inventio* legend with the *Lignum crucis* legend that developed in the twelfth century. The *Lignum crucis* legend uses Old Testament, patristic, and apocryphal sources to offer a narrative of the origins of the wood used to construct the cross. Included separately in the *Legenda* is the *Exaltatio* legend, which tells of the glorification of the cross relic for the dedication of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, built at the location of Saint Helena’s discovery.

Though meant to mark and celebrate feast days, these legends develop a background of information about the cross that was so widely venerated throughout the Middle Ages. Of the various versions of these legends, none was as popular, generally accepted, or widely influential as those of the *Legenda Sanctorum*, more popularly known as the *Legenda Aurea*.¹⁴⁸ This thirteenth-century compendium of saints’ lives and feast days was read across Europe in manuscripts and printed books in Latin and vernacular languages for more than two centuries, making the *Legenda* a medieval best-seller and “almost a cultural institution.”¹⁴⁹ Jacobus’s version of the Legends of the Cross includes all three legend traditions, influencing the spread of legends through literature and iconography.

The cross is a fundamental image for Christianity: it signifies the crucifixion, the highest moment of devotion, and Christ’s sacrifice that offers salvation. It also signifies the sacrifice that is celebrated in the Eucharist. The Legends of the True Cross and associated iconography grow throughout the Middle Ages and continuously reshape devotion. As illustrated in the previous chapter, the cross was an emblem of victory for Anglo-Saxon religious culture, demonstrated most fully in the gradual physical changes of the Rood throughout the *Dream* poem; however, the Anglo-Saxons also understood the cross’s salvific qualities, as demonstrated in the Rood’s

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homiletic conclusion of imagining the cross within the breast or soul in order to prepare for Judgment Day. What the legends of the cross add to the Anglo-Saxon depiction is an increasingly detailed story of the cross’s origins and various roles before and after the crucifixion. These legends also deepen the devotional significance of these roles by creating subtle parallels to Christ and the Eucharist.

The paucity of recent critical work on the Legends of the True Cross necessitates investigation into the legends’ design and function. Early twentieth-century works presented new discoveries of legends in manuscript fragments and offer comparisons to extant versions of the legends. These smaller works add to the variety of sources, analogues, and variations on the legends, but seldom does the research explicate the legends’ function, particularly their function in developing religious belief. The only scholarship focused on the legends is Barbara Baert’s 2004 study of the Legends of the Wood of the True Cross. She catalogues the literary and iconographic traditions of the Lignum crucis legend throughout Europe from the Carolingian era to the end of the fifteenth century. This study is singular in its content and forms the basis of this chapter’s background information. Other older works track the sources and variations of the legends, but it is not my intention in this chapter to provide the sources, influences, and variations of the legends because a project of this size is outside the scope of this chapter. Instead, this chapter will focus on the versions of the legends in the popular Legenda Aurea of Jacobus de Voragine and the legends’ representation of the cross as an index of its essential changeability and ultimate implication of the Eucharist.

The Legend of the Wood of the Cross, or the Lignum crucis legend, tells of the Edenic origins of the cross. Jacobus’s version presents this legend “as a typological prologue to the

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Finding of the Cross,“ and such integration of the Lignum crucis and Inventio legends occurs in later versions in works such as Cursor Mundi, The Travels of Sir John Mandeville, and the Cornish Ordinalia. In the Legenda version, the narrative of the cross’s origins establishes an inverse parallel with Christ, his redemption, and Heaven. Barbara Baert describes the Legenda’s Inventio legend: “a new Paradise delicately creeps through the Old Testament, accumulating there the soteriological powers it will discharge to the full in the Messianic sacrifice.” The relationship of the cross to Christ and his sacrifice is made through symbolic parallels, which hint at or begin the gradual transformation into Eucharistic symbolism.

Before beginning the Inventio legend, which marks the discovery of the cross by Saint Helena in 312, Jacobus invokes the Lignum crucis legend to remind his audience that Seth, the third son of Adam, was the first discoverer of the cross: “Nam et antea fuit inventa a Seth, filio Adam, in terrestri paradiso” (“It had been found earlier by Adam’s son Seth in the earthly paradise”). Saint Helena is praised for discovering the wood of the True Cross and starting its veneration as a relic, but the identification of Seth as the first discoverer points to the cross’s long history, particularly showing that the cross was destined for a holy purpose since it originated in terrestri paradiso. Its beginning in Paradise is paralleled to its ultimate role as a relic, connected to the paradise of Heaven, and these parallels are further established in the story of Seth and the branch from the Garden.

The Lignum crucis legend’s story of Seth is given in three variations in Jacobus’s Legenda. The first version is taken from the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus and tells of Seth’s

51 Ibid., 11.
52 Ibid., 306.
journey to Paradise in search of the oil from the Tree of Mercy to heal his ailing father Adam. Instead of offering Seth the cure for his father, Michael the Archangel says that the oil of mercy will be unobtainable until 5,550 years have passed, approximately the time between Creation and Christ’s resurrection, for the oil of mercy is a symbol for Christ’s redemption of mankind. In the second version of this story, Seth is given a twig to plant on the mount at Lebanon, which will grow into the wood used for the cross of Christ. These two legends are included to present the variety of legends about Seth and the origins of the cross, but Jacobus provides a third version that he presents as more factual, though, he notes, “Utrum autem haec vera sint, lectoris judicio relinquatur, cum in nulla chronica vel hystoria authentica haec legantur” (304; “Whether any of this is true we leave to the reader’s judgment, because none of it is found in any authentic chronicle or history,” 277).

This third version of the legend transitions smoothly into the traditional Inventio legend. Like the second version, the angel gives Seth a branch, but here, the angel says that the branch will only make his father whole when it bears fruit. This refers to the cross, as it bears the fruit of redemption at Christ’s crucifixion, making “whole” those patriarchs who died before the time of Christ. Seth understands this literally and carries it back to Adam in the hope of saving him. When he returns to find his father already dead, Seth plants the branch over Adam’s grave, and it grows until the time of Solomon where the narrative continues into the traditional Inventio legend. The cross offers redemption at the crucifixion, just as Christ’s sacrifice does. Christ’s death conquers sin, brings the Old Testament patriarchs into Heaven, and provides redemption for those still living. Christ is, as Michael tells Seth, the fruit that the branch bears after a time. The branch, which becomes the cross, bears fruit, which is Christ; therefore, it is as if the wood
of the cross “grows” Christ, providing a physical connection between the redemptory nature of the cross and that of Christ.

Jacobus’s identification of the Tree that forms the cross is not simply identification but a nuanced discussion of the inverse relationship of the Old and New Testaments, particularly a relationship between the Garden of Eden and Heaven. The tree from which the cross is made is the tree “in quo peccavit Adam” (304; “under which Adam committed his sin,” 277), or the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.⁵⁵ In the second chapter of Genesis, God commands Adam never to touch or eat from this particular tree, lest he die; however, his and Eve’s disobedience causes the Fall of Man for which Christ is sent to Earth. This identification of the tree is significant to the cross’s redemptive function and inverse relationship between the Old and New Testaments, for the tree under which the Fall of Man occurs is also the tree, in the form of the cross, that offers salvation from condemnation. Stephen Jerome Reno notes that the cross is a “material product” of the tree,⁵⁶ thus it is both a material product of Adam’s sin and a material product of redemption. By endowing the cross with a material history traced to the most important tree, these legends create a mythology that is commonly drawn from in crucifixion iconography.

Agnolo Gaddi’s fourteenth-century fresco cycle in Florence’s Basilica di Santa Croce is the first cycle based on the Inventio (which includes Lignum crucis) and Exaltatio legends of the Legenda Aurea. Gaddi’s cycle inspired his Italian contemporaries’ murals for the next century, spreading the story of Seth throughout the Middle Ages.⁵⁷ The first panel of Gaddi’s fresco,

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⁵⁵ Most scholars identify this Tree as the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, though some medieval sources identify the Tree of the Cross as the Tree of Life. This may be in an attempt to associate the redemptory nature of the Cross to the Tree of Life, though medieval and modern sources note the Tree of Knowledge in order to show a parallel of sin and redemption.


Death of Adam (Figure 2), portrays Seth’s receiving a scroll and planting a branch in Adam’s body that lies in a shallow grave. The top portion of the fresco shows an angel offering Seth a scroll. This scroll is believed to be a symbol of knowledge, implying the cross’s origin from the Tree of Knowledge. In the lower portion of the fresco, Seth plants a branch in Adam’s body. The branch illustrates the direct connection of Adam to the cross. As the tree of the cross grows from Adam’s body, he is firmly, physically and symbolically, attached to the wood. His body feeds the tree that grows into the cross that carries Christ’s body.

Agnolo Gaddi, Death of Adam, fresco, Basilica di Santa Croce, Florence, Italy. From Barbara Baert. Leiden: Brill, 2004. Figure 78a.
This fresco is one of eight fresco panels in Gaddi’s cycle depicting sixteen scenes of the Legends of the True Cross. This is the best preserved and most accurate artistic portrayal of the *Legenda* version which inspired similar Italian cycles in Volterra, Montegiorgio, Arezzo, and possibly Empoli.\(^58\) The second most popular fresco cycle is the cycle of Pierro della Francesca painted between 1452 and 1466 in the Basilica of San Francesco in Arezzo.\(^59\) This version is not as well preserved as Gaddi’s fresco in Florence, but the panel contains three similar scenes: Adam sending Seth to Paradise, Seth in Paradise, and Seth planting a branch in Adam’s dead body.\(^60\) Though this type of iconography is not prevalent, these frescoes showing the cross’s origins from Adam’s grave demonstrate the popular reception of this version of the legend and the inverse symbolism of Old and New Testament theology. Sin was brought into the world through Adam’s consumption of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, and humankind was redeemed by Christ, the symbolic fruit grown from the wood of the Tree of Knowledge.

As the time of Christ’s crucifixion approaches, the cross needs to be constructed from this wood. Since the wood of the cross has grown from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, the materials of the cross are predetermined; however, it is this point in the legend that problematizes this predetermination. Jacobus writes of the cross’s construction:

> Appropinquante vero passione Christi praedictum lignum supernatasse perhibetur. Cum autem illud Judaei vidissent, ipsum acceperunt et crucem domino paraverunt, ipsa autem crux Christi ex quatuor generibus lignorum fuisse perhibetur, scilicet palmae, cypressi, olivae et cedri. Unde versus: Ligna crucis palma, cedrus, cypressus, oliva. (304)

> When Christ’s time to suffer was drawing near, the aforesaid wood floated up to the surface of the pond, and the Jews, seeing it, used it in making the Lord’s cross. It is said that the cross was made out of four kinds of wood, namely, palmwood, cedar, cypress, and olivewood. Hence the verse: *Ligna crucis palma, cedrus, cypressus, oliva*. (278)

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\(^{58}\) Baert, *A Heritage of Holy Wood*, 404, Table 1. The frescoes at Empoli “were done away with in 1792 by the Augustinians, who apparently found them no longer to their taste.” The cycle seems to begin with the Queen of Sheba, excluding the Seth episode, leading Baert to believe there is another wall of frescoes not yet identified (376).

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 392.

\(^{60}\) Ibid., 399, Diagram 8.
The *praedictum lignum, aforesaid wood*, refers to the wood of the Tree in the Garden, but four different types of wood are listed as composing the final cross. This implies that the wood from Paradise might comprise only a quarter of the final constructed cross, possibly the main vertical beam or the crossbeam to which Christ’s hands are nailed. This problem has yet to be reconciled among the few critics who discuss this. Barbara Baert notes that Niccolò da Poggibonsi, a Franciscan monk, claims the twig from the Garden forms the length of the cross and the other three woods come from holy places near Jerusalem and Lebanon. An illustration of *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* shows four men of different nations assembling a cross with four distinctly different pieces. This is possibly a reaction to “the old symbolic interpretations of the cross and the Tree of Virtues,” which gives a virtue to each type of wood used.\(^6\) Though Jacobus does not resolve this issue, Mandeville assigns a different description to each type of wood used in order to enhance the significance of the final constructed cross.

In *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, each type of wood bears a particular significance. Palm, used for the horizontal beam, signifies victory, as the outstretched arms of Christ might signify. Cedar, used as the foundation, is incorruptible and will not decay in the earth. Cypress, used for the vertical support beam, is aromatic, as to disguise the smell of decaying flesh. Lastly, olive, used for the plaque of inscription, signifies peace, turning the mocking inscription into description of Christ’s redemption.\(^7\) The significance of the four woods extends the function of the cross beyond a material representation of the cross toward its salvific function as a relic.

Although the *Legenda* version does not expound the meanings of these woods, the implication is that the four different types are somehow innately important. The cross is not only made of physically different materials, but its materials signify Christ’s victory, perfection, and

peace. This development of the significance of the materials of the cross preface the narrative of the *Inventio* legend, thus heightening the importance of the cross’s discovery and translation by Saint Helena.

The Legend of the Finding of the True Cross, the *Inventio* legend, marks the feast on May third to commemorate Saint Helena’s discovery of the True Cross in Jerusalem. This legend is widely known: It is the main action of the Old English poem *Elene*; it is alluded to in *The Dream of the Rood*; it is depicted in almost every iconographic representation of the Legends of the True Cross cycle. In his prologue to the *Legenda*, Jacobus indicates that this organization follows the liturgical calendar, placing the *Inventio* legend during the time of reconciliation between Easter and Pentecost. The idea of reconciliation occurs in the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians which reflects a common understanding of the crucifixion that the legend also supports: “And through him to reconcile all things unto himself, making peace through the blood of his cross, both as to the things that are on earth, and the things that are in heaven.”63 Christ’s crucifixion is the reconciliation to which the *Inventio* legend alludes because Christ reconciles sinners to God through the crucifixion and through the cross. The Finding of the True Cross is the point when the material of the cross is discovered and that reconciliation can then be venerated materially as a relic.

The *Legenda* version of the *Inventio* legend presents a basic version of the Saint Helena story. When Helena, her company, and Judas the Jew come to the place where the cross is buried, three crosses are discovered: those of Christ and the two thieves, and, according to the *Legenda*, “Cum autem crucem Christi ab illis latronum nescirent discernere, eas in medio civitatis posuerant ibidem gloriam domini praestolantes et ecce cum circa horam nonam quidam juvenis mortuus deferretur.” (309; “since they had no way of distinguishing Christ's cross from

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63 Col 1:20 (Douay-Rheims Bible)
those of the thieves, they placed them in the center of the city and waited for the Lord to manifest his glory; and behold! At about the ninth hour…” 282). Christ’s cross reveals itself by either healing a woman or raising a man from the dead. Jacobus notes that his sources differ on the exact miracle, so he includes two of the most popular. The miracle of the cross, just one of many from the various versions of the legend, functions much like the miracles of a saint’s life or of Christ himself, demonstrating the saint’s sanctity and prompting the saint’s canonization. In a saint’s life, “the subject must be made to appear fully human while that which is being written must confirm and celebrate his or her ‘otherness.’” As a saint must “appear fully human,” the cross must appear as a normal wooden cross. The cross’s “otherness” is demonstrated in its ability to raise the dead or heal the sick. The cross contains salvific and redemptory power since, as a relic, it carries the power of the living cross since it is a descendant of the Tree of Knowledge. In addition, the miraculous power of the cross as a relic implicates the miraculous power of Christ, as exampled in various accounts throughout the Gospels. Due to their physical connection at the crucifixion and the persistent symbolic connections, the cross is able to implicate Christ in its “actions” since Christ has already risen and his instrument is left on Earth.

Jacobus’s second legend is the Legend of the Exaltation of the True Cross, the Exaltatio legend, corresponding with the feast on September fourteenth celebrating the dedication of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, built on the place where Saint Helena discovered the True Cross. As Jacobus notes in the prologue to the Legenda, this feast occurs during the time of pilgrimage between Pentecost to Advent. Jacobus defines pilgrimage as the present life of Christians: “tempus peregrinationis est tempus praesentis vitae, in quo peregrinamur et in pugna semper sumus” (2; “The time of pilgrimage is that of our present life, for we are on pilgrimage.

and constantly engaged in warfare,” 3). The spiritual warfare Christians face is present in the
*Exaltatio* legend in the narration of the abuse of the True Cross and the battle to reclaim it and
replace it within the sepulchre. This legend is also a way to connect Christ and the Eucharist. As
the veneration of the Eucharist became the high point of lay religious experience, anxiety of the
treatment and abuse of the Host grew, and many legends of these abuses are recorded by
Caesarius of Heisterbach in his early thirteenth-century *Dialogus Miraculorum*. The *Legenda*
does not record contemporary anxiety but instead *exalts* both the cross and the faith by showing
the proper treatment of this holy relic.

The *Exaltatio* legend begins when Chosroës, king of the Persians, steals a piece of the
True Cross from the sepulcher in 615 A.D. He builds a tower to live alongside the stolen piece of
the True Cross; he calls himself God, mimicking the Trinity with the wood at his right hand.
Eventually, Chosroës is decapitated when he refuses to convert to Christianity after losing a
battle against Emperor Heraclius, who shows true devotion to the cross. Heraclius destroys the
tower and returns the piece of the cross to Jerusalem with a cry of praise. These events set up the
cross’s importance, the importance of treating the physical relic with religious respect, in order to
lead to the elevation of the cross to a crowd of venerating worshipers at the dedication of the
Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

Jacobus opens the legend with an examination of the word *exaltation* and its connection
to the feast: “Exaltatio sanctae crucis dicitur eo quod tali die fides et sancta crux plurimum
exaltata fuit.” (605; “This feast is called the Exaltation of the Holy cross because on this day the
faith and the holy cross were raised to the heights,” 554). The cross was physically raised up for
all those in attendance of the Sepulchre’s dedication. This physical elevation is intended to draw
the gaze of the audience in order to allow meditation upon the metaphorical *exaltation*. Most
noticeably, this elevation directly implicates the Elevation of the Host for Jacobus’s audience. This ritual, the high point of lay experience in the mass, marks the moment of the Host’s transformation from bread to the Body of Christ. Therefore, this exaltation is both a physical elevation of the cross and a symbolic elevation of the cross to the role of relic and symbol of the Eucharist. The exaltation of the cross ends with the symbolism of the cross as a sign, but it begins like the Inventio legend with the symbolism of the cross as a tree. The legends are connected in their discussion of the devotional and symbolic importance of the wood of the cross, though this is a point where there are problems in connecting the narratives of the two legends.

According to the Inventio legend, the cross was grown from a branch from the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. Planted in the body of Adam, the tree eventually became the True Cross. The cross’s life before Christ, in the Inventio legend, seems predetermined to be holy, but the Exaltatio legend describes the wood of the cross in much different terms:

Notandum autem, quod ante Christi passionem lignum crucis fuit lignum vilitatis, quia hujusmodi cruces de lignis vilibus parabantur; infructuositatis, quia, quantumcunque in monte Calvariae plantabatur, fructum minime faciebat; ignobilitatis quoque, quia erat supplicium latronum; tenebrositatis, quia tenebrosum et sine omni decore erat; mortis, quia ibi homines morti tradeabantur; foetoris, quia in medio cadaverum plantabatur. (605)

It should be noted that before Christ's passion the wood of the cross was a cheap wood, because crosses used for crucifixions were made of cheap wood. It was an unfruitful wood, because no matter how many such trees were planted on the mount of Calvary, the wood gave no fruit. It was an ignoble wood, because it was used for the execution of criminals; a wood of darkness, because it was dark and without any beauty; a wood of death, because on it men were put to death; a malodorous wood, because it was planted among cadavers. (554)

Since the cross originates from the Tree in Paradise, given to Seth by Michael the Archangel, and planted in Adam’s body, the tree itself and the wood that comes from it should be innately holy. As infructuosus or unfruitful, the cross is compared to other crosses prior to the crucifixion that
could not provide the “fruit” that is needed to redeem mankind from the sins of Adam. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the Rood in *The Dream of the Rood* cannot proclaim that it is the True Cross until Christ is physically on the cross or until it has borne the fruit of salvation. Though these descriptions seem to contradict the *Inventio* legend’s implication of the cross’s innate holiness, this base, common understanding of the cross allows it to be exalted after the Passion.

Immediately following the descriptions of the wood’s ordinariness, the adjectives describing the cross are reversed, indicating a material that is and should be exalted. These changes are marked using Biblical and patristic sources. Consider the initial description of the wood as unfruitful: “infructuositas in fertilitatem, Cant. VII.: adscendam in palmam et apprehendam fructum ejus” (605; “Its unfruitfulness gave way to fertility, as in the Song of Solomon (7:8): ‘I will go up into the palm tree, and will take hold of the fruit thereof.’” 554).

The changes in this portion of the *Exaltatio* legend demonstrate, more clearly than the *Inventio* legend, the changing religious landscape. As a move to illustrate the devotional significance of the cross as an object, image, and symbol, this description takes physical changes that would characterize Anglo-Saxon cross veneration and adds commentary on the symbolism of these changes that become progressively Eucharistic as the Middle Ages progresses theologically. Though unfruitful before the Passion, the wood of the cross becomes fruitful in bearing Christ who redeems all of mankind in his death at the crucifixion and through his body as the sacrament of the Eucharist.

The popularity of the *Legenda Aurea* increased lay exposure to legends of the cross. By offering its origins, history, and power, the legends function on the level of hagiography, demonstrating to the laity the powerful association between the cross and Christ and ultimately
the Eucharist. The portrait of the cross in *The Dream of the Rood* focuses on its physical transformations before presenting it as an internalized symbol of salvation; however, the physical changes in the *Legenda Aurea* are focused on its growth as a tree, its function as a relic, and the devotional significance of each of these manifestations. The cross’s connection to Christ in the *Legenda* shows the presence of Christ even in his absence: his redemption of mankind is present in the tree’s growth from Adam’s body and his miraculous power is present in the cross’s miracles and veneration centuries after his ascension. The veiled connections and symbolism of the cross move its devotion beyond physical transformations, paving the way for Eucharistic thought after the Fourth Lateran Council establishes the doctrine of transubstantiation. With the doctrine comes heightened veneration and anxiety about the Body of Christ, and the cross on stage in the York *Play of the Crucifixion* demonstrates the significance of this object in Eucharistic semiotics.
IV. TRANSUBSTANTIATION OF THE CROSS IN THE YORK PLAY OF THE CRUCIFIXION

The stretching, nailing, and raising of Christ on the cross presented in the York *Play of the Crucifixion* is a central image of devotion throughout the Middle Ages. The play consists of the dialogue of four soldiers, narrating their thoughts and actions while performing their work. Christ speaks only twice: once before he is stretched and nailed to the cross, and after the cross is lifted and secured upright. Though all extant English Biblical cycles contain a crucifixion play, the York version separates the stretching and nailing of Christ from the other events of the Passion. Though the play’s dialogue describes the soldiers’ actions preparing Christ and the cross, the most striking image is near the end of the play as the soldiers elevate the cross after nailing Christ to it.

As an index of increasing Eucharistic devotion, the cross in the York *Play of the Crucifixion* implicates both Christ and the Eucharist through its physical changes on stage and its symbolic connection to Christ’s sacrificial body and blood. This thesis’s discussion of the cross’s essential changeability culminates in this chapter’s analysis of the cross as prop, as a staged representation of the True Cross. The cross of *The Dream of the Rood* physically transformed while also pointing to its salvific function as a symbol to bear internally for Judgment Day. In the legends of the cross that follow the Anglo-Saxon poem, the cross’s physical growth is focused on its life as a tree and relic, demanding the audience’s attention to be focused on the absent-presence of Christ in the time before and after his physical life on Earth. As Eucharistic theology grows more popular, the transformation of the cross is focused less on physical changes and more on the growing significance to Christ’s sacramental body in the Eucharist. The play’s
action in preparing and raising the cross point to its changing significance toward becoming a symbol of the Eucharist, not just a symbol of the crucifixion.

Most critical attention to the play is focused on the Eucharistic imagery, since the play indeed demonstrates to the audience the Real Presence of the Body of Christ within the Eucharist. The most notable readings argue that the purpose of the play is to illustrate and educate the laity about the Eucharist. Pamela King argues that in addition to portraying a narrative of the Biblical event, the York dramatist is “offering a commentary upon the history and nature of one of the sacraments of the Church,” that is, dramatizing the original event that the Eucharist celebrates.\(^65\) Clifford Davidson suggests that the York plays function “not only as an aid to understanding and imaginatively seeing the Passion but also as an adjunct to the ritual of the Mass,” specifically the Eucharist and its associated rituals.\(^66\) Both King and Davidson voice the consensus of most critics that the play’s purpose is to educate the audience about the sacrament. Sarah Beckwith’s work builds on this while concentrating on the performance of the Eucharist in both the mass and the cycle plays that together educate the lay audience on the Church’s doctrines. She describes the York play as “sacramental theater,” noting that since the Eucharist is presented in such a performative manner during mass, “it is in the theater of dramatic action that [the sacraments] are best understood.”\(^67\) Though the play indeed contains Eucharistic imagery, the laity would have already understood the rituals that Davidson believes the play is meant to accompany, particularly the Elevation of the Eucharist. The lay people desired to see the Eucharist so intensely that Thomas Cranmer notes that the sacring bell rung at the Elevation “made the people to run from their seats to the altar, and from altar to altar, and

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\(^{66}\) Clifford Davidson, *Festivals and Plays in Late Medieval Britain* (Hampshire: Ashbury Publishing Limited, 2007), 65.

from sacring (as they called it) to sacring, peeping, tooting and gazing at that thing which the priest held up in his hands.” 68 By reading the York play through the established lay understanding of the Eucharist, we may better understand the impact of the staged actions on late medieval piety and cross veneration.

The play’s allusions to the Eucharist are easily identified, yet the main prop of the play is seldom acknowledged in the play’s criticism. How does the lay audience understand and view the cross in relation to liturgy, the sacraments, and institutional devotion? How is the cross placed in the context of its own materiality and origins? The cross can be understood using the Church’s Eucharistic terminology, since the cross is an essential part of the Eucharist’s devotional semiotics. This terminology defines the progression of the cross from raw material to sacred object. I contend that the cross’s physical presence on stage indicates its place in Eucharistic devotional semiotics.

Representations of the Eucharist generally present Christ and his wounds, such as the widely popular Mass of Saint Gregory depicted in engravings, paintings, and sculptures throughout Europe during the late Middle Ages. Due to the adoration of the Elevation of the Host, “the high point of lay experience of the Mass,” 69 artists chose to portray the Elevation in Eucharistic art. The York Play of the Crucifixion follows this iconographic direction with the Elevation of Christ. The Elevation of the Host signaled the completed transubstantiation, and the Elevation of Christ in the York play signals Christ’s sacrifice and the Cross’s transition to venerated object. The figure of the cross is the focus of this chapter because of its actions and the implications of those actions for the soldiers’ work, Christ’s crucifixion, and lay Eucharistic

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69 Ibid., 96.
devotion. In this chapter, I argue that reading the York cross through Eucharistic theology will show its devotional significance as an object, relic, and symbol of not only the crucifixion but of the Body of Christ in the Eucharist.

Images and objects were necessary for a non-literate laity to understand the context and rituals of the mass. While images may illustrate a progression of events, like the Passion story, objects are important for liturgical rituals, like processional crosses, the chalice, and the Host. Caroline Walker Bynum argues that the late medieval period was “moving toward inner piety and visuality” while “[turning] to, rather than away from, the object.”

The early medieval period is rife with relics of saints and other holy matter that contained healing or protecting powers. As discussed in Chapter One, Anglo-Saxon devotion was highly materialistic; although, the physical nature of these objects did imply the devotional importance of the Passion. Though devotional objects continue to be of high devotional importance in the later Middle Ages, they “were constructed…to call attention to their materiality by means both obvious and subtle.”

Their elaborate construction and presentation materialize and, at times, animate religious belief, inspiring contemplation of the object’s devotional significance. This turn to inward contemplation of piety asks us to investigate late medieval devotional objects and their materiality.

The cross as an object influences late medieval devotion through its connection to Christ’s body, according to Caroline Walker Bynum. Her view of the medieval cross recognizes both its association with Christ and its existence as a material object:

In a sense, the cross, as revered in the Middle Ages, is both image and object, both representation and relic, both animate and inanimate stuff (body and wood). … it is the

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71 Ibid., 24.
72 Ibid., 113.
material on which Christ hung, its wood impregnated with his blood. ... As the crucifix, a devotional object found on innumerable altars, it is a depiction, a representation of the moment that saved the human race. It thus conflates the categories of relic and image, which medieval theologians (like some modern historians) struggled to keep distinct, and blurs the line between object and reproduction/representation.73

Her recognition of the cross’s “woodness” as well as its “impregnation” with Christ’s blood forms the basis of this chapter’s understanding of the material of the cross in the York Play of the Crucifixion, for the cross cannot be fully separated from the image of the crucified Christ. The cross, as she notes, cannot be a relic or an image; it must be both the object and the representation. The Eucharist is understood as the embodiment of Christ as well as a physical object, and the cross should be understood in this same way. This connection is not implausible for the York play because the piety of northern England was steeped in material devotion.

During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, devotional interest in the Passion grows, specifically in northern England.74 At the center of medieval material culture was York, a mercantile center providing devotional objects for the pious lay person. Some of the most popular objects and images of objects include the side wound of Christ, the arma Christi, the vernicle, and the napkin of souls.75 The latter three are objects portrayed in images and text. The first object, the side wound of Christ, is actually a hole in his side, though the pious laity of northern England objectify the wound as an independent body part.76 These images of the objects associated with the Passion were consumed with affective devotion, as the “spectators were emotionally involved in what they beheld” in the manuscripts and stained glass of the churches of York and northern England.77 The increased affective Passion devotion of northern England is

73 Bynum, Christian Materiality, 117.
74 John B. Friedman, Northern English Books, Owners, and Makers in the Late Middle Ages (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 149.
75 Ibid., 148-202.
76 Ibid., 166-67.
77 Friedman, Northern English Books, 201.
appropriate for the development of the York cycle plays to commemorate the feast of Corpus Christi, the ultimate civic celebration Christ’s Passion.

The feast of Corpus Christi inspired the development of Biblical cycle plays, particularly the York cycle. Though practiced as early as the late 11th century, the feast was celebrated widely by the early fourteenth century, and the earliest known performance of the York plays is 1376. The feast celebrates the Eucharist through a liturgy “offering a corporeal understanding of a sacramental substance, not veiled but real, which the senses cannot perceive, but faith can recognize.” As more people became involved, the Corpus Christi celebrations develop into processions, tableaux vivants, and eventually cycle plays. As a part of the feast, the cycle plays are meant to celebrate the Eucharist and are “therefore centrally concerned with promoting sacramentalism.” This theme is most apparent in the Passion plays. In his study on late medieval drama, Clifford Davidson summarizes the intention of the York Passion plays:

> We may, therefore, see the York Passion pageants not only as an aid to understanding and imaginatively seeing the Passion but also as an adjunct to the ritual of the Mass, which through the miracle of Transubstantiation was believed to make the body of the crucified Jesus present in the Host.

Since many of the audience members of the cycle plays were most likely familiar with the rituals of mass, as Davidson comments above, these plays use the familiar gestures and objects of mass to illuminate the unfamiliar significance of the liturgical performances. The audience would be familiar with the physical ritual of the Elevation of the Host. This ritual is even more significant because the lay audience would have contact with the Eucharist only through seeing it: “for most

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79 Ibid., 181.
80 Ibid., 280. This year is included in the York Memorandum Book, though it may have been tableaux vivants and not the wagon-staged plays they become by 1399.
81 Ibid., 188.
82 Ibid., 272.
84 Davidson, *Festivals and Plays*, 65.
people, most of the time the Host was something to be seen, not to be consumed.” Simply gazing upon the elevated Host was thought to function similarly to consuming it, which resulted in an intense eagerness to view the Host each time it was elevated. This is the most important portion of the mass, and the York play imitates this in the extended lifting of the cross after stretching and nailing Christ to it.

Since the purpose of the play is to present the sacrament of the Eucharist to a lay audience, the visual focal point of the play should be the image of Christ on the cross; however, it is not until the middle of the play that a distinctly liturgical moment arises. The majority of the play consists of preparations of Christ and the cross while the soldiers complain about their work and deadlines. When Christ is finally nailed to the cross, the soldiers spend much time struggling to lift the cross. According to Jill Stevenson, the increasing anticipation, specifically of the drawn-out struggle to raise the crucified Christ, is meant to remind viewers of the Elevation of the Host:

This scene is particularly sophisticated in the way it orients the devotional gaze. The dramatic moment replicates the Elevation of the Host, a pivotal visual encounter in the lives of the late medieval laity, and the play’s creators exploit this dramatic moment’s devotional and dramatic potential by drawing out the experience for spectators.

In the play, this scene mimics the moment in the mass when the Host is raised for those in attendance to see and contemplate it. The audience, familiar with this liturgical ritual and the crucifixion story, would be anticipating this elevation. Once the soldiers have accomplished the lifting, the subject of the audience’s gaze is Christ crucified on the cross, a representation of the Eucharist. Though much imagery of the Eucharist focuses on the Body of Christ, we should recognize the cross’s importance to Eucharistic iconography.

85 Duffy, The Stripping of the Altars, 95.
86 Jill Stevenson, Performance, Cognitive Theory, and Devotional Culture: Sensual Piety in Late Medieval York (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 118.
Even though most of the “pastoral design” of the Eucharist and the doctrine of transubstantiation were established prior to the thirteenth century, a heated intellectual debate continued.\footnote{Rubin, 	extit{Corpus Christi}, 34.} While the details of this debate are outside the scope of this chapter, the most prominent players include John Wyclif, Duns Scotus, Saint Thomas Aquinas, and William of Ockham. This debate was solidified at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, which defined how the change occurs. Those involved in the continuing debate differ on the nature of Real Presence, whether the Body of Christ exists alongside the bread at consecration or whether the Body of Christ completely replaces the substance of bread. Though the debates are influential in Eucharistic theology, the laity would understand the basic transformation that takes place in the mass.

Prior to consecration, the \textit{substance} and \textit{accidents} of the Eucharist are indistinguishable from wine and bread, for they do not yet contain Christ’s body or blood. At consecration, the \textit{accidents}, what are perceived with the senses, do not change. The bread remains bread-like—white, round, soft or hard. What changes at consecration is the \textit{substance}, that which we cannot perceive with our senses. This moment is marked by the Elevation of the Host to signal the replacing of the substance of bread with the Body of Christ. Though drawing from the Last Supper, the sacrament’s origins are the crucifixion, as Nardo di Cione’s early 14\textsuperscript{th}-century painting \textit{Crucifixion} illustrates.\footnote{Nardo di Cione, \textit{Crucifixion}, ca. 1320, tempera on wood, 145x72, Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy. Images like this survive in England, though they are less well-preserved. An image like this exists on the chancel arch of the 13\textsuperscript{th} century church All Saints and Saint Andrew in Kingston, Cambridgeshire.} As Christ hangs bleeding on the Cross, two angels with bowls catch the blood from Christ’s hands and side. The image reminds the viewer that the blood of Christ is meant for a sacred purpose, as implied in the golden bowls held by the angels. Popular in late medieval crucifixion iconography, many images like this show angels catching Christ’s
blood in chalices as it falls from his five wounds, a clear reference to the sacrament. These images are generally present on church walls and in stained glass making them accessible to the laity.

Nardo di Cione. *Crucifixion*, ca. 1320, tempera on wood, 145x72. Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy.

While the laity may not have understood or even known the Church’s terminology for discussing the Eucharist, popular legends, plays, and artistic motifs demonstrate Real Presence
that occurs during transubstantiation. In an effort to explain Real Presence to the medieval laity, many legends and plays demonstrate an extreme, visual transformation of accidents. The most common example is the legend of Gregory the Great, and this legend is continuously used in the visual arts, furthering its impact on the laity. In the legend, Gregory presents the holy, consecrated Host, “the Body of Our Lord Jesus Christ,” to a doubting woman who laughs, recognizing the same bread she has recently baked. Gregory refuses her communion and places the Host on the altar, but the Host transforms into a finger. Upon seeing this visual proof of the Body in the bread, the woman believes, repents, and takes Communion. It is only after the bread asserts the truth of Real Presence by visibly changing from the accidents of bread to the accidents of flesh that the woman recognizes that the Eucharist contains the substance of Christ. The audience of the York play would have been familiar with this legend and would have been familiar with common Eucharistic imagery, and though there are no extreme transformations in the York play, the cross does indeed transform through the work of the soldiers and the association with Christ.

The cross is essential for Christ’s sacrifice, though it does not have the sacramental significance of the Body and Blood. Like Christ, the cross is predestined for the purpose of execution, just as the Host is predestined for consecration. At the time of crucifixion, Christ and the cross experience an internal, symbolic transformation without physically changing significantly. While the cross itself is not an intrinsically sacramental object, it is still the most closely related object to the Eucharist and one of the most important relics of the medieval period. Due to the changing symbolism of the cross throughout the crucifixion, the Church’s Eucharistic terminology is appropriate for describing these symbolic changes. The *accidents* of the cross are simply the wood that comprises the material of the cross, but the *substance* changes
at the crucifixion. Prior to the crucifixion, the cross contains the substance and accidents of any other beam of wood, though, according to the legends treated in the previous chapter, it is predestined for a particular use. At the crucifixion, the accidents of wood remain while the substance of the cross transforms from “wood-ness” to “Cross-ness.” The material of the cross is now inextricably linked to Christ’s suffering body and, to use Bynum’s words, “impregnated” with Christ’s blood. This transubstantiation, in which a holier substance replaces the substance of the wood, begins with the soldiers’ nailing and is complete after they fully elevate the cross.

The soldiers “consecrate” the cross using their knowledge of woodworking, as demonstrated by the actors’ trade associations, in the manner that priests, with the knowledge of sacramental formulae, consecrate the Eucharist in the mass. The association of the actors’ trade to the work they perform on stage shows the materiality of the cross through an ability and familiarity with woodworking. The _Play of the Crucifixion_ was produced and performed by “the Pynneres.” The Pinners, carpenters and makers of pegs and nails, made use of their craft in the nailing portion of the play. The audience would be familiar with the actors’ trade, allowing the transubstantiation of the wooden instrument into holy cross to be a logical action.

The soldiers’ treatment of the cross as one instrument among others signifies the cross’s origins as tree and wood. The cross is listed among the various other instruments of their work—“bothe hammeres and nayles large and lange.” The Cross, “on grounde…goodely graied, / And boorede even as it awith to be” has been adequately prepared for the upcoming crucifixion like any other cross. At this moment, the cross is the object of the soldiers’ work and is presented to

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90 Critics are divided on what this trade produced. Alan D. Justice notes they do not make nails, only pegs. Other critics say they make pins, nails, and other small metal pointy objects.


92 “Crucifixio Christi,” 333, line 30.

the audience as a prop. These instruments are presented to the audience “largely to enhance the realistic impact of the presentation, but also because some of these objects later become the ‘Instruments of the Passion’ displayed by the angels at the Last Judgment.” These “Instruments of the Passion” (arma Christi) are quite common in medieval iconography where each instrument, including the cross, is listed, depicted, and discussed. Depictions of the arma Christi generally include the basic instruments listed by the York soldiers in addition to various other instruments and figures such as the Crown of Thorns, Longinus’s spear, and the thirty pieces of silver. Artistic depictions of arma Christi were common and existed alongside new additions to the Church’s feast days, such as the Feast of the Crown of Thorns. This iconography is prevalent enough for the lay audience to be familiar with it, and, as Richard Beadle points out, these instruments are used in the play of the Last Judgment to remind the audience of Christ’s suffering. The cross is the most iconic of these instruments and the most irritating for the soldiers whose words and works allude to the cross’s origins as tree and wood in order to emphasize its “transubstantiation” into the holy cross of Christ.

In preparing Christ and the cross for crucifixion, the soldiers refer to the cross as a tree—“And made me þane vnto þis tree”; “And bende þi bakke vnto þis tree”—which are seemingly references to the original material form of the cross, especially considering that the soldiers also refer to the cross as crosse at other times in the play. Tree in Middle English carries various meanings from broad definitions like plant or wood to more focused definitions of specific trees, an object made of wood, or a cross or gallows. Using tree in reference to the cross may mean the more narrow definition of cross or gallows, yet it still invokes the material origins of the cross.

96 “Crucifixio Christi,” 333-34, ll. 42, 74.
while signifying its function in the crucifixion, an image the lay audience may remember from popular legends of the origins of the True Cross.

Most legends of the origins of the True Cross narrate the cross’s origin from the seeds of the Tree in the Garden of Eden then follow it as it physically transforms and moves throughout time and place. After sprouting from under Adam’s tongue after his death, the tree grows in the house of King Solomon, who buries it after Queen Sheba worships it and prophesizes its future use. The water that springs forth from the burial site is itself miraculous, “When Christ’s time to suffer was drawing near, the aforesaid wood floated up to the surface of the pond, and the Jews, seeing it, used it in making the Lord’s cross.”97 Though these legends vary slightly among the numerous extant legends, they all demonstrate the material origins and transformations of the cross, and by naming the cross as tree, the play alludes to these legends with which the audience would be familiar. This vocabulary is not the only instance of allusions to the legends, as will be seen as the crucifixion begins.

The soldiers unintentionally misuse the accidents of the cross in the stretching and nailing of Christ to the cross, the most affective scene of the play. The accidents of the cross are prepared by the soldiers before the play begins as they bore holes for the nails. This preparation alters the materials of the cross without affecting its substance or “woodness.” Prior to Christ’s entrance, the soldiers have noted that “pe crosse on grounde is goodely graied, / And boorede even as it awith to be.”98 With no narrator or commentary like those in other plays, the audience has no choice but to believe that the soldiers have properly prepared the cross for Christ’s arrival. In fact, the soldiers themselves initially have no reason to believe they have prepared their work incorrectly. After one hand is secured to the cross, the soldiers realize a mistake in the placement

of the bored holes. Previously, the soldiers were confident in the preparations, and they do not understand why the holes are not in the proper place. They finally agree that the marking for each hole “was ouere-skantely scored.”\textsuperscript{99} The soldiers believe they have prepared the accidents of the cross properly. Officially, they are not the appropriate handlers of this holy object, resulting in their inadequate preparations; however, their ignorance of proper handling of the Body of Christ absolves them of conscious complicity in the death of Christ.

The soldiers attempt to compensate for their inadequate handling of these accidents by forcibly fitting Christ to the cross. Even after acknowledging that the holes are in the wrong places, the soldiers choose to stretch Christ with rope (another of the \textit{arma Christi} items) to reach. Of the various instruments the soldiers use, the cross is the broken, malfunctioning instrument, not Christ’s body, though battered and beaten from his torture. Tony Corbett notes that “the theme of Christ fitting or not fitting modulates into the soldiers’ concern for the cross itself.”\textsuperscript{100} Their focus is entirely on the cross, for they are only concerned with their work being seen as unacceptable and finished after the official deadline. Though the stretching and tearing of Christ to fit the cross emphasizes the bodily suffering that is also a center of Passion devotion, the true object of the unacceptable work is the incorrectly prepared cross. The soldiers decide to break what is not broken to hide what actually is, further connecting Christ and the cross before the nailing is even finished. The accidents in the Body of Christ as well as in the wood of the cross are both abused by the soldiers working to meet a deadline.

The scene in which the soldiers argue about the bored holes is reminiscent of origin legends in which the tree or wood changes shapes to avoid pain, torture, and misappropriation. The cross—in the form of seeds, rods, living tree, wooden board, and prefabricated cross—

\textsuperscript{99}“Crucifixio Christi,” 335, line 111.
\textsuperscript{100}Tony Corbett, \textit{The Laity, the Church, and the Mystery Plays: A Drama of Belonging}, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009), 230.
travels among different holy and pagan hands. As it moves, it performs miracles to reveal its holy substance and changes form to avoid being destroyed or misused. In a twelfth-century version of the cross legend, the wood itself changes length to avoid being used in construction of a temple with other non-holy beams. Solomon gives permission to his workers to cut down the holy tree for use in constructing a temple, but the beam of the tree is either too long or too short for proper use. Upon placing the beam in the temple and repenting, the workers miraculously find many beams of proper length for the project. The wood of the York cross behaves like the cross of the legend, “[balking] at its instrumentalization so emphatically.” The bored holes may have been correctly placed, for the soldiers are sure of their work at first. If the play is meant to mimic the themes of the legends of the cross, the cross may be attempting to avoid further torture; although, the cross has been destined for this purpose and may not be acting in this manner. Like Christ, the cross may be willingly offering itself in sacrifice. In attempting to avoid torture, the cross demonstrates its refusal to submit to the soldiers unconsciously treating the materials incorrectly. In offering itself for sacrifice, the cross functions much like the Rood of *The Dream of the Rood* as it shows its involuntary cooperation with this predetermined event. Ultimately, the problem with the bored holes shows the life within the cross as it attempts to handle the situation of Christ’s and its own crucifixion.

The materiality of the cross has been expressed throughout the play, but the most Eucharistic and liturgical moment is also the best moment for understanding the cross’s “transubstantiation.” The struggle to lift Christ and the cross is a pivotal point for the lay audience, and the anticipation for the audience has been mounting for over half the play. Jill Stevenson notes “the play’s creators exploit this dramatic moment’s devotional and dramatic

potential by drawing out the experience for spectators.” For the majority of the play, the only characters visible are the four soldiers, as the cross is lying on the ground or wagon and Christ is lying on top of the cross. When lifted, the audience is finally able to see the cross, and their focus moves from the work of crucifying to the image of the crucified. Since the play’s purpose is to educate the laity about the Eucharist, the final lifting/elevation scene reminds the audience of the Elevation of the Host, which is the Body of Christ they see on the elevated cross. This moment in the mass that marks the transubstantiation of the bread to the Body of Christ also marks the transubstantiation of wooden cross to holy cross and relic.

The nailing and lifting of Christ and cross marks the moment in which the cross is inextricably linked to the Body of Christ, which it will continue to represent as a relic. The moment of elevation is a struggle for the four soldiers; they moan and complain in their attempts to lift and steady the cross and Christ. This struggle is not only a difficulty of raising Christ but a continued struggle with the material cross, for the weight has increased with the addition of Christ and the weight of humanity’s sins. Their complaints alternate between lifting Christ, “to heve hym vppe on hight,” and lifting the cross, “we foure rayse it,” because the two are intertwined, having become joined spiritually in the cross’s “transubstantiation.” Their pronoun choices reflect the inseparability of the cross and Christ while also emphasizing the importance of each individually.

After Christ has been nailed to the cross, the soldiers shift between first- and third-person pronouns in reference to Christ and the cross. In preparing to lift, one soldier says “we foure rayse it noȝt right, to-yere,” using the neuter third-person for the cross, the object of their

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103 Stevenson, Performance, 118.
104 “Crucifixio Christi,” 337, line 168, emphasis added.
105 “Crucifixio Christi,” 336, line 164, emphasis added.
106 “Crucifixio Christi,” 336, line 164, emphasis added.
upcoming lifting. Then the soldiers switch to the masculine third-person, referencing Christ as they continue to prepare the lifting: “bere hym to ȝone hille,” “on lenghe he schalle no lenger lie,” “lote bere hym to ȝone hill.” This shift shows a change in focus from the cross to Christ, indicating their work of crucifying a man, not readying an instrument of their work. Should the soldiers replace these pronouns with it, then the presence of Christ would not be necessary. Further instances of referring to the cross itself indicate its physical function independent of Christ’s body. Upon lifting, they continue altering references to Christ and the cross. When the third soldier is having trouble lifting the heavy load, he exclaims, “this crosse and I in twoo muste twynne,” attributing his struggle to the weight of the cross itself. While the soldiers wedge the cross into place, they use the pronoun it because their work is focused on securing the cross itself “so þat it schall no forther flitte.” These shifts in pronouns show the awareness of the distinction between Christ and the cross. References to Christ concern his body and its visibility by those in attendance. References to the cross concern its materiality, its practical utility, its physical security so that Christ may be viewed.

Lay knowledge of the rituals of the Eucharist and the origin legends of the cross demonstrate the importance of the cross an index of the gradual devotional change toward Eucharistic piety. Many scholars have briefly noted the Eucharistic symbolism of the cross, though it is so prevalent that it has received far too little attention. The York Play of the Crucifixion presents the cross as a symbol for the Eucharist by invoking popular Eucharistic imagery and ritual. The laity would be familiar specifically with the Elevation of the Host, reenacted as the elevation of the cross in the York play. This physical display of the cross’s devotional significance is also an indicator of the place of the cross in devotional semiotics as it

107 Ibid., 337, ll. 172, 176, 178, emphases added.
108 Ibid., line 193, emphasis added.
109 Ibid., 339, line 234, emphasis added.
references the Eucharist through its physical connection, or as Bynum says, its impregnation with Christ’s blood.
V. CONCLUSION

This thesis has examined the essential changeability of the cross—both its physical and symbolic transformations—as an index of the changing devotional landscape of the Middle Ages. Limiting this investigation to three texts spanning centuries, I have concluded that the early medieval emphasis on the physical object gradually changes to allow for a more symbolic and Eucharistic understanding of the cross, whether as a material object or an imagined symbol. Though these three texts demonstrate a very small sampling of the cross’s representation in medieval literature, they show that the gradual change in devotional semiotics implicates Christ and the Eucharist through increasingly physical means and increasingly symbolic means. Since contemporary scholarship has not yet chronicled the cross’s gradual devotional transformation in the Middle Ages, this study remedies this lack by establishing an understanding of how the cross developed over time to eventually connote the Eucharistic mysteries in the late Middle Ages. Though this thesis draws from a small sampling of medieval works, future investigations of the cross’s physical and symbolic movements in devotion must include other related works to provide a firmer foundation for the cross’s influence on devotional semiotics.

The three texts used in this thesis—The Dream of the Rood, Jacobus de Voragine’s *Legenda Aurea*, and the York *Play of the Crucifixion*—were selected for their clear depictions of the physical and symbolic features of the cross. In order to provide a stronger argument for the importance of materials in Anglo-Saxon devotion, the Exeter Book riddles offer strictly physical descriptions of objects that venture lightly into symbolic territory. Though the solution is still disputed, the speaker of Riddle 55 speaks of its life in the forest and its creation by the Lord.
Similarly, Riddle 14 describes what seems to be a tree that is eventually passed around and revered by men. Old and Middle English legends of the cross, including *Cursor Mundi* and those found in Richard Morris’s collection *Legends of the Holy Rood*, may provide a span of analogues for the *Legenda Aurea*, showing Christ’s presence in the cross before and after the crucifixion, lending to Eucharistic interpretation. Yet it is the Eucharistic symbolism of objects on stage, particularly the miraculous Host of the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, that provided the seed of this thesis’s investigation. Numerous other dramatic works portray the cross as an index of Eucharistic devotion, such as the Passion and crucifixion plays of not only the York but the Chester, Towneley, and N-town cycles. Plays outside the Passion and crucifixion, like York’s *Last Supper*, demonstrate the symbolic origins of the rituals of the Eucharist later made physical and sacramental in the crucifixion. Expanding on this thesis’s choice of poetry, legends, and drama, an investigation of the cross’s transformations must include other genres.

Medieval romance, allegorical narratives, and travel literature allow for different readings of the cross’s role in devotional symbolism. Sir Percival’s escape from various fiends in Book Fourteen of Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur* might not offer a particularly devotional interpretation of the cross as sign, but the cross’s salvific importance has been prevalent even in Old English poetry, making Malory’s use of the salvific cross a commonly understood image. Additionally, the image of parishioners crawling to the cross in Passus XVIII of *Piers Plowman* offers a physical image of the cross as a part of Eucharistic symbolism. These referred actions clearly demonstrate both the physical and symbolic importance of the cross while Eucharistic veneration develops.

As the devotional landscape continues to evolve into the Protestant Reformation and the Renaissance, studies of the cross and other devotional objects must evolve with it. While anxiety
is heightened concerning the inclusion of objects in devotion, one must consider the Biblical origins of the ritual of the Eucharist: the Last Supper. Investigation into Lollard anxiety and rejection of the use of images in devotion, particularly their treatment of the cross, will continue the present Eucharistic imagery of the cross, combining their rejection of the doctrine of transubstantiation (they believe it entails “recrucifying” Christ) with their rejection of devotional objects and images. Future research of the cross’s influence on devotional semiotics must consider numerous works from various periods, genres, and languages in order to completely and adequately map the progressive change of the cross from the physical indicator of Christ’s crucifixion to the devotional symbol of changing belief.
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VITA

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