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It is a holy relic and one of the greatest works of medieval art. But the man who found the long-lost Bury Cross believes it is an icon of anti-semitism that ignited a 12th-century slaughter. Julian Borger reports
Special report: race issues in the UK

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In the rarefied galleries of the New York art world there is talk of a brutal series of murders. The killers are long dead and buried in England, but they may have left behind a vital clue which mysteriously surfaced only 40 years ago. Since then, it has stood undeciphered in a dark corner of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The crucial evidence in this bizarre Manhattan murder mystery is a 12th-century cross exquisitely carved from walrus tusk. Known in Britain as the Bury Cross, after Bury St Edmunds, the Suffolk town where it is thought to have been made, it is one of the greatest works of medieval art in the world, with a place of honour at the venerable museum which bought it in 1963.

For the young curator who acquired it, Thomas Hoving, the cross brought acclaim and respect. Hoving went on to become the Met's director, a princely position in the US art world, but throughout his career the cross chewed away at his conscience. In his zeal to acquire it, he had told his superiors at the museum far less than he really knew about its origins, and what he now believes was its murderously anti-semitic purpose.

"I just kept quiet. I really didn't tell anyone what I knew. This is New York and we had a lot of Jewish sponsors," Hoving says. "I had to suppress its ugly message."

Since then, in his own way, the former museum director has been doing penance. He brought out a book about the cross in 1981, called King of the Confessors, but few outside a small circle of experts ever read it. Since then, Hoving has spent a lot of time researching his obsession in Britain, and this week Cybereditions.com is due to publish an updated and more controversial version online.

In the book, Hoving portrays the cross as nothing less than a medieval version of a swastika, used to incite the massacre of Bury St Edmunds' Jews in 1190 with a dark litany of anti-semitic inscriptions carved minutely along its 20in length. He claims it marked and helped speed the birth of English anti-semitism.

"This is the thing that it ignited it," Hoving says. "It is one of the great works of art of the medieval era, but how such a beautiful work of art could carry such an embittered message, I still can't understand. It's as if Hitler and Michelangelo got together to make this thing… Goebbels would have loved it."

According to Hoving, the story of the cross began on Good Friday 1144, when the decomposed corpse of a 12-year-old skinner's apprentice called William was found in the woods near Norwich. The story quickly spread that he had been ritually slaughtered, crucified in fact, by the local Jews for their Passover celebrations. He was declared a martyr and became a focal point for a rising tide of anti-Jewish sentiment. His body, entombed in Norwich cathedral, became the site of alleged miracles. The hopeful sick flocked to the shrine, including many from nearby Bury, the resting place of another Christian martyr, King Edmund.

Four years after William's murder, the Abbot of the Bury monastery ordered the town's (and England's) most accomplished artist, Master Hugo, to carve a unique cross out of "morse ivory", walrus tusk. The commissioning of a cross "incomparably carved by the hands of Master Hugo" is recorded in the contemporary Chronicle of Bury, written by Jocelin of Brakelond.

The cross held the dying body of Christ which has since been lost – although a possible candidate is on display in a museum in Oslo alongside tiny carvings of biblical scenes and busts of the prophets. But what makes the cross truly remarkable is its nearly 100 inscriptions, in Latin, Greek and mock Hebrew, etched on miniature scrolls which function like cartoon bubbles for the characters. It is, almost literally, a speaking cross.

One of the largest inscriptions declares: "The Jews laugh at the pain of dying God." Another is a description of the Ascension: "The earth trembles, Death is conquered and bewails. From the opening grave, life surges forth and Synagogue collapses after vain and stupid effort."

The Latin word used for "stupid" is "stulto", a particularly harsh and non-clerical use of language, "like a gob of spit", says Hoving.

The "titulus" on a crucifix, the inscription above Christ's head, traditionally describes him as "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews". On the Bury Cross, it reads King of the Confessors. "It's as if the maker of the cross could not bear to admit Jesus was a Jew," Hoving argues. "The message of the cross is to say to the Jews: convert or die."

In Hoving's account, the cross stood on the altar of Bury's abbey, where it would have been seen by the town's Jews who, Jocelin reported, walked through the chapel constantly as they went about their business.

Since the first significant immigration of Jews after the Norman Conquest, they had been assigned the role of usurers and were thus tolerated for several generations. Henry I granted them protection as his financial backers. But at the time of William's murder, they were becoming increasingly unpopular. The nobility and the monasteries owed them money and the monastery at Bury St Edmunds was no exception. By 1190, the abbot, Samson, was deeply in debt when he launched a pogrom against the town's Jews on Palm Sunday.

"It's simple. If you owe these people money, wipe them out," Hoving says. He insists he has "no doubt" that Samson pointed to the cross as he stoked the flames of hatred with his blistering ser mon. An estimated 57 Jews died in the sectarian violence that ensued, one of a string of bloody anti-Jewish riots around medieval England leading up to the expulsion of the Jews in 1290.

In view of its dark provenance, Hoving believes that the cross should be handed over to the British Museum, to be displayed and explained in its context as "an indelible stain on the Christian faith".

The Met is unconvinced, to say the least. The cross remains on show at The Cloisters, a mock monastery housing much of the museum's medieval collection at the northern tip of Manhattan. The ancient walrus ivory is golden and luminous under the lights, and its exquisite detail is as breathtaking as it must have been on the day it was completed.

“A masterpiece of Romanesque art,” the official plaque boasts “this altar cross with some 92 figures and 98 inscriptions is the vehicle for a unique iconographic programme.”

The blurb does not go into much detail about what that programme entails. The conventional history of the masterpiece, The Cloisters Cross, on sale in the gift shop, analyses the inscriptions but concludes: “It is doubtful… that the Cloisters Cross, a sophisticated liturgical object was specifically designed for the additional purpose of either castigating or converting any member of the small Jewish population in England in the mid-12th century.”

Asked about Hoving and his theories, the cross’s current guardians speak with a mix of fondness and frustration, as if the ex-director was a beloved and brilliant old uncle steadily losing his marbles.

“It really is a flight of fancy for Hoving to assume that it was used to give a sermon at a given date and a given place,” says Peter Barnet, the curator in charge of the Met’s medieval collection. Some scholars, he says, question whether it was even made in England, let alone Bury.

Hoving, however, insists he is free of doubt. So do Abbot Samson’s descendants in the town of Bury St Edmunds, where the cathedral is currently trying to collect enough money to have a wooden replica carved. Brigadier Denis Blomfield-Smith, who is in charge of the fundraising effort, believes that the stylistic similarities with Master Hugo’s known work, together with the evidence of Jocelin’s chronicle, puts the matter beyond question.

Blomfield-Smith agrees with Hoving that the cross was put on display on the abbey’s altar where it would have been seen by Jews, to whom the abbot happened to owe a great deal of money. “It was a brilliant attempt to ‘correct’ them,” he says.

Hoving has written to Blomfield-Smith, warning him of his suspicions about the cross, but the brigadier is unfazed, arguing that it is a pointless exercise to judge a medieval work of art through the critical lens of modern political sensitivity. “You’ve got to remember that we’re talking about the 12th century. The crusades themselves would hardly be welcomed by the United Nations,” he points out.

He is more interested in tracing the cross’s convoluted and still mysterious route from Bury to New York, and explaining its disappearance between the middle ages and 1963, when Hoving bought it from a flamboyant and unorthodox Yugoslav art collector, Ante Topic-Mimara.

Throughout his life, Topic refused to tell Hoving where he had found it, and broke a promise to leave a note for him at his death, finally revealing the story of how he came by his treasure.

Blomfield-Smith believes Richard the Lionheart took it with him on his crusade or – more likely – that it was part of the huge ransom England paid to rescue Richard from Germany where he had been taken hostage on his way back from the Holy Land. The churches of East Anglia were ransacked to pay the king's captors, but by being shipped out of the country, those treasures – the cross included – paradoxically stood a better chance of surviving the mass vandalism of Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries.

But where did the cross sit out the centuries in exile? Hoving has one possible answer. After King of the Confessors was first published, he was contacted by a Hungarian-American who said he recalled being taken by his grandfather to a Cistercian monastery near Zirc, in the Bakony mountains. There, the Hungarian said, the priests kept a beautiful and complex cross of blackened ivory.

Topic had said the cross was black when he came across it, and he spent ages cleaning it. Furthermore, the Hungarian described how the cross was made of a series of interlocking pieces, a fact which had not been widely published.

The cross was kept in a chamois bag along with a document which, according to the monks, indicated that it had been bound for Jerusalem when its English bearer died. Most intriguing of all was the monks' name for the cross. They kept it hidden away and referred to it by a word from one of its more visible inscriptions – "maledictus". To them, it was the "cursed cross"