

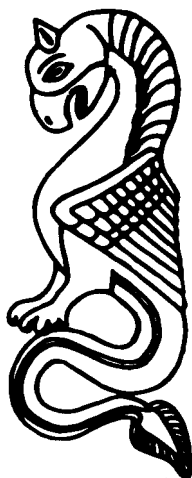
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## St Joseph's Trade and Old English *smiþ*

James Bradley

Old English *smiþ* has for long been the subject of a deep-frozen and all too muffled lexicographical quarrel. According to Bosworth and Toller's Anglo-Saxon Dictionary, *smiþ* denotes 'a worker in metal or wood'.<sup>1</sup> The 'or in wood', however, is called into question by Wilhelm Klump's detailed study, published in 1908, of Old English terms for artisans; Klump concludes that the meaning of *smiþ* is simply that of German *Schmied*, i.e., 'a worker in iron or other metals', and doubts the wisdom of ascribing non-metallurgical meanings to *smiþ*.<sup>2</sup> Yet despite Klump's solid philology, the view that *smiþ* could mean 'worker in wood', which had been taken up by Bosworth in 1838<sup>3</sup> and upheld by Bosworth-Toller in 1898, is not corrected in the Bosworth-Toller supplements of 1921 and 1972. It may therefore be assumed to have acquired a congealed respectability. Its wholesomeness is another matter, however, for it apparently, and somewhat disconcertingly, descends from (and has doubtless served to entrench) endemic insensibility with regard to important Anglo-Saxon and medieval opinions about the trade of St Joseph – as an examination of Bosworth-Toller's citations for *smiþ*, coupled with a brief and somewhat exploratory account of the development of medieval opinions regarding St Joseph's trade, will, I hope, show.

It is on Bosworth-Toller's citations for *smiþ* that we will initially focus, briefly noting beforehand the exclusively metallurgical nature of the non-figurative compounds formed from *smiþ*. If *smiþ* had once been applied to handicrafts other than metal-working, we should expect perhaps to find some indication of this in the numerous terms for manual occupations formed from *smiþ*, such as *goldsmiþ*, *arsmiþ*, *selforsmiþ*, etc. As Klump points out, however, these literal *smiþ* compounds (as distinct from isolated instances of figurative *smiþ* compounds) are all terms for metal-workers. Klump also notes that Old English *smiþ* is clearly not analogous in this respect to its cognate form Old Norse *smiþr*, to which it is

sometimes compared. Old Norse *smiþr*, for example, could refer to a worker in metal, wood and other materials and accordingly gave rise to such compounds as *skusmiþr* 'shoemaker', *skipasmiþr* 'shipwright', *iarnsmiþr* 'blacksmith' and *husasmiþr* 'house-builder'. The equivalent term for *smiþr* in Old English was not *smiþ*, but *wyrhta*, 'wright, workman, artificer', from which numerous occupational terms were formed. The hypothesis that 'smith' once had a much broader semantic range, like that of *smiþr*, pertains essentially to the prehistory of the language and is inherently speculative.<sup>4</sup>

The tenet that *smiþ* might mean 'a worker in wood' is not supported by the evidence supplied by Bosworth-Toller from purely Old English texts (as opposed to Latin-Old English glosses and translations). The eight purely Old English examples given by Bosworth-Toller (six from verse and two from law codes) seem to indicate quite clearly that a *smiþ* was inherently a worker in metal. These are the examples referred to by Bosworth-Toller:

1. *Gifts of Men*, lines 61-66:

Sum mæg wæpenþræce,    wige to nytte,  
modcræftig smið    monige gefremman,  
þonne he gewyrceð    to wera hilde  
helm oþþe hupseax    oððe heaþubyrnan,  
scime mece    oððe scyldes rond,  
fæste gefeged    wið flyge gares.<sup>5</sup>

[One, a wise smith, can perfect weapons for use in battle as he produces for heroes' combat helmet or dagger or war-corslet, shining blade or shield's boss, fixed firm against the flight of a spear.]

2. *Beowulf*, lines 405-06:

Beowulf maðelode    – on him byrne scan,  
searonet seowed    smiþes orþancum.<sup>6</sup>

[Beowulf spoke – on him shone a coat of mail,  
an armour-net knit with the arts of a smith.]

3. *Beowulf*, lines 1448, 1450-54:

ac se hwita helm hafelan werede,  
.....  
..... since geweorðad,

befongen freawrasnum, swa hine fyrndagum  
worhte wæpna smið, wundrum teode,  
besette swinlicum, þæt hine syðþan no  
brond ne beadomecas bitan ne meahton.

[and the fair helmet covered (Beowulf's) head,  
... with riches adorned, reinforced with strong  
bands, just as a smith of weapons had wrought  
in days long ago, wondrously created it, overlaid  
it with boar-images, so that thereafter neither  
brand nor battle-sword could wound it.]

4. *Riddle 26*, lines 13-14:

forþon me gliwedon  
wrætlic weorc smiþa, wire bifongen.<sup>7</sup>

[thereupon the smiths' ornamental creations  
adorned me (a Bible codex), covered with  
filigree.]

5. *Riddle 5*, lines 7-8:

ac mec hnossiað homera lafe,  
heardecg heoroscearp, hondweorc smiþa.

[but the hammers' legacy, the hard razor-sharp  
blade, smiths' handiwork, strikes me (a piece of  
armour).]

6. *Riddle 20*, lines 6-8:

þonne ic since wege  
þurh hlutterne dæg, hondweorc smiþa,  
gold ofer geardas.

[Then I (a sword) bear treasure throughout the  
clear day, the handiwork of smiths, gold  
amongst the dwellings.]

7. *The Laws of Alfred*, number 19, article 3:

Gif sweordhwita oðres monnes wæpn to feormunge onfo, oððe smið monnes andweorc, hie hit gesund begen agifan, swa hit hwæðer hiora ær onfenge . . . .<sup>8</sup>

[If a sword-furbisher receive another man's weapon for furbishing, or a smith a man's gear, they both should return it (in as) sound (a condition) as each of them received it in the first place.]

8. *The Laws of Ine of Wessex*, number 63:

Gif gesiðcund mon fare, þonne mot he habban his gerefan mid him 7 his smið 7 his cildfestrān.<sup>9</sup>

[If a person of rank travel, then may he have with him his reeve, his smith, and his children's nurse.]

Taken altogether, these examples tell us that a *smiþ* was a worker in metal. In 1 the *smiþ* is spoken of as one who typically makes metallic weapons, such as hip-sword and helmet, and in 2 and 3 the products of his craft are similarly the coat of mail and costly metal helmet. Example 5 likewise equates the *hondweorc smiþa* with weaponry, in this case the hammered sword, while 4 and 6 equate it with the gold ornament on the cover of a Bible codex and the gold decoration on a sword. One inference which may be drawn from these examples is that *smiþ* was applicable only to workers in metal. Examples 7 and 8 refer to the *smiþ* in a social rather than a technological context: nevertheless they possibly indicate a worker in metal and not a worker in wood. It is thought that example 7, for example, pertains to the smith's legal responsibility for weapons entrusted to his care for refurbishing.<sup>10</sup> Example 8 is perhaps an indication of the important contribution of the smith to aristocratic life. It is not difficult to imagine why a noble should consider it appropriate to travel with his metal smith, who could repair and make ready his weapons for hunting and fighting. On the other hand, there is no indication that in this, or any of the other examples referred to, any craftsman other than a worker in metal is indicated. As a result, these examples, taken as a whole, tend to cast doubt on the validity of Bosworth-Toller's contention that *smiþ* meant a 'worker in wood'.

The doubtful nature of the 'worker in wood' theory becomes even more apparent when we turn to examine the ten remaining examples for *smiþ* provided by Bosworth-Toller. These are all drawn from Old English glosses or translations of Latin texts. In each case *smiþ* has been equated with one of three Latin words with strong metallurgical associations: *cudo*, the Latin substantive for 'metal-worker' derived from *cuðere*, 'to beat, to prepare by beating, to forge'; *ferrarius*, which meant 'blacksmith'; and *faber*, which according to the *Etymologies* of Isidore had the primary meaning of 'blacksmith'.<sup>11</sup> These are the examples given in Bosworth-Toller:

9. *Ælfric's Grammar*:

*cudo* ic smiðige . . . eft, gyf ðu cweðst *hic cudo*,  
*huius cudonis*, ðonne byþ hit nama smið.<sup>12</sup>  
[*Cudo* I smith; moreover, if you say *hic cudo*,  
*huius cudonis*, then it is a noun, smith.]

10. *Ælfric's Colloquy*:

Se smið *Ferrarius* . . . se treowwyrhta  
*Lignarius*<sup>13</sup>  
[The smith *Ferrarius* . . . the carpenter *Lignarius*]

11. Twelfth century gloss:

*Faber, uel cudo*, smiþ<sup>14</sup>  
[*Faber, uel cudo*, smith]

12. Latin - Old English gloss:

*Faber*, smiþ<sup>15</sup>  
[*Faber*, smith]

13. Latin - Old English gloss:

*U[U]lcanus*, fyr oþþe fyresgod, hellesmiþ<sup>16</sup>  
[*Vulcan*, fire or god of fire, hell-smith]

14. *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*:

wið ðon þes smið þæs þystran modes 7 dæde, þa  
he his deaþe nealæcte, geseah helle tintrego

opene, geseah he deofles niþrunge 7 his  
æfterfylgendra.<sup>17</sup>

[then this smith of dark mind and deed, as he  
approached his death, saw the torments of hell  
clearly, saw the condemnation of the devil and  
his followers.]

15. *Ælfric's Colloquy*:

Ic hæbbe smiþas, isene smiþas, goldsmiþ,  
seoloforsmiþ, arsmiþ, treowwyrhtan 7 manegra  
oþre mistlicra cræfta biggenceras. *Habeo fabros,  
ferrarios, aurificem, argentarium, eranium,  
lignarium et multos alios uariarum artium  
operatores.*<sup>18</sup>

[I have smiths, iron smiths, a goldsmith, a  
silversmith, a coppersmith, carpenters, and  
workers in several other different crafts.]

16. Old English Gospels:

Hu nys [þys] se smiþ marian sunu.<sup>19</sup>

[Is not this the smith the son of Mary?]

17. Old English Gospels:

smið 1 wyrihte faber<sup>20</sup>

[smith or craftsman *faber*]

18. Old English Gospels:

þes ys smiðes sunu . . . .<sup>21</sup>

[this is the son of a smith . . . .]

It may be seen from these examples that Bosworth did not build his 'worker in wood' theory on very solid foundations. Nowhere, in fact, is *smiþ* equated with the Latin term for 'worker in wood', *lignarius* (the Old English equivalent of which is *treowwyrhta* in 10 and 15). Rather, it would appear that the 'worker in wood' interpretation stems from the instances of *smiþ* in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew (16, 17, and 18). Klump's 1908 study concludes that these are the crux of the

matter:

Höchstens die Bibelstellen, wo Christus entweder selbst als *smiþ* oder als *smiþes sunu* bezeichnet wird, dürften einen noch etwas weiteren Begriff zulassen, aber sonst heisst ae. *smiþ* durchweg 'der Schmied'.<sup>22</sup>

[At the most, Biblical passages where Christ himself is designated either as a *smiþ* or as a *smiþes sunu* might allow a somewhat wider meaning, but otherwise OE *smiþ* without exception means 'der Schmied' (i.e. smith or metalworker).]

The 'worker in wood' interpretation, it would seem, is an attempt to account for the use of *smiþ* in connection with the manual trade of Jesus and St Joseph, a trade which post-Reformation translations of the Gospels identify with carpentry. So unshakable, it seems, was Bosworth's belief in both the authority of the King James Version and the unanimity of Christian tradition in this matter that he felt that he could safely deduce from the context of St Joseph's trade that *smiþ* must have meant 'worker in wood'. This result, however, is questionable for two reasons.

In the first place, it differs markedly from the meaning of *smiþ* found in Bosworth's other citations. Even a search of the *Microfiche Concordance of Old English*, which contains some sixty citations for *smiþ*, or roughly three times the number given by Bosworth-Toller, reveals not a single citation which confirms the 'worker in wood' interpretation. The *Microfiche Concordance's* additional evidence comprises several citations in which the context offers no obvious clue to the meaning of *smiþ*, as well as citations in which the context offers no indication of meaning other than that *smiþ* is associated with *faber* and *cudo*, including additional citations in which *smiþ* is used in the context of St Joseph's trade; but the *Microfiche Concordance* also provides several new citations from both prose and verse in which *smiþ* is strongly associated with metal-working.<sup>23</sup> In sum, the available evidence supports Klump's view that *smiþ* was the accepted word for 'metal-worker' and not 'worker in wood'. How, one wonders, could Anglo-Saxons have known that *smiþ* in the context of St Joseph's trade meant 'worker in wood' when in other contexts it regularly meant 'worker in metals'?

The 'worker in wood' interpretation is questionable for a second and more basic reason, however: the premiss that Christians have always and everywhere identified St Joseph's trade with work in wood is incorrect. As we delve deeper, we



find that there is a lack of consensus among medieval authorities about the sort of trade Joseph practised. A long line of prominent authorities portray St Joseph as a worker not in wood, but in metals.

On the literal plane, it may be recalled, Christians have always associated Christ with the manual arts, for the historical Jesus is believed to have spent his childhood in the home of St Joseph, an artisan, in Nazareth. Our knowledge of St Joseph's trade is, however, less certain than most people realize. Indeed, information about Jesus's early life is so meagre that there is no absolute certainty about the precise nature of Joseph's trade, or Jesus's involvement with it. The view of this matter commonly held today, that Jesus and Joseph were carpenters, rests upon an inference formed from a scrutiny of the earliest relevant sources, extra-biblical as well as biblical, which are Greek. In the Latin West during the early Middle Ages, these Greek sources were either unknown or carried very little weight, for there emerged an authoritative, if heterodox, tradition that Jesus and Joseph had been, not carpenters, but blacksmiths. So influential did this tradition become that it is worthwhile investigating it in more detail. It will be useful here to proceed to Latin and Old and Middle English materials after we have first touched upon the early Greek sources pertaining to this topic, beginning with the New Testament.

The belief that Jesus and St Joseph were artisans is rooted in Scripture. The seminal passages, however, are vague and, as we shall see, leave room for interpolation. The matter is dealt with briefly and in only one incident of the synoptic Gospels, namely that known as 'The Rejection at Nazareth'. Furthermore, the trade which Jesus and St Joseph are said to be associated with is conveyed by just one word: τέκτων. As well as denoting specifically a carpenter, τέκτων may be used to denote workers in other trades, such as a mason or a smith, and, less explicitly, an artisan in general.<sup>24</sup> (In citing, below, the relevant passages of Scripture from the Revised Standard Version I have, for the purpose of illustration, substituted 'artisan' for 'carpenter' as a translation of τέκτων in the Greek original.)

Of the three Scriptural versions of 'The Rejection at Nazareth', one, that in Luke 4. 14-30 makes no reference to Christ's industrial background. The other two, however, give τέκτων as one of the tags applied to Jesus by those opposed to his teachings. In St Mark's version, 6. 2-3, we are thus told that:

on the sabbath he [Jesus] began to teach in the synagogue; and many who heard him were astonished, saying 'Where did this man get all this? What is the wisdom given to him? What

mighty works are wrought by his hands! Is not this the artisan  
(τέκτων), the son of Mary . . . ?'

These remarks seem to be ironical. In Matthew's version the detractors of Jesus refer to him as 'the son of an artisan' (τέκτονοζ υιοζ, 13. 55). And these two epithets are all that Scripture has to say on the subject of Christ's industrial background. We are thus told only that Jesus and Joseph were known in Nazareth as mere artisans; we are not told anything more about their trade and our knowledge of it turns on our interpretation of a single word, τέκτων. But τέκτων is problematic; for as an authority on this matter, E. F. Sutcliffe, has written:

τέκτων may . . . mean either an artisan or craftsman in general, or a carpenter in particular, and the sense is indicated by the context. But the special difficulty of Matt. xiii. 55 and Mk. vi. 3 arises from this that *there is no context*.<sup>25</sup>

In practice, therefore, our understanding of the precise nature of Christ's manual skill and whether he and St Joseph were carpenters and not some other type of craftsman such as smiths, depends on a process of interpolation in which these seminal passages of Matthew and Mark are read in the light of other materials.

It is, moreover, relevant to note that the primitive Church is not known to have possessed any authoritative writings which might have dealt in an objective or documentary manner with the industrial background of Jesus and St Joseph. The earliest writings which touch on the matter, which include, in addition to the apocryphal infancy gospels, writings by Justin Martyr (c. 100-165) and Irenaeus of Lyon (c. 130-200), show that there was a common belief among Greek-speaking Christians as early as the second century that Joseph had been a carpenter, but whether this belief was rooted in historical truth remains open to doubt.<sup>26</sup>

Because, in fact, there appears to be no primary evidence to support the belief that Jesus and Joseph had been carpenters, it is perhaps not very inappropriate that this belief eventually, in the Latin West, entered into a long period of eclipse. What is not so easy to understand, however, is that it was replaced by a belief with even less of a claim on historical reality, namely, that Christ had been raised in the home of a blacksmith. Yet this belief was to prevail in the West for nearly a millenium. As E. F. Sutcliffe remarks, 'it is a surprise to find how many writers ranking high in the esteem of the Church speak as though St. Joseph were a blacksmith' (p. 180).

Yet however strange this belief may appear to us today, for those who held it it was not inapposite; rather, in the Latin West, it appeared to be firmly supported by Scripture. In part this was because it lent itself brilliantly to allegorical explanation. But more fundamentally, the Latin church held fast to the idea that Jesus and Joseph were blacksmiths because that was what Matthew and Mark seemed literally to imply. In Latin the trade of St Joseph was rendered by the word *faber*. As this word came to be particularly associated with metallurgy, Western exegetes naturally found it congenial to explain Christ's industrial background in terms of the metallurgical symbolism of the Old Testament prophets.

In Gaul, Italy and Anglo-Saxon England scholars such as Hilary of Poitiers (c. 315-c. 368), Ambrose (339-397) and Bede thus link the portrayal of Jesus as an artisan in the Gospel accounts of 'The Rejection at Nazareth' with images of Christ as a divine smith shaping the world, like metal, with fire. Hilary in his commentary on Matthew 13. 55 says:

Sed plane hic fabri erat filius, ferrum igne vincentis, omnem sæculi virtutem iudicio decoquentis, massamque formantis in omne opus utilitatis humanæ: informem scilicet corporum nostrorum materiem in diversa membrorum ministeria, et ad omnia æternæ vitæ opera fingentis.<sup>27</sup>

[But clearly this was the son of a smith (*fabri erat filius*), of one vanquishing iron with fire, smelting all the worth of a lifetime in judgement, shaping the mass of metal into every work useful to mankind: moulding, that is to say, the unformed material of our bodies into the various services of its members and for the purposes of all works of eternal life.]

Ambrose similarly implies that Christ was associated with smithcraft. Ambrose's commentary on 'The Rejection at Nazareth' in his exegesis of Luke says that Christ was known as the son of an artisan because he knows how:

rigida mentium spiritus igne mollire et in uarios usus omne humanum genus diuersa ministeriorum qualitate formare.

[to soften in the fire of the Spirit the stiffness of souls and to fashion for varied uses the whole human race by different types of ministry.]

It is noteworthy, however, that Ambrose also associates Christ with carpentry, for in the same sentence he speaks also of woodworking:

pater Christi igni operatur et spiritu et tamquam bonus animae  
faber uitia nostra circumdolat, cito securem admouens arboribus  
infecundis, secare doctus exigua, culminibus seruare  
sublimia . . . .<sup>28</sup>

[the father of Christ works with fire and the Spirit, and like a  
good artisan of the soul, planes our vices, quickly applying the  
axe to the infertile branches, knowing how to trim what is puny,  
to preserve the slender tops . . . .]

This passage was known to Bede, for he quotes from it in his own commentary, suppressing the allusions to woodworking and expanding on the associations of Christ with the metal-workers' forge. He identifies Christ's industrial background with the prophecy of the Messianic goldsmith in Malachi 3. 2-3 (used in the liturgy for the Feast of the Presentation) and links it also with the words of John the Baptist:

Vnde et de ipso tamquam de fabri filio praecursor suis ait: *Ipse  
vos baptizabit in spiritu sancto et igni.* Qui in domo magna  
huius mundi diuersi generis uasa fabricat immo uasa irae sui  
spiritus igne molliendo in misericordiae uasa commutat.<sup>29</sup>

[Thus the forerunner speaks of him to his own people as the son  
of a smith (*fabri filio*): 'He will baptize you in the Holy Spirit  
and fire' (Matthew 3. 11). He who forges in the great house of  
this world the vessels of different species indeed transforms  
vessels of wrath into vessels of mercy by softening with the fire  
of his spirit.]

Less ambivalently than Ambrose, Bede, like Hilary, implies that St Joseph had been a smith; moreover, he gives no indication that Joseph might also have been associated with carpentry, even though he must have known of this association from Ambrose. Bede must have been quite convinced in his own mind that Christ's industrial background was inherently metallurgical.

It is significant in this regard that the Latin-speaking West associated Christ with the forge while the Greek-speaking East associated him with carpentry. Bede's

and Hilary's view that Joseph had been a smith is not unconnected with the vagaries of language. As we saw above, the Greek New Testament refers to Joseph's occupation as that of τέκτων and the corresponding word in the Vulgate is *faber*. In their respective languages these words could mean an artificer in general as well as specific occupations such as carpenter or smith. It is often pointed out, for example, that in the Greek Septuagint τέκτων refers to a craftsman in metal as well as wood.<sup>30</sup> In the Vulgate Old Testament, meanwhile, *faber* can refer to a worker in metal as well as other hard materials: the first smith, Tubalcain, is thus 'faber in cuncta opera aeris et ferri' (Genesis 4. 22), but carpenters are called 'fabri lignorum' in II Kings 12. 11. The correspondence in meaning between τέκτων and *faber* in Scripture is, however, complicated by the fact that in ordinary speech τέκτων was commonly associated with carpentry;<sup>31</sup> *faber*, by contrast, came to be associated, especially in the early medieval period, with smithcraft.

The belief that Joseph had been a blacksmith was thus probably rooted in the common understanding of the word *faber* as 'smith'. Even though *faber* could denote an artificer in general, sufficient evidence that it was inherently associated with iron-working is to be found in Romance philology and Isidore's *Etymologies*. The *Französisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* compiled by Walter von Wartburg shows that *faber's* associations from an early period were primarily with iron-working. In most of the Romance languages, including French, Romanian and Italian, the word which evolved from *faber* meant 'smith'.<sup>32</sup> Isidore, in the sixth century, also associated *faber* inherently with iron-working, for in the *Etymologies* he, significantly, explains the word in the context of metal-working:

De fabrorum fornace. Faber a faciendo ferro inpositum nomen habet. Hinc derivatum nomen est ad alias artium materias fabros vel fabricas dicere; sed cum adiectione, ut faber lignarius et reliqua, propter operis scilicet firmitatem. In fabrorum autem fornace gentiles Vulcanum auctorem dicunt, figuraliter per Vulcanum ignem significantes, sine quo nullum metalli genus fundi extendique potest.<sup>33</sup>

[Concerning the furnace of *fabri*. The *faber* has a name imposed from producing iron (*faciendo ferro*). From it is derived a name to specify *fabri* and the workshops of *fabri* (*fabricae*) with regard to the other materials of the arts; but with an adjective, such as *faber lignarius* (carpenter), etc., evidently because of the

firmness of the work. Pagans, moreover, call the inventor of the furnace of the *fabri*, Vulcan, figuratively signifying fire, without which no type of metal can be poured or expanded.]

Here Isidore implies that without a modifier *faber* ordinarily means 'blacksmith'. Furthermore, Isidore reinforces this impression by listing in a subsequent passage the tools of the *faber*. These we instantly recognize to be smiths' tools: *incus* 'anvil', *malleus* 'hammer', *marcus* 'sledgehammer', *martellus* 'medium hammer', *marculus* 'small hammer', *forcipes* 'forceps', *lima* 'file', and *cilium* 'chisel' are the ones he lists.<sup>34</sup> For Isidore, as for many of the numerous readers who looked to the *Etymologies* as an authority, the use of *faber* in Matthew's and Mark's accounts of 'The Rejection at Nazareth' must have indicated that Joseph and Jesus had been blacksmiths. Indeed, the fact that *faber* was not qualified by any modifier (such as, perhaps, *lignarius*), could be taken as *prima facie* evidence that its intended meaning was 'smith'.

Because this reading could, in the early Middle Ages, be justified on the grounds of what seemed to be common sense, we would do well to take stock of its influence on art and vernacular literature. Unfortunately, this is a task which modern scholarship has not, to the best of my knowledge, attempted. Sutcliffe's investigation, carried out over seventy years ago and not well known today, deals almost exclusively with the writings of Church authorities. Thus, for example, he catalogues notable instances of the belief that Joseph had been a smith in the writings of Peter Chrysologus (died 450) and Anselm of Laon (died 1177), in addition to the writings of Ambrose, Bede and Hilary already mentioned.<sup>35</sup> Sutcliffe's work indicates further that this belief did not begin to lose its authority until the thirteenth century, when Thomas Aquinas asserted that 'Joseph . . . non erat faber ferrarius sed lignarius' [Joseph . . . was not a blacksmith, but a carpenter].<sup>36</sup> Nor did the view that Joseph had been a carpenter itself achieve a consensus until after the Reformation.<sup>37</sup> For Sutcliffe's work we must therefore indeed be thankful; at the same time, however, we should be aware that the belief that Joseph had been a smith was more influential than even Sutcliffe's work has indicated.

Thus, for example, there are two interesting instances of the belief that Joseph had been a smith which Sutcliffe overlooks and which pertain to the monastic movement in Visigothic Spain. There, in the sixth to seventh centuries, monks and nuns were instructed to take as a model of dignified labour the example of Joseph 'the blacksmith'. Whereas St Basil, in recommending the spiritual benefits of

manual work to monks, reminds them that the Apostle Paul had worked hard to support himself and others, Leander of Seville (c. 550-600) refers, in a treatise for nuns, to the example of St Joseph:

Joseph, cui fuerat desponsata [Maria], cum esset justus, erat tamen et pauper, ita ut victum et vestitum artificio quæreret. Certe faber ferrarius fuisse legitur.<sup>38</sup>

[Joseph, to whom Mary was betrothed, although he was just, was poor also, so that he had to work for his food and clothing. At any rate, it is read that he was a blacksmith.]<sup>39</sup>

This advice was repeated by Leander's younger brother Isidore in a treatise for monks, where we read that:

Joseph justus, cui virgo Maria desponsata exstitit, faber ferrarius fuit.<sup>40</sup>

[Joseph the just, to whom the Virgin Mary was betrothed, was a blacksmith.]

These instances of the belief that Joseph had been a blacksmith are noteworthy not only for their directness and simplicity; they also indicate that the industrial background of Christ was not only of allegorical significance, but had in addition a moral application which, potentially at least, boosted its glamour.

With this in mind we should perhaps be aware of the potential here for some interesting discoveries in the field of art history. At issue is the possible existence of works of art depicting Joseph or Jesus as a smith: hitherto, the existence of such works has apparently gone unsuspected. Yet it is a curiosity of the iconographical history of St Joseph that we do not hear of any depictions of Joseph with the tools of his trade for the period between 600 and 1400, whereas such depictions were produced before the medieval period and have certainly been quite common since the fifteenth century. Sutcliffe himself noted that 'in several representations of the fourth and fifth centuries St Joseph is figured with a saw and an axe'.<sup>41</sup> A standard modern authority, the *Iconographie de l'art chrétien*, in addition catalogues comparable representations from the fifteenth century and later, but not before then, in which St Joseph 'a pour attributs les outils de son métier: une *hache*, une *scie*, un *rabot* ou une *équerre*' [St Joseph has as attributes the tools of his trade: an *axe*, a

Plate I



Ingleton Parish Church font (detail): St Joseph with hammer, tongs and anvil accompanying the Virgin and Christ Child.

By kind permission of the Vicar and Churchwardens of St Mary the Virgin, Ingleton.



saw, a *plane*, or a *square*].<sup>42</sup> That such depictions are not readily found in medieval art might possibly strike us as anomalous; certainly there is an apparent hiatus in the iconographical tradition surrounding the figure of Joseph which deserves further investigation. It may well have been the case that Joseph was not a popular figure in the medieval period, although the references to 'Joseph the just' which we saw just now in the writings of Leander and Isidore do not lend support to this hypothesis. On the other hand, is it not possible that in the Middle Ages Joseph was depicted not as a carpenter, but as a blacksmith, and that modern investigators have been unaware of this fact, leaving something of a gap in our knowledge? Students of medieval iconography might do well to be on the lookout for depictions of Joseph with the tools of the smith, such as hammer, tongs and anvil.

Just such a depiction is illustrated in Plate I. This plate shows a detail of the carved decoration on the medieval font in the parish church of St Mary, Ingleton, North Yorkshire; this font is a notable work of art and is admired by Nikolaus Pevsner in the volume of *The Buildings of England* series devoted to the West Riding (Ingleton has since become part of North Yorkshire). Pevsner calls it 'one of the best Norman fonts in the West Riding'. He goes on to describe it as 'circular with twelve figures under intersected arches' and notes that 'among the figures are the three Magi and the Virgin and Child'.<sup>43</sup> Pevsner does not mention that standing beside the Virgin and Child and immediately to their right, with his body angled toward them, is the standing figure of a smith working at an anvil with hammer and tongs. In Plate I we see this figure with the Virgin and Child beside him. The composition suggests, I think, that this smith is intended to accompany them. Was this ensemble intended to be an image of the Holy Family? Given the context, an ineluctable hypothesis is surely that this smith is none other than St Joseph the just, 'faber ferrarius'. If this identification is correct, moreover, it would indicate a definite probability that similar depictions of Joseph the blacksmith were not uncommon. It would be useful, certainly, to know if there are other such depictions still in existence. Regrettably, this is not an issue which we can explore any further in the present work, but one which we must entrust to future research.

As for representations of St Joseph as a metal smith in Old English texts, one has perhaps by now come to suspect that there are examples in the Old English Gospels. Such indeed one sees to be the case once one has exorcized the phantom of Bosworth's 'worker in wood' interpretation for *smiþ*. For although Bosworth-Toller would want us to read *smiþ* in the context of St Joseph's trade, if nowhere else, as 'worker in wood', this reading is, indeed, incorrect. It is incorrect,

moreover, because it is a deduction from a false premiss, the premiss that St Joseph is represented as a worker in wood always and everywhere. If one were to accept this premiss, one would have to conclude that whatever it might mean elsewhere, in the context of St Joseph's trade *smiþ* would have to mean 'worker in wood'. But one can no longer accept this premiss because one has seen that St Joseph is not, in fact, always represented as a worker in wood. As a result, in the context of St Joseph's trade, *smiþ* does not at all have to mean 'worker in wood'. Indeed, because St Joseph's trade is not a known constant, but an unknown variable, from it one cannot correctly deduce any meaning for *smiþ*! On the contrary, in this context one can but infer a meaning for *smiþ* from what *smiþ* means elsewhere. Since elsewhere *smiþ* regularly means 'a worker in metals', one can only infer that it means 'worker in metals' in the context of St Joseph's trade also. Accordingly, Wilhelm Klump's conclusion that *smiþ* means 'a worker in metals' but not 'a worker in wood' must be valid even in the context of St Joseph's trade. The result – that St Joseph is represented in the Old English Gospels as a worker in metals – may be surprising to some, but it is not improbable, since it is corroborated by the many medieval authorities who speak of St Joseph as a metal smith.

If Bosworth's 'worker in wood' interpretation for *smiþ* has at last been dismissed, we may now perhaps begin to perceive how commonly St Joseph was spoken of as a metal smith in medieval England. The Rushworth Gospels indicate that Jesus was 'smiðes sunu', while the Lindisfarne Gospels say that he was 'smið vel wyrrihte' and 'smiðes vel wyrrihta sunu'.<sup>44</sup> So too the Old English Gospels make Christ a 'smið' and 'smiðes sunu';<sup>45</sup> and although the *Old English Gospel of Nicodemus* refers to Jesus as 'wyrhtan sunu',<sup>46</sup> the *Old English Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* indicates that Joseph was 'smið and mænigteawa wyrhta' [smith and skilful artificer].<sup>47</sup> None of these texts indicates that Christ had been a carpenter: for although he is occasionally called a *wyrhta*, this is a general term for an artisan (and is often used as a term for God).<sup>48</sup> But the specific craft commonly associated with Joseph and Christ was evidently metalworking. Further references are to be found in a considerable number of Middle English texts; these include: *Vices and Virtues* of c. 1200; a thirteenth century poem called 'The Passion of Our Lord'; *A Stanzaic Life of Christ Compiled from Higden's Polychronicon* dated 1387; and the Wycliffe translation of the Bible completed in c. 1382. In the treatise called *Vices and Virtues* there is a reference to 'Iosepe ðe smiðe'.<sup>49</sup> In 'The Passion of Our Lord', meanwhile, Jesus is called 'smyþes sune';<sup>50</sup> and in *A Stanzaic Life of Christ Compiled from Higden's Polychronicon* Jesus is 'smyth sone'.<sup>51</sup> The Wycliffe

Bible also refers to Jesus as 'smyth' and 'the sone of a smyth'. This last work, it is true, glosses 'smyth' in both Gospels with the word 'carpenter', indicating, perhaps, the influence of scholars like Aquinas, who had ruled that Joseph had been not a smith, but a woodworker; but indicating also, that even more than a century after Aquinas's death, 'smyth' was still the common English term for Joseph's occupation.<sup>52</sup> The association between St Joseph and woodworking, much taken for granted today, appears to have established itself in England comparatively late.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Based on the Manuscript Collections of the Late Joseph Bosworth*, edited by T. Northcote Toller (London, 1898). *Supplement*, by T. Northcote Toller (1921). *Enlarged Addenda and Corrigenda*, by Alistair Campbell (1972). This work (in its entirety) will subsequently be referred to as Bosworth-Toller.

<sup>2</sup> Wilhelm Klump, *Die altenglischen Handwerkernamen sachlich und sprachlich erläutert*, *Anglistische Forschungen*, 24 (Heidelberg, 1908), pp. 97-104.

<sup>3</sup> See the entry for 'smið' in J. Bosworth, *A Dictionary of the Anglo-Saxon Language* (London, 1838).

<sup>4</sup> Klump, *Die altenglischen Handwerkernamen*, pp. 103-04.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in the edition of George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, *The Exeter Book*, *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, 3 (New York, 1936), hereinafter referred to as *The Exeter Book*.

<sup>6</sup> *Beowulf* is here and subsequently cited in the edition of Fr. Klaeber, *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, third edition (Boston, 1953).

<sup>7</sup> Here and subsequently the Riddles are cited from *The Exeter Book*.

<sup>8</sup> *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, edited by F. Liebermann, 3 vols (Halle/Saale, 1903-1916), I, 60.

<sup>9</sup> *Die Gesetze*, I, 118.

<sup>10</sup> Frederick Pollock and F. W. Maitland, *The History of English Law before the Time of Edward I*, second edition, 2 vols (Cambridge, 1911), I, 31.

<sup>11</sup> Isidore, *Etymologiarum sive Originum Libri XX*, edited by W. M. Lindsay, 2 vols (Oxford, 1911-13), Book XIX, Chapter 6, Sections 1-2.

<sup>12</sup> *Ælfrics Grammatik und Glossar*, edited by Julius Zuptiza (Berlin, 1880), p. 216.

<sup>13</sup> *Ælfric's Colloquy*, edited by G. N. Garmonsway, second edition (London, 1947), pp. 39-40. In citing Garmonsway's text here and subsequently I use the letters 'g' and 'w' where Garmonsway uses their Anglo-Saxon equivalents.

<sup>14</sup> *Anglo-Saxon and Old English Vocabularies*, edited by Thomas Wright and Richard Paul Wülcker, second edition, 2 vols (London, 1884), I, 539.

<sup>15</sup> *Anglo-Saxon and Old English Vocabularies*, I, 272.

<sup>16</sup> *Anglo-Saxon and Old English Vocabularies*, I, 529. Bosworth-Toller, following the first edition of this work, has *helle smiþ*.

<sup>17</sup> *The Old English Version of Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, edited by Thomas Miller, EETS, os 95, 96, 110, 111 (London, 1890-98), I, 2, 444. Where the Old English has *smið*, the Latin text has *faber*: see *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, edited by Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969), p. 504.

<sup>18</sup> *Ælfric's Colloquy*, p. 38.

<sup>19</sup> *The Gospel According to St. Mark in Anglo-Saxon and Northumbrian Versions*, edited by W. W. Skeat (Cambridge, 1871), p. 42, Mark 6. 3, Corpus.

<sup>20</sup> Skeat, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, p. 43, Mark 6. 3, Lindisfarne.

<sup>21</sup> *The Gospel According to St. Matthew in Anglo-Saxon and Northumbrian Versions*, edited by W. W. Skeat (Cambridge, 1887), p. 112, Mathew 13. 55, Corpus.

<sup>22</sup> Klump, *Die altenglischen Handwerkernamen*, p. 104.

<sup>23</sup> *A Microfiche Concordance of Old English*, edited by Richard L. Venezky and Antonette diPaolo Healey, Publications of the Dictionary of Old English, 1 (Toronto, 1980): see citations for *smiþ*, *smiþa*, *smiþas*, *smiþe*, *smiþes*, and *smiþum*. The overall impression that *smiþ* means 'metal-worker' is perhaps slightly complicated by the Lindisfarne gloss of Matthew 27. 7 (also noted by Klump, *Die altenglischen Handwerkernamen*, p. 98), in which 'smið' is given as an alternative to *lamwrihta* for Latin *figulus* in the phrase 'agrum figuli' [potter's field]. It would probably be a mistake to attach much significance to this gloss, especially since the West Saxon translations stick to *tigylwyrhta* in this context: see Skeat, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, pp. 214-15. Since pottery must have formed part of the Anglo-Saxon metal smith's craft when he made clay moulds for metal castings, this gloss could be seen as further confirmation of Klump's thesis.

<sup>24</sup> Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, revised and augmented by Henry Stuart Jones with the assistance of Roderick McKenzie (Oxford, 1940), p. 1769 (τέκτων).

<sup>25</sup> E. F. Sutcliffe, 'St. Joseph's Trade: An Enquiry into the Evidence', *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 10 (1915), 179-201 (p. 198).

<sup>26</sup> See Sutcliffe, 'St. Joseph's trade', pp. 180-200, and Jean Daniélou, *Primitive Christian Symbols*, translated by Donald Attwater (London, 1964), pp. 89-96. Daniélou points out that the earliest references outside the Gospels to Christ's association with a handicraft allude to the imagery of Isaiah 2. 4 and portray Christ as a maker of ploughs and yokes (p. 94).

<sup>27</sup> Hilary of Poitiers, *In Matthaeum*, edited by J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, 9 (Paris, 1844), cols 996-97. In later references *Patrologia Latina* is abbreviated PL.

<sup>28</sup> Ambrose, *Traité sur l'évangile de S. Luc*, edited and translated into French by Gabriel Tissot, *Sources Chrétiennes*, 45 and 52, second edition, 2 vols (Paris, 1971-1976), I, 120 (Book III, Chapter 2).

<sup>29</sup> Bede, 'In Marci Evangelium Expositio', edited by D. Hurst, *Beda's Venerabilis Opera Pars II: Opera Exegetica*, 3, *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina*, 120 (1960), p. 502, lines 543-47. This edition by Hurst clearly indicates Bede's knowledge of Ambrose's exegesis of this passage and prints in italics lines 540-43, which Bede adopted from Ambrose's *Expositio Evangelii secundum Lucam*. This work of Ambrose Bede knew well, as we may see from Hurst's *Index Scriptorum*, pp. 671-72.

<sup>30</sup> See *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, edited by Vincent Taylor, second edition (London, 1966), p. 300.

<sup>31</sup> See Sutcliffe, 'St. Joseph's Trade', pp. 196-98.

<sup>32</sup> Walter von Wartburg, *Französisches etymologisches Wörterbuch: Eine Darstellung des galloromanischen Sprachschätze* (Leipzig, 1922–), III (1934), 341-42 ('faber schmied').

<sup>33</sup> Isidore, *Etymologiae*, edited by W. M. Lindsay, Book XIX, Chapter 6, Sections 1-2.

<sup>34</sup> Isidore, *Etymologiae*, edited by W. M. Lindsay, Book XIX, Chapter 7.

<sup>35</sup> Sutcliffe, 'St. Joseph's Trade', pp. 181-84. See further Peter Chrysologus, *De Christo fabri filio appellato et de invidia*, PL, 52 (Paris, 1894), cols 334-35. Anselm of Laon, *Enarrationes in Evangelium Matthaei*, PL, 162 (Paris, 1889), col. 1377, claims to follow the authority of Bede in this matter. Other early authorities who followed Bede and described Christ as the son of a metal smith are Rabanus Maurus, *Commentariorum in Matthaum libri octo ad Haistulphum*, PL, 107 (Paris, 1864), col. 957, and Walafrid Strabo, *Glossa ordinaria*, PL, 114 (Paris, 1879), col. 200. (These last two authorities are not mentioned by Sutcliffe.)

<sup>36</sup> Sutcliffe, 'St. Joseph's Trade', p. 188.

<sup>37</sup> Sutcliffe, 'St. Joseph's Trade', p. 188, cites a number of authorities (including Cardinal Cajetan) who held that the question of what sort of artisan Joseph had been was indeterminable.

<sup>38</sup> Leander of Seville, *De institutione virginum et contemptu mundi*, PL, 72 (Paris, 1844), col. 888. For a comparable Basilian passage see Basil, 'The Long Rules', in *Ascetical Works*, translated by M. Monica Wagner, Fathers of the Church, 9 (Washington, 1950), pp. 317-18 (R. 42).

<sup>39</sup> Leander of Seville, 'The Training of Nuns and the Contempt of the World', in *Iberian Fathers*, translated by Claude W. Barlow, The Fathers of the Church, 62 and 63, 2 vols (Washington, 1969), I, 218.

<sup>40</sup> Isidore, *Regula Monachorum*, PL, 83 (Paris, 1862), col. 873 (Chapter 5).

<sup>41</sup> Sutcliffe, 'St. Joseph's Trade', p. 194.

<sup>42</sup> Louis Réau, *Iconographie de l'art chrétien*, 3 vols (Paris, 1955-59), III, part 2 (1958), 757.

<sup>43</sup> Nikolaus Pevsner, *Yorkshire: The West Riding*, second edition revised by Enid Radcliffe, *The Buildings of England* (Harmondsworth, 1967), p. 280.

<sup>44</sup> *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, edited by Skeat, p. 113, and *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, edited by Skeat, p. 43.

<sup>45</sup> *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, edited by Skeat, p. 112, and *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, edited by Skeat, p. 42.

<sup>46</sup> 'The Old English Version of the Gospel of Nicodemus', edited by W. H. Hulme, *PMLA*, 13 (1898), 457-542 (p. 471, line 20).

<sup>47</sup> See *Angelsächsische Homilien und Heiligenleben*, edited by B. Assmann, *Bibliothek der angelsächsischen Prosa*, 3 (Kassel, 1889), p. 591.

<sup>48</sup> Bosworth-Toller: see *wyrhta*, II.a.

<sup>49</sup> *Vices and Virtues, Being a Soul's Confession of Its Sins with Reason's Description of the Virtues: A Middle English Dialogue of about 1200 A.D.*, edited by F. Holthausen, EETS, os 89, 159, 2 vols (London, 1888-1921), I, 51, line 4.

<sup>50</sup> *An Old English Miscellany Containing a Bestiary, Kentish Sermons, Proverbs of Alfred, Religious Poems of the Thirteenth Century*, edited by Richard Morris, EETS, os 49 (London, 1872), p. 39, line 59.

<sup>51</sup> *A Stanzaic Life of Christ Compiled from Higden's Polychronicon and the Legenda Aurea*, edited by Frances A. Foster, EETS, os 166 (London, 1926), p. 191, line 5688.

<sup>52</sup> *The Gothic and Anglo-Saxon Gospels in Parallel Columns with the Versions of Wycliffe and Tyndale*, edited by Joseph Bosworth (London, 1874), pp. 71 and 191.

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