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Exploring new interpretations of past and place in archaeology, folklore and mythology

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Supernatural church-moving

Jacqui Truman

Jeremy Harte

Churches *moved* BY NIGHT

JEREMY HARTE is Curator of the Bourne Hall Museum, Ewell. In the 1980s he edited Earth Giant *magazine and since then has continued to write extensively on folklore. His article' 'Under the Greenwood Tree' appeared in* At the Edge *No.1.*

It was a fragment of tessellated pavement. The vicar handled it curiously while the farmer fumbled in his bag for more. 'We been finding them everywhere, sir, down in Hocbery furlong'. *In loco Hocbery vocato*, wrote the vicar, who hadn't been to college for nothing. Later that year (it was 1630) he wrote the whole thing up for the parish register, in an elegant Latin which I shall spoil by translating. 'The village people told me that they had often come across silver and brass coins here, without having any idea what they were; but it was handed down from the older generation, that Rodmarton village used to stand on this spot and was afterwards removed to where it is now. Clearly there was a Roman camp here once'.

Archaeology is not really a learned profession. It consists of digging holes in the ground and then putting two and two together - skills which are required of most rural labourers. The Rodmarton workforce had picked up fragments of dwellings and inferred from them that their settlement had moved - fair enough. But the story does not end there. In 1807 Samuel Lysons went down to Gloucestershire in a search for Roman remains. Nobody could remember anything for him about mosaics or coins, but they knew Hocbery all right. It was the field where the church was due to be built in the old days, but everything that they built by day was moved by night. The Devil carried the stones away and dropped them where the church now stands. That is why Rodmarton village is where it is.

Today the Devil has lost some of his following. The villagers of Rodmarton are still adamant that their church was moved by night from some other location, though they have forgotten where that location was. They are inclined to blame a troop of headless horsemen for the change [1].

We say that truth is stranger than fiction, but as the Rodmarton example shows, people will plump for fiction in the end. The inhabitants of Morwenstow in Cornwall agree with the antiquaries that their village was named after St Morwen, but after that promising beginning, folklore turns much more creative than history. 'The tradition is, that when the parishioners were about to build their church this saint went down under the cliff and chose a stone for the font, which she brought up upon her head. In her way, being weary, she lay down the stone and rested herself, out of which place sprang a well, from thence called St Moorin's Well. Then she took up the stone and carried it to the place where now the church standeth. The parishioners had begun their

Illustrations by Jacqui Truman.

church in another place, and there did convey this stone, but what was built by day was pulled down by night, and the materials carried to this place; whereupon they forebare, and built it in the place they were directed to by a wonder.' [2]

The Morwenstow legend was set down in the early seventeenth century, about the same time that Rodmarton was replacing its prosaic Roman soldiers by a prankster Devil. In the same century Herefordshire worthies were assuring visitors that the church of Much Cowarne was moved by invisible hands from a hill north-west of its present location [3]. These are the earliest English examples of a legend which occurs with growing popularity in the folklore collections of the

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. New examples are being discovered - or, for all I know, invented - in contemporary oral tradition. The tale-type has been recognised for about a century. But what does it all mean?

An ingenious explanation for church-moving legends can be seen in the romantic embroideries of the tales which were provided by the early folklorists. The story is seen as a conflict between the Lord of the Manor and his tenants. The wicked baron (there is a particularly nasty specimen in Roby's 1829 retelling of the Rochdale story) insists that the church be built on a proposed site, and the shivering villeins have no option but to obey. Somehow, mysteriously, the stones are found elsewhere the next morning. Po-faced, the villagers blame fairy powers, and the Lord has to give in. Abraham Elder, writing about Godshill in 1843, makes the landlords into monks, who from his point of view are almost as iniquitous as Norman barons [4].

George Oliver tells the story of Dorrington church twice over in his voluminous works. In one book (1837) he repeats the straightforward account of his Lincolnshire informants, about the church being shifted by the Devil; but elsewhere (1829) the story is rewritten to suit his theory of its origins. Tochti, a Saxon thane, plunders the site of a pagan temple and drags its stones away to build a church in Dorrington village. The villagers have other ideas, however, and in the morning the stones are found back at the site of the pagan temple on the adjoining hill. The fuming thane admits defeat, and there the church stands to this day [5].

The image of the pagan temple soon caught on. Any suggestion that a landowner could be in conflict with his tenants was taboo in late Victorian England, and so the interpretative reworking of the tale shifted subtly from class

war to anti-Catholicism (never far from the surface when the nineteenth century engaged with the middle ages) and so to narratives of tension between incoming priests/monks and sturdy pagan villagers. So the first scholars to compile studies of church-moving legends were in agreement that each of these stories was an allegory of a real historical event. Within a frame of reference which took it pretty much for granted that churches were built on pagan foundations, the most dramatic instances of hill-top shrines - Brentor, Breedon, Godshill, Christchurch - seemed to represent deliberate annexations of ancient high places for the new religion, and their church-moving legends were taken as 'the struggles which took place between the adherents of the new faith and those of the old, ere, in some cases at least, that occupation could be made good' [6].

Alfred Watkins was part of this emotional milieu - *The Old Straight Track*, despite its publication date, is a very Edwardian book - and in his folklore chapter he sees church-moving legends as an allegory of the struggle between early Christian leaders and their pagan flock, with the added implication that either the proposed or the eventual church site ought to have been on one of his leys. There, from a theoretical point of view, the matter has rested. More recent geomythic researchers, such as Janet and Colin Bord, reflect the post-imperial climate of our times by suggesting that a church on a pagan site represents Christians capitulating to native tradition rather than brutally suppressing it, but the imagined basis in fact remains the same [7].

The weakness of this well-loved interpretation lies in

its *petitio principi*. It explains church-moving legends as a memory of some great geomantic debate between Christian and pagan factions but, unfortunately, there is no independent evidence of any such debate: so the legend itself is roped in as evidence for the same historical context which is supposed to be offering an explanation for it. Moreover, the interpretation ignores the popularity of church-moving as a migratory legend. People in one place imitated the story because they had heard it told by somebody about somewhere else. There are, as it happens, several suspicious pairs of villages - Dowlish Wake/Kingston, Fleckney/Kibworth, Matching/Beauchamp Roding - which lie within a few miles of each other and have similar legends. Where one parish could claim a church transported by the Devil, it seems, the neighbouring one would make sure that its own church had been moved too, and preferably twice as far. If church-moving legends have been used like this as the currency of inter-village rivalry, we would be deluded to trust them as echoes of a distant past.

This sort of sceptical interpretation has already been made by Williamson and Bellamy in their critique of geomythics [8]. These authors are not noted for their reverent approach to the sacred earth, but they do know that an isolated church site is likely, historically speaking, to betray a subsequent movement of the settlement. The lonely church calls out for an explanation, as much from the landscape historian as from the local yokel, but it is the latter who 'therefore invent an explanatory story featuring stone-shifting pixies'. Well and good. But why pixies? As the example of Rodmarton shows, even those of us without a PhD from Jesus College can deduce the existence of settlement drift. If

> It is not enough to say that people like telling stories. *Why* do people like telling stories?

villagers choose not to do this and start talking instead about diabolical intervention, they must have a motive for their motif. It is not enough to say that people like telling stories. *Why* do people like telling stories?

The stories are fictional. Even I, who have a robust belief in fairies, would not accept that they had acted as building contractors on quite the grand scale implied. The known facts about mediaeval church building rule out any choice of site through revelation, levitation, divination, or things of that sort. Nor do I think it likely that gangs of pagan peasant freedom fighters dressed up as fairies in order to haul stones unobtrusively to their present location. The legends are migratory, and have been applied to churches already in existence. But that is the beginning, not the end, of the enquiry. If they are not derived from facts, if church-moving is not a metaphor or an allegory of events then where do the stories come from?

Some of the ideas which have contributed to church-moving legends are very old, and the most common one is the motif of fruitless labour. If you try to do a job all day, and the evidence of your work vanishes overnight, it is a sure sign that a supernatural being lurks nearby. There is a Melanesian story about a man who, having felled a tree, was working it into a canoe; every evening a spirit replaced the chips so that the tree was whole again. Eventually, by carrying a chip away, the man frustrated his invisible partner's scheme and the two met up and collaborated. In a South African tale, a woman was hoeing her new garden only to find that each day's work was undone at night. Hiding during the hours of darkness, she observed a little bird who flew down and sang to the broken clods of earth, which smoothed themselves back into place; the woman caught the bird and made it work magic. The

creation epic of the A-Hsi, an indigenous people bordering China, tells how the ancestors began to cultivate the earth, but 'the ground they had dug was land not allowed by the gods to be delved. Therefore, waiting until after they had gone home, a celestial god, taking the stretch of ground that had been dug up, covered it with grass, wood and stones'. The ancestors lie in wait and seize hold of this deity, who obliges by giving a prophecy of the Deluge [9].

Tales of fruitless work are pretty nearly universal. Many of them record the uselessness of digging in the face of a supernatural prohibition. Mysterious powers guard the lake of Bomere in Cheshire, which cannot be drained, any efforts made during the day being repaired at night. The same problem was encountered at Lochen-uran in northern Aberdeenshire, a small loch occupying potential grazing ground. Each day's work proving fruitless, the labourers set a watch and on the stroke of midnight saw hundreds of small black creatures swarm out of the loch, each armed with a spade so that in minutes they were able to undo the achievement of the previous day. In a sixteenth-century tradition, the great Charlemagne had proposed making a channel between the Rhine and the Danube. It was a project fit to stir the envy of the demonic empire: so *quidquid interdiu exhauriebatur, nocte explebatur,* what was dug out by day was backfilled at night, until even the emperor had to admit defeat [10].

Round one to the supernatural. But there were ways of coming to terms with the unseen world. When Alexander the Great was building Alexandria - according to Mas'udi, who was admittedly writing some fourteen centuries after the event - demonic monsters came out of the sea each night with pickaxes and crowbars to pull down the walls. But Alexander defeated them by means of talismans. Some

English stories imply a similar use of charms or stratagems. Mother Shipton has prophesied that Ouse Bridge and Trinity Church should both be built by day and fall by night, until the topmost stone of the church is made into the lowest stone of the bridge [11]. Each night the Devil demolished work done on Bideford Bridge, until the builders hit on the idea of using woolpacks as foundations, and these rapidly became too soggy for the fiend to overthrow. The Devonshire Devil is a half-hearted fellow. He tried to pull down the walls of Buckland Abbey, too, when that building was being converted to a mansion in Tudor times; but Sir Francis Drake evicted him by climbing up a nearby tree and lustily imitating the sound of cockcrow [12].

When building work is held up so mysteriously, it is a sign that things are wrong, and ritual action will be needed to set them right. Just what action was open to debate. Vortigern, setting out to build a castle of refuge at Dinas Emrys, found that all the wood and stone gathered for the workmen's use had vanished overnight. A second and a third time the long-suffering artificers dragged materials into the wilds of Snowdonia, only to see them wasted in the same manner. The panel of magicians usually consulted on such occasions recommended sprinkling the ground with the blood of a fatherless child, by name Ambrose (at least according to

Nennius; Geoffrey of Monmouth says it was Merlin). Faced with the knife, Ambrose/Merlin hastily explains that the wise men have got it all wrong and that the real solution is to uncover the prophetic white and red dragons beneath the old citadel, which is duly done. The story, with its dark hints of sacrifice, appears to be a twelfth-century embroidery of an old tale about the magician Emrys, and the pool itself was discovered in the excavation of the hillfort [13].

On the basis of this and other tales - for instance, the tradition that the walls of Iona tumbled down until St Columba buried his companion Oran alive there - George Laurence Gomme proposed that all church-moving legends should be interpreted as memories of foundation sacrifice [14]. This is straining the evidence, because demolition by night often features as a sign of general supernatural displeasure, not simply a demand for blood or for building guardians. Still, there are many stories in which this is the motive. In the Romanian ballad of Mesterul Manole, the walls of a castle collapse as fast as they are built, and the workmen agree that this is because there has been no life sacrificed to it. They conspire to inter the first woman who brings out a workman's meal, and this turns out to be the master builder's wife [15]. Serbian legend is the same -

three brothers laboured to build the fortress of Scutari, but the *vila* pulled down each night what three hundred masons built by day, until it was decided to wall up the first wife to bring her husband his midday meal. The walls of Copenhagen collapsed daily until a little girl was enticed to play in a vault which was sealed above her. The Italian masons building the bridge of Aosta saw it fall repeatedly until they walled in the master-builder's wife. They had to force her in - all these stories are about how women have been murdered to suit the public interests of men - and she cursed the bridge, that it should always tremble like a flower on its stalk [16].

Demolition by night can equally well stand as an injunction, not to sacrifice before building, but to go and build somewhere else. Irish fairies take exception to any attempt to block their paths, and houses set up in their way are liable to be found in ruins the next morning. In one Leitrim story, an outbuilding was repeatedly pulled down by night until it was removed to a geomantically innocuous position on the other side of the house. In another tale from Limerick the farmer tries to beat the fairies by working both day and night at his new home but to no avail, the house was burned down in the end [17].

There are many more such stories. But it would be laborious to tell how the fairies prevented the erection of a church at Wednesfield, or the rebuilding of a chapel at Denbigh; how the Devil forestalled the building of church towers at Towednack, St Mewan and East Bergholt, and made sure that Mitchel Troy and Llanfair near Llanishen went churchless; how he would have prevented the building of March church, too, until they scared him off with a wayside cross [18]. Inkberrow church was finished despite fairy opposition, and when they heard the sound of church bells they left the county; at Tingwall

in Shetland the trows did their best, but lost their power to demolish the building as soon as it was consecrated - though they did strike the priest dumb as soon as he came in through the door. The grey trow is a grim creature. When work on Gletna Kirk was found to be demolished overnight, the priest sat up to watch for the intruders. Next morning he was found dead on the ground [19].

A pattern is beginning to emerge. The oldest, most universal stories are those in which a day's work is undone at night by a supernatural presence. In Europe this takes the particular form of repeated attempts at building which are frustrated by the powers of the otherworld in token that something is wrong. One thing which may be wrong is the place chosen for the building, in which case demolition by night is a sign that a new site should be found. Here we have the origin of church-moving legends.

The story seems to have grown up in north-west Europe. But when did this happen? It is hard to date church-moving stories as a whole, although a date in the last two centuries should not be ruled out for any particular example. When we hear that the Presbyterian meeting-place at Crookham was built on a supernaturally appointed site, the legend is likely to be no older than the building it dignifies [20]. On the other hand there are stories associated with early mediaeval relics such as the staff of St Baglan, presented to him by St Illtyd who 'bid him that he should let that guide him until he found a tree that bore three sorts of fruit, and there erect a church for himself. Arriving at the site where the church now stands he found the tree that had a litter of pigs near the roots below, a hive of bees in the body, and a kite's or crow's nest at the top. However he did not like the site, being upon a proclivity, and attempted to build upon the plains below, but what was built there was removed in the night, and at

last discouraged he built it where it now stands'. Thus Edward Lhuyd, writing about Baglan in 1697.

From further north comes the only mediaeval reference I have yet discovered, at Nevern, where St Brynach attempted to build his church beside the river but for three successive nights was disappointed. Then an angel told him, 'This place is not the place of thy dwelling, but go along the bank of the river . . . until thou seest a wild white sow with white piglings' [21].

It can be no coincidence that our three earliest texts are lives of Celtic saints - Morwen, Baglan and Brynach. There is circumstantial evidence, too, for the migration of the Brynach story. At Braunton in Devon they tell how the church was originally to have been built on Chapel Hill, but that after its mysterious demolition the new site was chosen where a sow was found suckling her young. As there is a fifteenth-century roof boss showing the sow and her piglets, this element of the legend is likely to be at least pre-Reformation. St Brannoc/ Brynach, however, is not a native of the parish. Braunton is one of a number of north Somerset and Devon churches which picked up a Celtic patron in the high middle ages, when things Arthurian and antiquarian were in vogue. The monks of Glastonbury had fishing rights for salmon here, and it was probably from these monastic anglers that the locals learnt the art of spinning a yarn. At Braunton, then, we have caught a church-moving legend in the process of transformation away from its origins in a saint's life. Nowadays they claim that the Devil was responsible for it all [22].

The origin of the church-moving legend in the literate milieu of Celtic hagiography would explain some of the features which accompany it, such as the choice of the eventual site by the discovery of a white sow and piglets, which is derived from the classics -

Aeneid VIII:43. A second method of divining the holy place was Biblical, adapted from the advice given to the Philistines (I Samuel 6:7-12) when they wished to return the Ark of the Covenant to its rightful owners. 'Make a new cart, and take two milch kine, on which there hath come no yoke, and tie the kine to the cart . . . The kine took the straight way to the way of Beth-shemesh'. This is the story which we encounter, suitably transformed, in the life of St Clydawg, a royal saint who died while out hunting and whose

hearse was pulled by oxen to the River Monnow at Clodock. Here they stopped, and here the church was to be built; the locals tried to start work at Llanwinnog instead, but their efforts fell down by night until they returned to the site at the ford [23].

As Tyack observed in his early survey of the motif, church-moving legends come in two sub-types. In some the

church is demolished by night until a revelation is imparted about the true site, or until the baffled builders resort to an act of divination in order to find it. In others, the unfinished church is bodily transported elsewhere by the supernatural power, which therefore in a single operation demolishes the old work and shows where the new one should be. If I am right, the divinatory sub-type is closer to the Celtic origins of the story, and the transportation sub-type is an imaginative development.

This is borne out by the distribution of the legends. In Wales, the divinatory type is more common. Demolition is ascribed to fairies or spirits, or is simply the work of unseen hands; the Devil is not allowed to interfere with church architecture. At least one church - Meifod in Montgomeryshire - had its site chosen by the disembodied voice of the patron saint, and in several cases a voice is heard (naturally speaking good Welsh) which indicates where the church should be built and gives a name to the parish. All this is compatible with a development

from the vitae of saints such as Brynach. At Llangar in Merionethshire the workmen found the eventual church site by hunting down a white stag, an action which has its parallels in the early hagiographical literature.

In England the pattern is much more varied. The transportation sub-type is more common than the divinatory and it is usually the Devil who is responsible, or the fairies, or something out of a most curious menagerie of pigs, cattle, cats, swans and doves. It is likely that these beasts represent variations on the white sow and milch kine contributed by the learned to the Welsh divinatory legends. Sometimes the two original motifs seem to have been rolled into one, as at Alfriston in Sussex, a church built where white cattle were discovered lying in the form of a cross [24].

Church-moving legends are less common in the rest of the British isles. The Scottish mainland has only two instances, Fordoun and Old Deer, although the story is told of a number of castles. At the extreme north, in Shetland, it becomes familiar again. I know of only three instances in Ireland, all of them involving saints rather than the ubiquitous fairies. These national differences can be easily accounted for by the different progress of the Reformation in the three kingdoms. No law-abiding Scots fairy would dare meddle with the kirk, while in Ireland the demolition of churches was carried out, not by supernatural agency, but by an occupying power. In England, however, even the Devil is an Anglican and it comes as no surprise to find him contributing to the building fund.

The story is known further afield, the outpost of its distribution being Corsica, where Leslie Grinsell found three instances. In France, as in Scotland, the legends centre on castles as well as churches, and the divination of the new site is often achieved by the master mason who throws his hammer away in desperation and determines to build the new church where it falls [25]. There are church-moving legends in the Channel Islands - Ste Marie du Castel in Guernsey was moved from a field in the centre of the parish to its present site by a menhir, La Grannere du Castel - and since these islands were French-speaking but within the diocese of Winchester they may have acted as a route for the transmission of the legend [26].

It is in Scandinavia, however, that the legend is enormously popular [27]. Both the divinatory and the transportation subtypes are present, with a third variant, based on old pagan practice, in which a church is built where its floating timbers have washed ashore. As in Wales and England, there are stories in which the village name is a pun based on words heard from the troll or giant who moved the church [28]. In Scandinavia, as in Ireland, they keep proper folklore records instead of leaving the subject to the authors of tourist trails, and it is stimulating to know that there are 158 examples from Norway on record - for those of us who can read Norwegian [29]. I believe that these will, on inspection, still conform to the theory of a Celtic origin, perhaps in twelfth-century hagiography, but the whole field is ripe for research from a geomythic rather than a folkloristic viewpoint. We are so accustomed to thinking of geomancy as a peculiarly English eccentricity that we sometimes forget to look for sacred landscapes across the Channel or the North Sea. Fairies travel light, and do not need passports.

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A PAGAN GOTHIC RITUAL

Alby Stone

ALBY STONE has written many articles and several booklets on northern traditional beliefs. His article on 'The Perilous Bridge' appeared in At the Edge No.1. A book on northern creation mythologies, Ymir's Flesh, will be published by Heart of Albion Press later this year.

In the years 369-72, pagan Goths embarked upon a campaign against those of their compatriots who had been converted to Christianity. This occurred in the Gothic-controlled lands straddling what are now the Ukraine (the land surrounding the mouths of the rivers Dniestr and Dniepr), Moldova, eastern Romania, and north Bulgaria. A significant fraction of the Goths had by this time been converted to Christianity, largely through the efforts of Ulfilas, who was consecrated as bishop to the Goths by Eusebius of Nicomedia, and sent among them as a missionary. The brand of Christianity purveyed by Ulfilas was Arianism, subsequently regarded as a heresy, since it denies the divinity of Christ.

However, it was not the type of Christianity adopted by the Goths that resulted in their persecution. Athanaric, the *iudex* (a combination of judge, war-leader and over-chieftain) of the Tervingi, one of the main tribal groups, seems to have instigated the campaign. Exactly why he did so is unclear, but a previous wave of persecutions involving Athanaric (347-8) has been suggested as an attempt to rid the Goths' ancestral religion - vital to their sense of ethnic identity - of corrupting influences, or perhaps to spite the Christian emperors of Rome. The persecution of 369-72 happened very soon after Rome officially recognised Gothic independence - the emperor Valens negotiated peace with Athanaric on a ship in the middle of the Danube in 369 - and it could be that the Gothic leader simply wished to rid the tribes of all remaining Roman influence. One distinct possibility is that Valens had been encouraging the conversion of the Goths, perhaps even offering military support to Athanaric's internal enemies in exchange for their conversion [1].

Whatever the truth of the matter, Athanaric certainly pressed ahead with a plan seemingly designed to eliminate Christianity. But the persecution appears to have been conducted according to a prescribed ritual, with the victims being offered a choice between returning to the pagan religion or remaining Christian and being punished accordingly. The ritual is described by the Church historian Sozomenus, writing in the mid-fifth century:
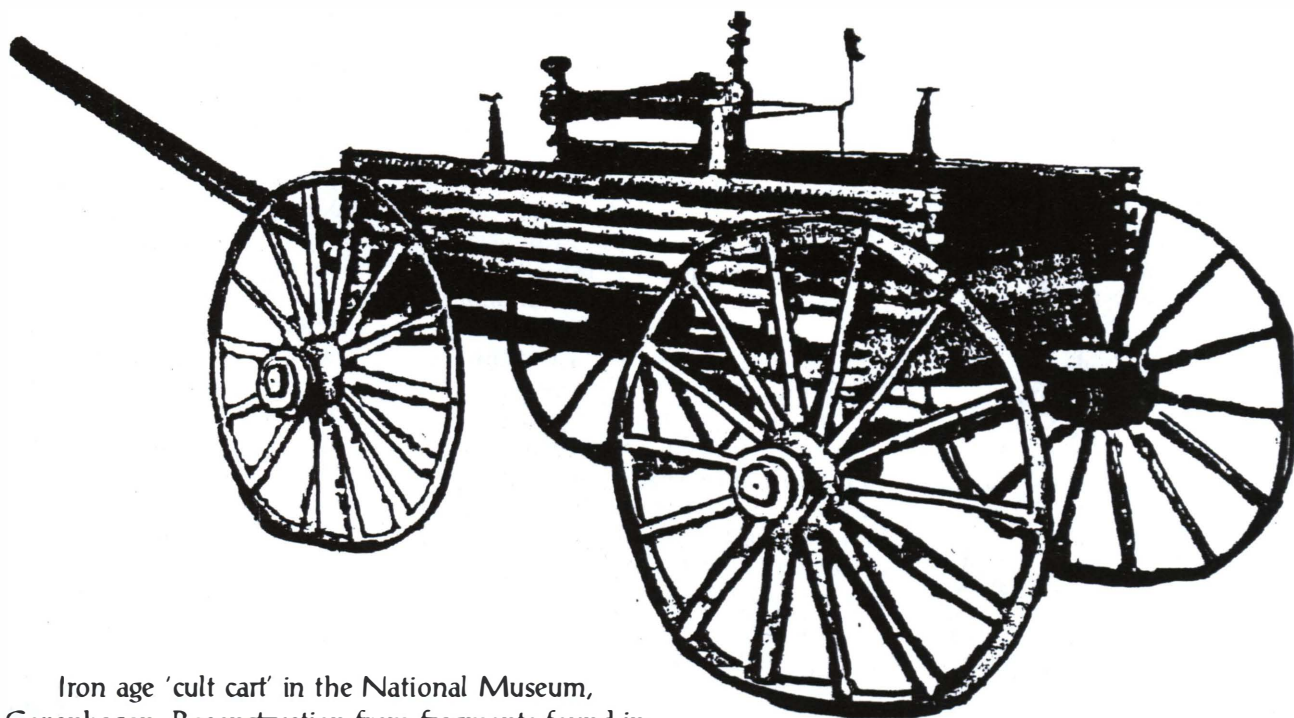
'It is said that a wooden image was placed on a wagon, and that those instructed by Athanaric to undertake this task wheeled it round to the tent of any of those who were denounced as Christians and ordered them to do homage and sacrifice to it; and the tents of those who refused to do so were burned, with the people inside.' [2]

The Goths - who appear to have migrated to eastern Europe from Sweden and the southern shore of the Baltic from around 150 onward - seem to have been adhering to a tradition brought with them from their native lands. Tacitus, writing toward the end of the first century, describes the worship of Nerthus, whom he characterises as 'Mother Earth', among the Germanic tribes of northern Germany:

'They believe that she takes a part in human affairs, riding in a chariot among her people. On an island of the sea stands an inviolate grove, in which, veiled with a cloth, is a chariot that none but the priest may touch. The priest can feel the presence of the goddess in this holy of holies, and attends her with deepest reverence as her chariot is drawn along by cows. Then follow days of rejoicing and merrymaking in every place that she condescends to visit and sojourn in. No one goes to war, no one takes up arms; every iron object is locked away. Then, and then only, are peace and quiet known and welcomed, until the goddess, when she has had enough of the society of men, is restored to her sacred precinct by the priest. After that, the chariot, the vestments, and (believe it if you will) the goddess herself, are cleansed in a secluded lake. This service is performed by slaves who are immediately afterwards drowned in the lake. Thus mystery begets terror and a pious reluctance to ask what that sight can be which is only seen by men doomed to die.' [3]

Any discussion of the goddess Nerthus is fraught with peril. This is the only mention of the name in any ancient text, and all that can be said with certainty is that the name is related to that of the Norse god

Iron age 'cult cart' in the National Museum, Copenhagen. Reconstruction from fragments found in Proestegaardmore, Dejbjerg, West Jutland. Illustrations by Bob Trubshaw.

Njorðr, who is conventionally associated with the sea. Any cultic or mythological relationship between Nerthus and Njorðr has yet to be satisfactorily demonstrated - although there are theories that either Tacitus got the deity's sex wrong, or an important Germanic goddess has been mysteriously masculinised, or there were originally two divinities, brother and sister, with different forms of the same name.

There are fewer problems with another Germanic deity associated with a ritual perambulation in a wheeled vehicle. The Icelandic *Flateyjarbók* includes a tale, *Gunnars þáttr*, that tells how a Norwegian named Gunnar Helmingr flees to Sweden after a dispute with king Olafr Tryggvason of Norway. He takes up with a priestess of Freyr, a woman characterised as the god's wife. When she sets out in a wagon containing an image of Freyr, Gunnar goes along for the ride, eventually impersonating the statue, joining in the celebratory feasts,
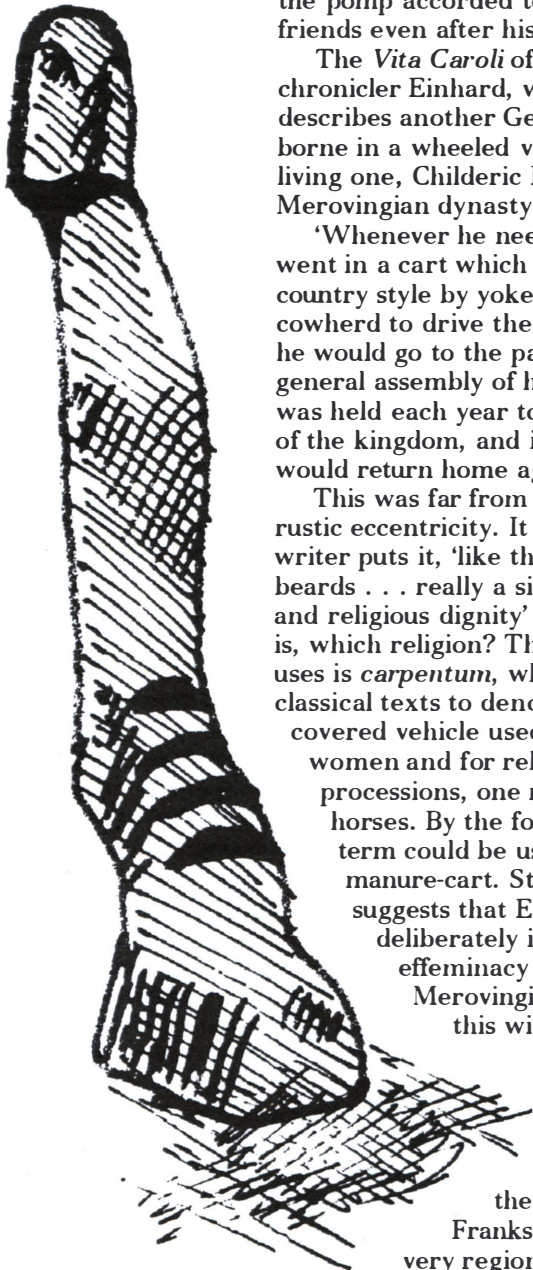
and enjoying a sexual relationship with the priestess, who becomes pregnant - an event taken as a good omen by the populace at large [4].

This relatively late tale is presented as a comedy, the joke being at the expense of the credulous heathens. But the god's wagon-ride seems to have been based on an authentic practice. *Flateyjarbók* records another wagon-borne deity, Lytir, who is consulted as an oracle by a Swedish king. The god's carriage is led to a particular place, and the king waits; when the wagon becomes heavy, it is taken as a sign that the god has entered it, and the vehicle is led to the king's hall, where it answers questions. Apart from this tale, Lytir is unknown except for a handful of place-names that might be derived from the name [5]. As to the name Lytir, it seems fairly certainly to be derived from Old Norse *lyta*, and means 'dirty, filthy, disgraceful'. This is an odd name for such a useful god, and it seems sensible to accept the argument of those who believe Lytir to be a

derogatory name given by later Christian authorities to Freyr, whose frank sexuality - his representation at Uppsala was ithyphallic - would have been enough to earn him such an epithet.

Another version of Freyr appears in the *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus. Saxo, writing early in the thirteenth century, recounts the life and career of the Danish king Frothi, whose reign - after wars against the British and Irish - is famous for peace and prosperity. It must be emphasised that Frothi's reign is wholly legendary; it is accepted, for good reason, that he is a euphemised version of Freyr, or perhaps a similarly-named Danish equivalent [6]. According to Saxo, Frothi (who has taken to travelling in a carriage because of old age and infirmity) is eventually killed by a sorceress who has taken the shape of a sea-cow. The nobility, fearing that conflict would break out if his death became known, embalm the corpse.

'For this reason they would carry his lifeless body about,

not, so it seemed, in a hearse, but a royal carriage, pretending that this was a service due from his soldiers to a feeble old monarch not in full possession of his strength. Such was the pomp accorded to their ruler by his friends even after his decease.' [7]

The *Vita Caroli* of the Frankish chronicler Einhard, written c.829-36, describes another Germanic monarch borne in a wheeled vehicle, this time a living one, Childeric III, last of the Merovingian dynasty.

'Whenever he needed to travel, he went in a cart which was drawn in country style by yoked oxen, with a cowherd to drive them. In this fashion he would go to the palace and to the general assembly of his people, which was held each year to settle the affairs of the kingdom, and in this fashion he would return home again.' [8]

This was far from being merely rustic eccentricity. It was, as one writer puts it, 'like the long hair and beards . . . really a sign of their royal and religious dignity' [9]. The question is, which religion? The term Einhard uses is *carpentum*, which is in used classical texts to denote a type of covered vehicle used mainly by women and for religious processions, one rarely drawn by horses. By the fourth century the term could be used for a manure-cart. Stuart Piggott [10] suggests that Einhard was deliberately insinuating effeminacy on the part of the Merovingians, and links this with their fabled long hair. He notes the androgynous possibilities of Nerthus; and the fact that the Franks originated in the very region in which Nerthus was supposedly venerated as a goddess.

Einhard is certainly making some kind of jibe at the Merovingians; but is he really suggesting effeminacy? Probably not. The ritual *carpentum* of pagan Rome was ornate, slow-moving, and patently meant to invest the occupant with dignity. The later usage, 'manure-cart', seems to have been meant (especially considering the description *rustico*, 'country-style') - in the same way that today the envious might sneeringly describe a wealthy man's Rolls-Royce as 'an old banger'.

These examples establish a basis for there having been a widespread tradition of ritual perambulations of gods (goddesses too, if Nerthus was genuinely female) and, later, kings in wheeled vehicles in the region from whence the Goths first came. Bearing in mind the historical tradition of divine ancestry attributed to Germanic royal houses, Saxo's euphemerisation of Frothi, and Gunnar Helmingr's successful impersonation, there may have seemed to be little difference in the popular mind between a wagon-borne god and a similarly-esconced ruler. The Gothic rite was not an innovation.

Frothi's association with peace, and its continuation after his death, compares with the cessation of war during the perambulations of Nerthus. Gunnar's adventure hints obliquely at something similar: the journey is described in terms of feasting, merrymaking, and sexual activity. Childeric's drive to the annual assembly should, perhaps, be considered in terms of the Germanic þing taking place amid general truce and laying-down of arms - although Tacitus states that men attended assemblies fully-armed, he also says they were overseen by some kind of priesthood, 'who on such occasions have power to enforce obedience' [11].

According to Sozomenus, the Gothic wagon contained an object - translated above as 'wooden image' - which he names as a *xoanon*, which denotes a cult-statue carved from wood. This accords perfectly with the contents of the wagons of Freyr and Nerthus - idols, images of divinity. If *Gunnars þáttr* is to be believed, then the statue of Freyr was life-size - otherwise Gunnar could not convincingly have worn ritual clothing or other adornments designed for it. Archaeological evidence is not much help: some cult vehicles of the Bronze Age onward are of normal size, while others - such as the

Above and opposite: Wooden cult-images recovered from Danish bogs, probably similar to the Gothic wagon-deity.

Trundholm sun-chariot are tiny (though it should perhaps be noted that the solar disc it bears is obviously not an anthropomorphic representation).
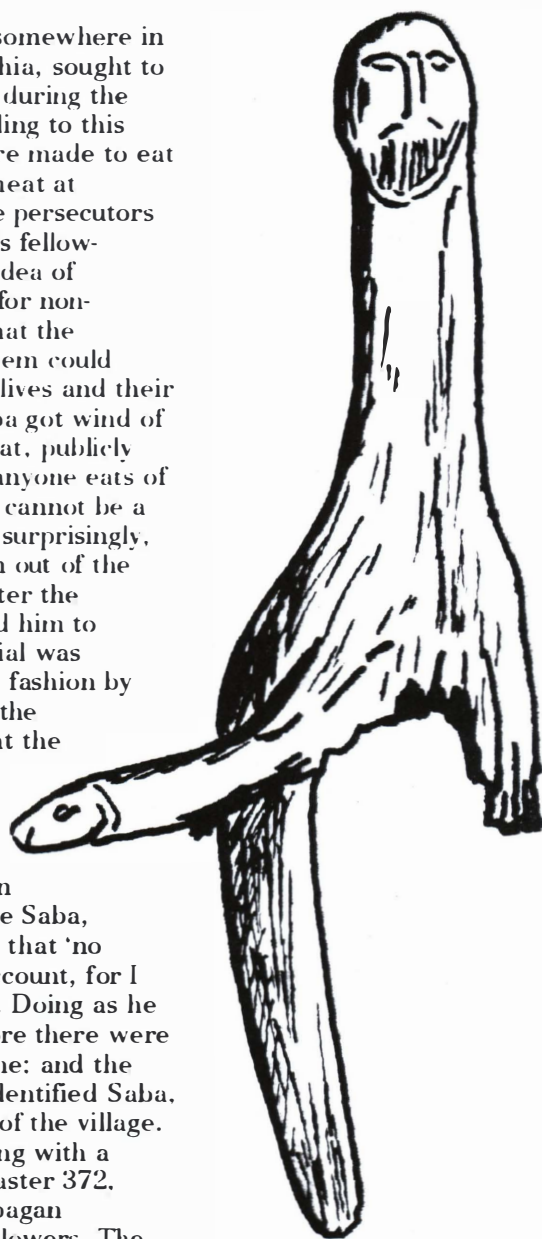
The fact that the Gothic wagon was wheeled from one place to another suggests that it and its divine occupant were life-size. Unfortunately, there are no other clues as to the nature of the deity it carried. The balance of cultic evidence from (admittedly late) Scandinavian texts, and the Frankish association with kingship, tends to suggest that the deity was male. There seems little point in invoking the similar vehicular perambulations of the Phrygian goddess Kybele, whose cult is known in the same region at an earlier date - if the Goths really were so concerned to maintain the purity of their ancestral religion, then they are hardly likely to have elevated a distinctly alien goddess to such a significant purpose.

Events in the Gothic lands during the persecution period 369-72 may provide further pointers to the nature and purpose of the ritual. Sozomenus presents it as a test of faith for pagans and Christians alike. But why should it take this particular form? The easiest way would surely have been for suspected Christians to be forced to take an oath. A popular way was to swear on a sacred arm-ring - and these are certainly known from the region in the period in question. The treasure of Pietroasa in Romania includes a splendid example, engraved with Gothic runes. Yet this common means of oath-taking seems not to have been employed at all.

A clue may be found in the *Passion of St Saba the Goth* (which was written as a letter from 'the church of God dwelling in Gothia, to the church of God dwelling in Cappadocia and all the other communities of the holy catholic church in any place' [12]). Written very soon after the events it purports to recount, the *Passion* tells how a Christian named Saba, a member of a Gothic community somewhere in what is now Wallachia, sought to uphold his integrity during the persecution. According to this text, the people were made to eat (pagan) sacrificial meat at gatherings when the persecutors were present. Saba's fellow-villagers hit on the idea of switching the meat for non-sacrificial fare, so that the Christians among them could preserve both their lives and their integrity. When Saba got wind of this, he refused to eat, publicly announcing that 'If anyone eats of that meat, this man cannot be a Christian' [13]. Not surprisingly, the man was thrown out of the village. Later on - after the villagers had allowed him to return - 'a time of trial was moved in customary fashion by the Goths' [14] and the villagers decided that the pagans among them would swear by their gods that there were no Christians in the village. The noble Saba, however, demanded that 'no man swear on my account, for I am a Christian' [15]. Doing as he said, the pagans swore there were no Christians save one: and the persecutor, having identified Saba, had him thrown out of the village.

Later, while staying with a Christian priest at Easter 372, Saba fell foul of the pagan Atharidus and his followers. The priest, curiously, was 'held captive on a wagon', but Saba was soundly beaten and driven through burning bushes. The next day, Saba boasted that the mistreatment had left him unblemished. The heathens then tied wagon axles to his outstretched hands and feet, and flogged him until they were so tired that they fell asleep. A woman came and set Saba free, but he refused to leave the place: so his hands were tied and he was strung up from a roof-beam. When Atharidus' men turned up with sacrificial meat, the two prisoners refused to partake. Saba insulted Atharidus and the meat, and an angry pagan grabbed a pestle and threw it at Saba's chest. The blow was hard, but Saba sneered at the man, denying that it had hurt.

When Atharidus heard this, he finally ordered Saba to be killed. The priest was allowed to live, but Saba was led away to be drowned in a nearby river. On the way - 'along the entire road' - he praised God and gave thanks to the Holy Spirit. On reaching the river, Atharidus' men decided to 'set free this fool'; but Saba admonished them for attempting to avoid carrying out orders. Thereupon, they threw him in the river and pressed him down with a wooden beam until he drowned [16].

The letter does not mention a wagon-borne

xoanon, although the test of sacrifical meat would parallel the feasting that celebrated the arrival of Freyr's carriage in *Gunnars þáttr*. A wagon looms large in Saba's encounter with Atharidus, as a prison for a holy man, and as a means of punishment; was it a ritual wagon of the type mentioned by Sozomenus? Atharidus' rôle would suggest that it was, but it is not at all certain. More telling is the treatment meted out to the insufferable Saba. On two occasions his admission of Christianity results in nothing more than his being thrown out of the village. This conflicts with Sozomenus' claim that discovered Christians were burned alive in their dwellings. Atharidus and his men beat Saba with rods, whip him, and subject him to a rough-and-ready form of torture with axles, but they seem reluctant to do more than that. Even the pestle-throwing incident appears to be an angry, impetuous reaction to Saba's smug cantankerousness, with the thrower seizing whatever came to hand. Finally, personal insult and blasphemy cause Atharidus to lose patience, and he orders Saba to be drowned. Even then, the executioners try to evade the issue - they want to free the condemned man, but he insists upon being killed.

Three points arise from this story. Firstly, there is a marked reluctance on the part of the persecutors to kill anyone, and Saba is only drowned after provoking his captors. Secondly, actual weapons are not mentioned - the persecutors use whatever everyday objects are to hand. Finally, the manner of Saba's death accords with sacrificial executions described by Tacitus, and echoes the drowning of slaves who wash the wagon and image of Nerthus [17].

There are further tentative links with the cult of Nerthus.

Tacitus asserts that, when Nerthus is on her travels, 'no one goes to war, no one takes up arms; every iron object is locked away'. Is this why Atharidus and his men are forced to use domestic implements and makeshift tortures, because warfare and weapons are forbidden to them while the deity in the wagon is abroad? Of course, there is a conflict between Sozomenus and the story of Saba - one depends on ruthless and lethal persecution, the other on Saba being allowed to live so that he can display his faith. Even so, the former tells us that Christians were burned in their homes - *not* that they were put to the sword. Perhaps this was intended as a sacrificial death; or maybe it never happened at all [18].

On the whole, these accounts of the Gothic persecution of Christians do not really conflict with the peace-generating perambulations of Nerthus as described by Tacitus - the burnings alleged by Sozomenus ring false when set alongside the *Passion of St Saba the Goth*, which is practically a contemporary record of the persecution. It may even be suggested that the real purpose of the wagon-borne deity was to procure peace among those of conflicting faiths, rather than being a straightforward test of religious alliegance. Certainly there have been those who have described the Goths' internal religious differences in terms of civil war, Sozomenus among them [19]. Unreliable though Sozomenus may be in describing various aspects of the Goths' religious dispute, the wagon ritual rings true; though he obviously does not understand its significance. The deity in the wagon evidently belongs to the religious traditions of the Goths' ancestral lands, and its existence is supported by circumstantial evidence in the story of the martyr Saba.
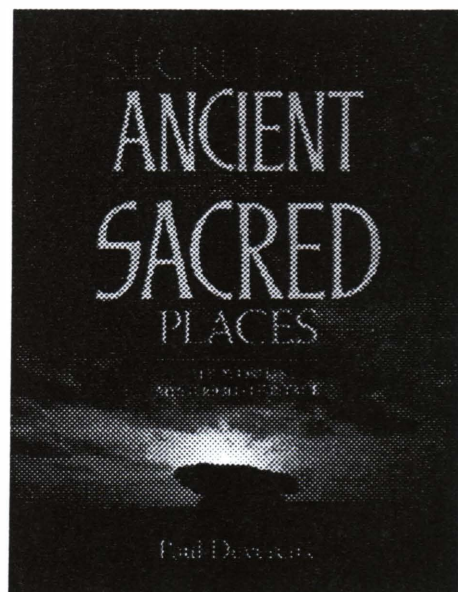
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11: Tacitus, op. cit., p111.
12: Heather and Matthews, op. cit., p111.
13: Ibid., p113.
14: Ibid., p113.
15: Ibid., p113.
16: Ibid., p114-7.
17: Tacitus, op. cit., p111.
18: For example, Sozomenus writes of the Goths living in tents. As Heather and Matthews note (op. cit., p108), this was not a time when the Goths lived a nomadic life. They also note that Sozomenus had problems with chronology.
19: Heather and Matthews (op. cit.): 'the Goths fought among themselves and were split into two divisions . . . these two made war on each other'. The 'extent, dating and historicity' of this alleged conflict are, as Heather and Matthews acknowledge, matters for debate.

Some special treats for *At the Edge* readers!

1   Paul Devereux's *Secrets of Ancient and Sacred Places* is now out as a Blandford paperback. This most attractively produced book provides the latest 'Earth Mysteries' understanding of twenty UNESCO World Heritage Sites around the world.

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    Entries on a postcard to arrive before Sunday 30th June (address inside front cover). First five correct replies out of the mythical hat will receive their copy early July; results will be published in *At the Edge* No.3. One entry per person; entrants must have paid-up subscription to *At The Edge* valid for issue 3. Editor's decision final and all that stuff.

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2   Anthony Weir and James Jerman's *Images of Lust* is an innovative study of how sexual imagery on Romanesque churches 'travelled' up the pilgrimage routes from Santiago de Compostella from northern Spain, through western France and into Norman England - bringing with it 'sheela-na-gigs', ithyphallic males and other intriguing indelicacies.

    Originally published in 1986 and reprinted as a paperback by Batsford in 1993, this edition has recently been been remaindered. Anthony Weir has secured a few copies which are available to *At the Edge* readers at the special price of **£7.95 + 80p p&p** (paperback edition cover price was £15.99). Send cheques, payable to 'Heart of Albion Press', to address inside front cover.

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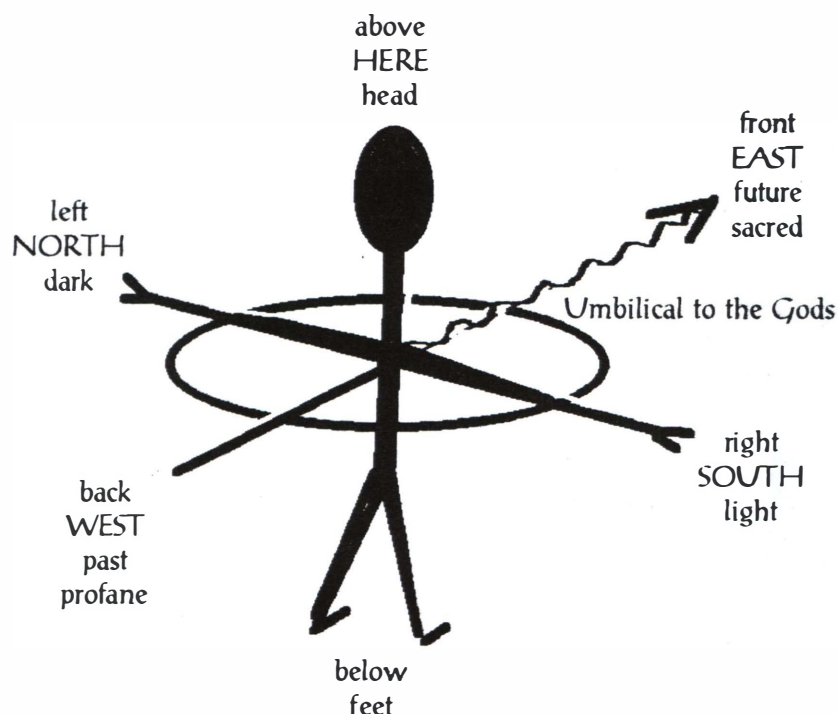
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Bob Trubshaw

THE FIFTH DIRECTION

Sacred centres in Ireland

BOB TRUBSHAW's interest in sacred central places first manifested as a number of articles in Mercian Myseries, *some of which were reprinted in a booklet titled* The Quest for the Omphalos *(Heart of Albion Press, 1991; out of print).*

above
HERE
head

front
EAST
future
sacred

left
NORTH
dark

Umbilical to the Gods

back
WEST
past
profane

right
SOUTH
light

below
feet

Anyone who starts to take an interest in the medieval texts relating to Ireland quickly picks up the idea that the country was divided into 'fifths'. Indeed, the Gaelic word *cuigeadh* still means 'fifths' (singular *coiced*) and the modern-day Gaelic expression which translates literally as 'the five fifths of Ireland' refers to the political divisions of Ulster, Connacht, Leinster and Munster. Yes, you have counted correctly. There are only four 'fifths' in Ireland. The early legends subdivided Munster into east and west, but this is an artificial adjustment. The earliest clearly datable references to the *cuigeadh* relate to the kingdoms which emerged in the fifth and sixth centuries. At this date Ireland is considered to be divided into fifths but only four functional divisions are recognisable.
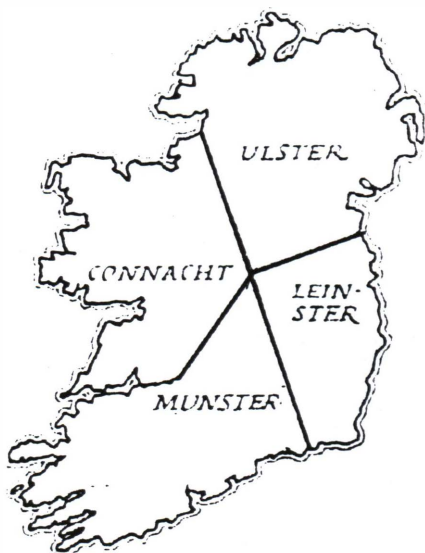
A region known as *Midhe* (perhaps meaning 'middle' or 'neck'), which incorporated the royal centre at Tara, was regarded as having pre-eminent status and has for many centuries been popularly considered to be the fifth *coiced*. Yet, politically, from the iron age onwards, *Midhe* was

under the domination of one or other adjoining kingdoms. Tara, with its impressive group of ditched earthworks and the *Lia Fail* (Stone of Density, used for the coronation of the High Kings of Ireland), indeed had enourmous prestige in the medieval literature yet, when the kings met annually (at Beltain), they did so at a natural outcrop known in recent years as *Aill na Mireann*, but probably traditionally as *Carraig Choithrigi* (the Stone of Divisions), which is situated near the less-impressive earthworks on the Hill of Uisnech. Furthermore, it is Uisnech, not Tara, which is the geographical mid-point of Ireland. For instance, it is claimed that a beacon fire on Uisnech can be seen over a quarter of Ireland [1].

Midhe is not the missing fifth *coiced*. Nevertheless, the earliest literary sources suggest that this five-fold division is of immemorial antiquity, a suggestion generally accepted by historians and archaeologists. What we are looking at is less a five-fold division which had pragmatic functions for politics and government than at a

mythological concept which forms a fundamental level of symbolism within Irish tradition. In a book of Celtic mythology published in 1961 [2] (which has survived the ravages of academic debates and developments much better than many later works) Alwyn and Brinley Rees develop a detailed appreciation of this cosmological symbolism.

In essence, it requires us to think of *five directions.* Modern western thinking counts four cardinal points (north, south, east and west) but the Irish, along with several other traditional Indo-European cultures and the Chinese, think of five directions - the fifth being 'here' or 'centre'. The logic of this is impeccable. 'North', 'south' and such like are all essentially relative terms - what is north of me at this moment might well be south of you or vica versa. Everything is relative to 'here' This fifth direction is also the *axis mundi*, the Cosmic Axis, which manifests worldwide as the World Tree and its derivatives, such as the maypole. For each of us, the centre is 'here'.

This cosmological symbolism begins to explain the sanctity given to crossroads. Although more difficult for the modern mind to comprehend, crossroads were once considered to be the most magical places, credited with powers of protection and healing, and favoured places for magical spells and love auguries. Crossroads were also dangerous places - penal courts often met there, the pillory or stocks and, traditionally, the gallows were so sited. Suicides, gypsies, witches, outlaws and other reprobates were buried there - as innumerable labourers repairing roads have discovered [3].

Traditional north European board games strongly reflect this same 'four-sides-and-centre' form. 'Nine Men's Morris' was a common persuit throughout the medieval period and crudely-scratched 'boards' survive on the stone seats of a number of medieval church porches and the like. This game has survived today in the similar, but less-interesting, 'Noughts and Crosses'. Of at least equal antiquity are a different family of related games which the Irish knew as *Brandubh* and the Vikings as *Hnefatafl* ('King's table'). One contestant defends the King, who starts play at the centre, from the other contestant, whose pieces start from the four sides.

An old Irish baldic poem draws a direct analogy between *Brandubh* and the position of the High King at Tara, with the men of the four *cuigeadh* arrayed in the appropriate directions [4].

The history of Tara is complex. The most visible remains today are two

conjoined iron age hillforts (see illustration p18), in one of which now stands the *Lia Fail*. The ritual importance of the site extends much further back, however, as the so-called 'Mound of the Hostages' (all these names are simply high Victorian myth-making derived from mistaken readings of medieval literary sources) proved, on excavation to be a neolitihic passage tomb. Aligned to the 'Mound of the Hostages' is the 'Banqueting Hall' which is probably neolithic and a cursus-like feature on which all the major roads of ancient Ireland converged. Aerial photographs reveal a number of otherwise-invisible circles and mounds in the vicinity [5].

The literture relating to Tara reveals a more complex cosmological mythology. To develop briefly just one aspect, the Ulster Cycle of the medieval literature describes how the trouble-maker Bricriu erected a banqueting hall at Tara and arranged a feast which led to three of the legendary heroes of

Top left:
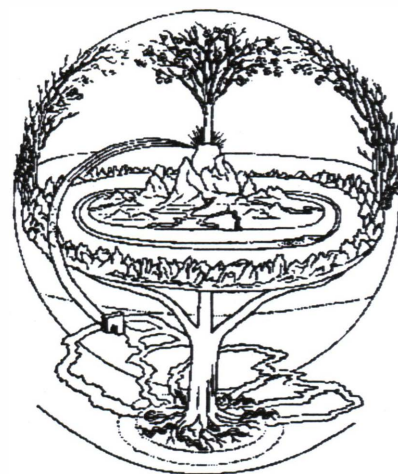Ireland divided into four 'fifths' (adapted from Rees and Rees).
Top right:
Ygddrassil, the World Tree of northern traditions.
Bottom left:
Nine Men's Morris board.
Bottom right:
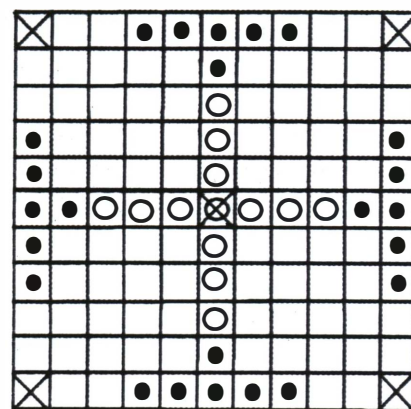Hnefatafl board with pieces shown at starting positions.
Centre:
Mahjong tile for 'Centre'.
Opposite page:
Schematic diagram of five directions, incorporating ideas from Yi-Fu Tuan and Nigel Pennick.

Bronze sculpture of Cú Chulainn tied to a monolith, with the raven-goddess of death on his shoulder. Drawing of a statue cast in 1916 by Oliver Shepherd which stands in Dublin's main Post Office.
Illustration by David Taylor.

Ulster contesting the Champion's Portion (see boxed text on ritual dismemberment). According to the Rees':

'The account of the construction of Bricriu's Hall certainly embodies a calendrical symbolism. It took *seven* of the Ulster champions to carry every single lath, and *thirty* of the chief artificers of Ireland were employed in constructing and arranging the building. The hall contained the couches of the *twelve* heroes and it was built in the course of *one* year.' [10]

The King who, myths say, brought about the construction of Tara had *365* people in his household, became king at the end of his *seventh* year, and provided a feast at Samhain which lasted *seven* days. To emphasise the calendrical connections, we are told that he had *twelve* foster-fathers and was given a nominal kingship which would elapse at the end of *one year*.

This symbolism links into wider cosmological concerns, as John Matthews has recognised: 'the story of the great Irish hero Cuchulainn describes how, when his last and greatest battle was going badly, Cuchulainn strapped himself to a stone monolith, which represented the central backbone of creation, and drew strength and support from it.' [11] Both Tara and Uisnech, two *axis mundi* of Ireland, are associated with stones of a size which would readily brace a fading hero.

If this seems all too androcentric, perhaps it worth mentioning that Janet McCrickard [12] has noted that at Tara there was a *grianan* (literally 'the abode of the sun' but known from the legends to be an elevated and well-lit room from which men were excluded). She suggests this could have been an 'observatory' for a solar cult among the women, maybe a tantalising clue to an area of ritual unknown, or intentionally ignored, by the male storytellers and scribes.

More centres

Tara may be cosmologically the centre of Ireland, but the geographical centre is over thirty miles to the west. Between the

modern towns of Mullingar and Athlone is the Hill of Uisnech. On the slopes of the hill is the natural outcrop known as the Stone of Divisions. However, while Tara is in fertile and accessible terrain, the geographical centre at Uisnech is less hospitable. To the south and east are lakes and bogs, to the west and north are rivers and Lough Ree. Nevertheless, legends suggest that Uisnech was the symbolic focus of Ireland long before Tara [13]; early Christian activity was quick to establish a major monastic site nearby, at Clonmacnoise, on the banks of the Shannon.

Reinforcement of the five-fold cosmological concept of Ireland comes from the clearly-recognisable presence of sacred centres in each of the four *cuigeadh*. In Ulster, Navan Fort near Armagh appears to be one of several sites which make up the remains of a complex of royal centres. The much-criticised visitors' centre explores the idea that Navan Fort fits neatly with the epic literature relating to Eamhain Mhacha, but nothing could be further from the truth. This is not to say that the sites near Armagh were not important - the skull of a Barbary ape, found at Navan Fort and dated to the fifth century BC, may be taken as evidence for exotic gifts 'fit for a king'. The nearby artificial pool, known today as the King's Stables, has produced a number of iron age votive offerings including large ceremonial trumpets. But these all substantially predate the medieval legends of Eamhain Mhacha.

The Channel Four programme this February, which reported on the *Time Team* 'visit' to Navan Fort, made clear that the iron age sites are strung out over several miles and local archaeologists have yet to form a detailed understanding of the relationships between the various earthworks. The most recent excavations at Navan Fort revealed a vast round iron age temple which was deliberately burnt to the ground and covered over with a stone cairn. The excavators noted that the stones had been placed in 'wheel-like' segments and suggested that this was a deliberate intention to symbolise a 'navel' or ritual *axis mundi*. The excavated remains include the base of the central wooden post, the centre of the 'wheel' [14]. Excavations at Haughey's Fort, overlooking the King's Stables pool, have revealed another major site, a possible precursor to Navan Fort itself [15].

Tara, Navan Fort and Dun Ailline (The Hill of Allen in the sunrise-facing front, Leinster) are all recognised as so-called 'royal centres' in the Celtic iron

RITUAL DISMEMBERMENT

As noted in the 'Exploring past and place - where next?' article elsewhere in this issue, Michael Parker-Pearson has recognised the way cosmological symbolism manifests in the iron age settlements and cemeteries of East Yorkshire. This suggests that in the iron age there was a clear mental map in which east equated to front, west to back, north to left, and south to right. Our word 'orientation' still embodies this sense of facing to the *orient* i.e. east, a trait shared with many Indo-European languages. Less explicit is the temporal 'map' which this implies, where front equates to 'future' and behind is associated with 'past'.

In the early Christian era in Ireland it is still possible to recognise that warriors were buried in the north of churchyards and that the west (and, to a lesser extent, north) were regarded as in some way 'evil' or, at the very least, profane with respect to the sacred east [6].
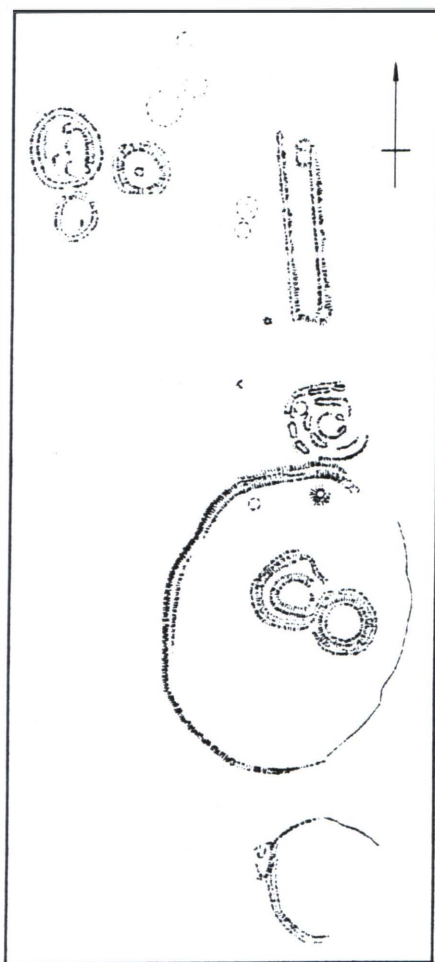
Parker-Pearson's analysis of the food offerings buried with the dead in East Yorkshire will, for anyone in the least familiar with the Irish *Mabinogion* and related 'Celtic' mythology, readily bring to mind the numerous disputes which arose over who among the heroes present at a feast should be awarded the 'champion's portion'. Unfortunately the surviving tales fail to tell us which part of the animal was so highly regarded. Perhaps the archaeological evidence in East Yorkshire offers some compelling clues.

But the allocation of the champion's portion is merely the tip of an iceberg which lurks under the surface of much Indo-European mythology. Alby Stone has shown how the 'Questing Beast' of Arthurian legend is only one of the more recent mythological manifestations of ritual dismemberment [7] which derive from a once-widespread belief that the Earth came into existence when a primeaval giant was dismembered, with his hair becoming the grass and trees, his blood the rivers, and such like [8].

This original 'beginning of space and time' (or 'cosmogeneic') dismemberment was enjoined in the act of ritual sacrifice, where 'According to this archaic scenario . . . all sacrifices, human and animal, recreate the cosmos in the same way as the primordial sacrifices created it in the first place.' [9] Given the intricate interlocking of left:right and north:south symbolism in the iron age mythology, we need not be surprised if the 'dismemberment' of Ireland into *cuigeadh* also married closely with this cosmological symbolism, at least in the early phases of the legends not lost by later accretions and evolution.

In passing, it is worth noting that the later phases of this development led to the ritual 'cosmogenic' sacrifice evolving into the Christian Eucharist rites (although the transubstantiation of bread and wine into flesh and blood 'inverts' the original ordering).

As I explore in the main article, the early medieval Irish 'royal centres' were places of ritual assembly and feasting. Like the layers of an onion, the activities which took place there embodied a 'nested' cosmological symbolism that integrated both the location and layout of the sites themselves as well as such matters of detail as the seating and distribution of food.

Left:
The surviving earthworks
at Tara.

Right:
Aitchison's reconstruction of the
five-fold medieval plan of
Armagh, showing principal
churches and a 'sacred way'/
market place to the (sacred) East.

age. However, they share a distinctive feature with a specific type of neolithic ritual site - henges. They all have banks with *internal* ditches. This makes them unsuitable for defence.

Raffin Fort is another major (although smaller) 'royal centre' which, when recently excavated, revealed cultural continuity from the late bronze age into the iron age; again a neolithic site was found underlying all the later earthworks. Quite what these so-called 'royal centres' really were used for is subject to intense debate. We should not think of them primarily 'residential' bases for royalty but rather as the focus of seasonal gatherings, inaugurations, law courts, and other social and political activities. According to Conor Newman, Director of the Tara Survey project, 'more importantly, they provided a symbolic tribal focus' [16]. The *axis mundi*/World Tree

symbolism is clear as an other feature of early Irish 'royal centres' is the *bile* or inauguration tree. At least four such sites have a *bile* at the focal point; a sacred ash also stood at Uisnech [17]

Further back, to use the traditional Irish directions, a now-eroded earthwork known as Rathcrogan Mound, at Cruchain on the plains of Roscommon, was the centre of Connachta power and took its place in importance alongside Tara, Uisnech, Navan Fort and Dun Ailinne. In more recent centuries it was regarded as one of Ireland's most important cemeteries - and was the location of one of the great fairs of ancient Ireland [18]. Although things might not be as simple as they look - recent geophysical surveys suggest that Rathcrogan Mound is just part of a scatter of monuments covering some four square miles [19].

This is a far from exhaustive list of medieval Irish 'royal centres'. Indeed, much remains to be discovered and, above all, understood about these 'royal centres'. For instance, one avenue of approach is to look at place-names with the element *riogh* ('royal'). In Leinster alone this suggests that more investigation is needed at Dinn Ríogh and Nás na Ríogh. And it is not only the centres themselves which are of interest, but also the 'gaps' in between. Excavations in the peat deposits near Colea revealed a prehistoric roadway

made from timber. This was no 'brushwood path' but built for wheeled traffic and had a 'monumental character indicative of power, prestige and authority'. It seems never to have been used; indeed, a short section may never have been finished. One explanation of its intended purpose is as a ritual route linking Uisnech and Cruchain [20].

Five-fold Christian Cosmology

One almost consistent feature of these chief 'royal centres' is that they acquire a major early Christian neighbour. Tara alone seems to be the exception, perhaps because of its proximity to Dublin. Uisnech may be why St Ciaran was attracted to Clonmacnoise around AD 545. Navan Fort seems certainly to be been why St Patrick founded the cathdral at Armagh. Well, historical evidence indicates that it seems most unlikely that St Patrick had anything to do with the origins of Armagh, but long-standing rivalry between the ecclesiastics of Armagh and Kildare for authority over all Ireland's churches meant that it was imperative that history was rewritten to give St Patrick a starring role at Armagh.

More than hagiographical symbolism was invoked in these ruthless arguments. The whole layout of the medieval city of Armagh seems to have been laid out as a five-fold cosmological

model, further asserting the right to be the spiritual centre of the country. The evidence for this is difficult to summarise but has been approached in Aitchison's book-length work, *Armagh and the Royal Centres in Early Medieval Ireland*. He examines many of the ideas and discoveries presented in this article [21].

Indeed, the stimulus to get to grips with this wide-ranging material was provided by Aitchison's impressive integration of myth and archaeology. Michael Dames' *Mythic Ireland* covers many of the same ideas in a more accessible manner, introducing many additional suggestions. Several of Dames' ideas and observations have crept into this article without overt reference; my apologies and thanks. The pioneering work of the Reeses remains as solid foundations for both these later authors. All these three books provide profound insights into the interlocked relationship between mythology and physical places which makes the Irish literature and landscape so special. In this article I have skipped all too capriciously across the surface.

References

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2: Alwyn and Brinley Rees, *Celtic Heritage: Ancient Tradition in Ireland and Wales*, Thames and Hudson, 1961.
3: A more detailed discussion of crossroads and related 'liminal' sites appeared in my article 'The metaphors and rituals of place and time: an introduction to liminality' in *Mercian Mysteries* No.22 February 1995. Copies of this issue are still available at £1.50 incl. p&p from Bob Trubshaw at the editorial address.
4: Nigel Pennick, *Games of the Gods: the Origin of Board Games in Magic and Divination*, Rider, 1988. The company Past Times were selling a *Tafl*-type game, but this has been dropped from recent catalogues. Any readers interested in purchasing hand-made Hnefatafl sets should contact Bob Trubshaw.
5: Peter Harbison, *Pre-Christian Ireland: From the First Settlers to the Early Celts*, Thames and Hudson, 1988 (revised paperback edition 1994).
6: N.B. Aitchison, *Armagh and the Royal Centres in Early Medieval Ireland*, Cruithne Press/Boydell and Brewer, 1994. It is no coincidence that the modern term 'wasteland' is derived from 'west land'. The contrast with a 'civilised east' is graphically demonstrated in the romantic mythology concerning nineteenth century attempts to tame the 'Wild West' of America. More recently, the 'hippy era' awoke an interest in the religions of the east, claiming for them a spiritual mysticism which was considered to be lacking from the materialist emphasis of western religious institutions. The structuralism of the iron age seems to be alive and well over 2,000 years on!
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11: John Matthews, *The Celtic Shaman - a Handbook*, Element, 1991.
12: Janet McCrickard, *The Eclipse of the Sun: an Investigation into Sun and Moon Myths*, Gothic Image, 1990.
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14: *Current Archaeology* No.134 (1993) p44-49.
15: *Archaeology Ireland* No.31 (1995) p28-30.
16: *Archaeology Ireland* No.31 (1995) p38-40.
17: Raftery, op. cit. A summary of Celtic tree lore associated with sacred sites is provided in John Matthews, *Taliesin: Shamanism and the Bardic Mysteries in Britain and Ireland*, Aquarian, 1991.
18: Harbison op.cit.
19: *Archaeology Ireland* No.25 (1993) p20-3.
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21: Aitchison, op. cit.

Envoi

Imprisoned by four walls
(to the North, the crystal of non-knowledge
a landscape to be invented
to the South, reflective memory
to the East, the mirror
to the West, stone and the song of silence)
I wrote messages, but received no reply.

Octavio Paz

[Original publication not known; quoted in Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (trans. D. Nicholson-Smith, Blackwell 1991).

OXHIDE TALES

Michael Behrend

a worldwide trick

MICHAEL BEHREND enjoys tracking down obscure references in Cambridge libraries. He all-too-occassionally stops enjoying himself long enough to write articles. These include contributions to the maze journal, Caerdroia, and joint authorship, with Bob Forrest, of statistical studies of leys.

The oxhide tale is an example of a folk tale in which land is gained by deception. The trickster asks for as much land as can be covered by the hide of an ox (or other animal) and, when this seemingly modest request is granted, cuts the hide into a single thong, encloses a large area of ground, and successfully claims it. Penny Drayton has summarised British examples [1] but the story is known in many parts of the world. Usually the trickster is presented as a settler from a distant country, who takes advantage of the natives. For example, the story is told against European settlers in Asia, South Africa and North America. As one Canadian story puts it, 'This is the way the white man does. He cheats the Indian' [2]. So too the English are said to have got land in Calcutta, the Spanish in the Philippines, and the Dutch in both Formosa (Taiwan) and Cambodia (for bibliography see for example [3]).

Often a town or fortress is built on the stolen land, and in memory of the trick is given a name that includes 'hide' or 'thong'. Presumably this means that the legend has become attached to a place with a suggestive name. For example, the Zyrians or Komi (Komi Republic, extreme north-east
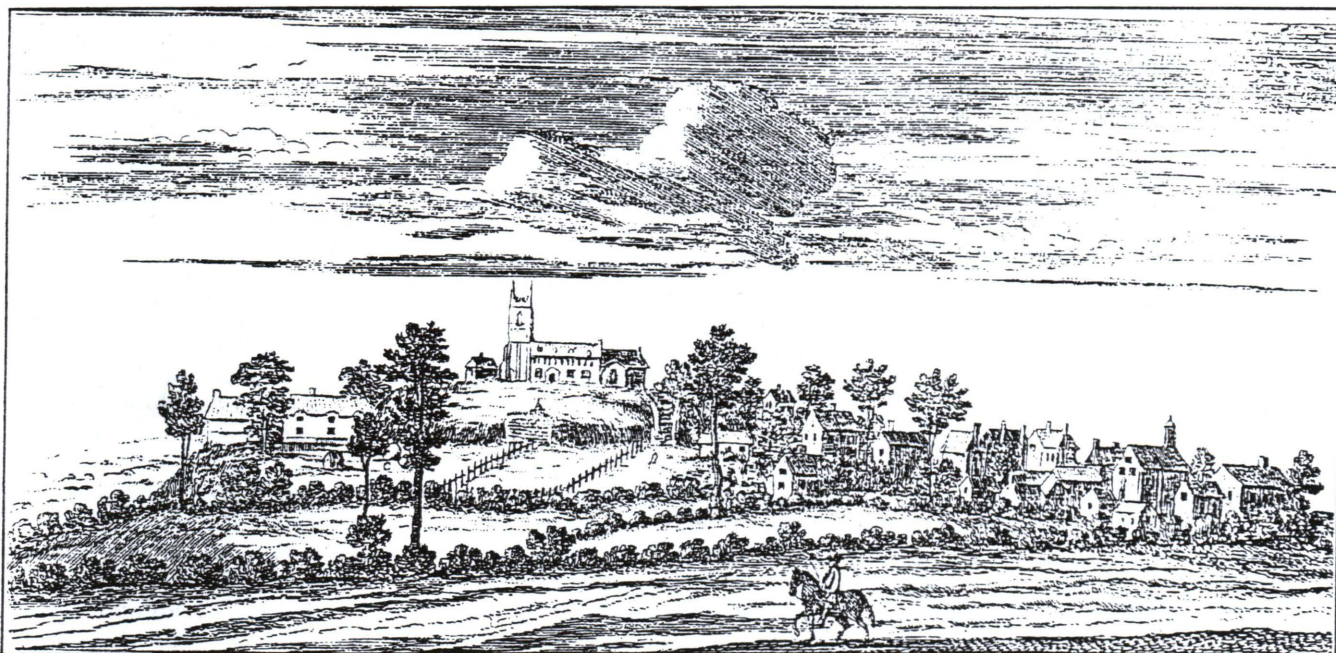
Europe) have a tradition that the Russians took the site of Moscow from them by the trick: in the Zyrian language Moscow is called Mössku, which also means cowhide [4]. The same is true of the classical story, quoted by many ancient and modern writers, in which settlers led by Queen Dido get the site of Carthage by the oxhide trick. 'This myth probably arose from the fact that the Phoenician *bosrah*, "citadel", was confused with the Greek *byrsa*, "bull's hide".' [5]

Here, however, I will concentrate on English versions of the tale. It is first told by Geoffrey of Monmouth [6]. Hengist defeats the Picts in battle on behalf of King Vortigern, who rewards him with 'many lands in the neighbourhood of Lindsey'. Hengist asks for a castle or city too. Vortigern, as a Christian, is reluctant to make such a gift to a foreigner and pagan, but consents to give as much land for the purpose as can be enclosed by a single thong. Thereupon Hengist cuts a whole bull's hide into a single thong, and on the ground so enclosed builds a fortress which is called Castrum Corrigie in Latin, Kaercarrei in Welsh, and Thancastre in Old English – all meaning 'Thong Castle'. (The variant Caer Egarry, given for

example by Camden [7], is evidently *caer y garrai*, with the definite article.) After this part of the story, Vortigern falls in love with Hengist's daughter (even though she is a pagan!) and gives him the province of Kent in return for his consent to the marriage.

Geoffrey's version differs from the usual one in two ways. First, Hengist already has plenty of land. What he is asking for (as Tatlock [8] emphasises) is permission to build a castle on it, for in Geoffrey's time a grant of land by no means implied such permission. Second, Hengist mentions the thong in his request, so the trick, if there is one, consists in making the thong of extraordinary length. Camden too, writing 450 years after Geoffrey, does not suggest any trickery.

But between those dates other writers tell the story as a trick. In Layamon's *Brut* (c.1205) [9] Hengist asks for as much land as a bull's hide will cover when spread out; then his 'wise man' slits the hide into a single thong as fine as a thread. Layamon puzzles us by adding that the fortress was later captured by the Danes, who called it Lane-castel. Hardyng, writing in the fifteenth century [10], tells the story like Geoffrey, but emphasizes the trick element:

Caistor in Lindsey, showing the 'precipitous site' and the remains of 'Thong Castle' (fragments of wall in front of church and in front of cottage to left). From Stukeley's *Itinerarium Curiosum* (1776 edition).

And thus by subtletee and
   sleyghty gyn
Where then he made
   Thongcastre as men tolde
In Lyndesey, that now is Castre
   of the wolde.

This brings us to the question of where Geoffrey meant Thong Castle to be. I cannot agree with Penny Drayton that there is any ambiguity here, for all writers till about 1500 place it at Caistor in Lincolnshire. Some later writers place it in Kent, but Kent does not come into this part of Geoffrey's story; as we have seen, Hengist wants a castle on the lands that he has been given in Lindsey. Geoffrey's description 'precipitous site' refers to Caistor's situation on the steep western escarpment of the Wolds (see illustration).

The identification is confirmed now that publication of a scholarly work on Lincolnshire place-names is at last in progress (Cameron [11]). The short form of the name Caistor has been in use for 1000 years ('CASTR' on coins of 975–8) but, alongside this, 'Thwangcastre' or the like is recorded in official use from 1190 to 1465, and later in

antiquarian writers. (Admittedly 1190 is still over 50 years after Geoffrey's account.) Other instances of 'thong' names, but without an oxhide legend as far as I know, can be found in Ekwall [12]. Neither Ekwall nor Cameron is sure of the real origin of such names. The suggestion that they refers to a narrow strip of land is probably correct in this case, for Stukeley, who visited Caistor in 1724, described the fortifications as 'a narrow tongue of land . . . encompassed with a wall' [13].

As Penny Drayton notes, the antiquary Abraham De La Pryme visited Caistor in 1695 and recorded the oxhide tale in his diary [14]. He saw the ruins of Thong Castle, a wall five or six yards thick. 'But, when Christianity came in, they pull'd the castle down, and built a church in the place where it stood, out of the stone that it was built off.' This 'castle', fragments of which are still visible, was a late (fourth century) Roman work, built against raiders from the North Sea. Incidentally, there is evidence of very early English occupation around Caistor. Later, power in Lindsey seems

to have passed peaceably from the British to the English; the partly British name of a sixth century king, Caedbaed, 'suggests the possibility of a marriage between the new royal house and a prominent native family' [15]. So if 'Hengist' and 'Vortigern' are regarded as personifications of the English and British in Lindsey, there may be some truth in Geoffrey's story.

Hengist, however, is traditionally associated with Kent, so it is not surprising to find that Thong Castle has also been placed in that county (rather as Sussex has laid claim to the Gotham tales of Nottinghamshire [16, 17]). It seems to have been Fabyan who first linked the tale with a Kentish site. In his chronicle (1516 edition) [18] he tells how Hengist 'axed of the kynge so moche grounde as the hyde of a Bull or other beest wolde compace', then 'to the ende to wynne a large grounde caused the sayd beests skyn to be cut into a small and slender thonge . . . By reason of which thonge the sayde Castell was longe after named Thonge Castell which was sette by thagrement of all wryters in the Countre of

Lyndesey.' Yet in the margin he has a note; 'Thonge Castell standyth within iiii Miles of Feuersham by Thamys syde not ferre from Quynburghe which is now forfaryn [ruined] and is called of the Bordersders [sic] tong Castell' (read 'of the borderers', i.e. by the local people).

Here Fabyan is referring to Tonge Castle (TQ 933636), a Norman motte and bailey whose 80 foot high mound is still to be seen and is still associated with the legend [19]. Thomas Middleton (1570?–1627) introduces the legend of Tonge Castle into his play *Hengist King of Kent, or the Mayor of Queenborough*. Even in the late eighteenth century the historian Hasted [20] places Thong Castle here. But by that time modern scepticism was setting in: he notes that the same tale is told of other places, 'which rather casts a shew of doubt on the whole of it.'

In addition, both Tonge and Caistor [21] are reputed to be the site of the banquet at which Hengist treacherously massacred the British nobility, even though Geoffrey's well-known account places it near Amesbury, and has Merlin bring Stonehenge over from Ireland to be set up as a memorial to the slain.

The story of Hengist and the oxhide is also told of Tong Castle in Shropshire. This time Merlin is on Hengist's side and helps him to include the castle in his domain [22]. Other sites that I have seen mentioned are Thong in Kent (TQ 673307; about 17 miles from Tonge Castle), and Doncaster [23]. The latter could be just a misreading of Thoncaster, if the 'th'-sound was written as 'Ð?'.

Frank Earp [24] draws attention to a tradition recorded 90 years ago about the origin of the earthwork called Maiden Bower, near Dunstable. A certain queen made a wager with a certain kind that she would encamp an army within a bull's hide. The wager being accepted, she cut the hide into narrow shreds, and joined them

end to end. Then she ordered her maidens to stand in a ring with the thread in their hands, and lay it on the grass. The army marched into the ring and the queen won her wager. The king so admired her skill that he ordered the soldiers to build a high bank of chalk along the line of the thread. Here the work takes its name not from the thong but from the maidens, who play only a minor part.

Two more English oxhide tales have been preserved by the nineteenth-century German folklorist Felix Liebrecht [25]. He was told by an Englishman that Hyde Park in London takes its name from the story. It is not known how old this tradition is, but the name at least is ancient, for the park takes its name from the Manor of Hyde, which is mentioned in 1204. Probably it was so called because its area was only one hide [26]. The other story, passed on by an English correspondent, was told by fishermen at Bulverhythe near Hastings. After William the Conqueror had landed at Pevensey Bay and was advancing on Hastings, he cut a bull's hide into thongs at Bulverhythe, tied them together, and decided to halt and give battle when he had advanced as far as the thongs would reach. Evidently this legend derives from the accidental resemblance between the name of the village ('landing place of the people of the burg', i.e. Hastings [27] and 'bull's hide'.

A Scandinavian version of the tale may be mentioned here, since it is considered to be derived from England [28]. Here the trickster is Ivar the Boneless, son of Ragnar Lodbrok and leader of the great army that invaded England in 865. King Ella (or Ælle) of Northumbria has killed Ragnar by casting him into a snake-pit. Ivar, bent on revenge, comes to Ella with false friendship and asks merely for as much land as a bull's hide will cover. By the usual trick he gets enough land to build a fortified city. Then, with the help of his brothers, he

captures Ella and cruelly puts him to death. The story is told in Ragnar Lodbrok's saga, which goes into details of how the thong was made: 'Then Ivar took the hide of an old bull and had it softened and thrice stretched. This he had cut up as narrow as possible, and he let it be drawn out, the hairy side and the fleshy side separate; when this was done the strip was marvellously long, far longer than anyone had thought.' On the land so enclosed 'a great burg was raised that is now called Londonburg. It is the greatest and most famed in all the Northland' [29]. In another version of the saga, the city is York (which at least is in the right part of England). Saxo Grammaticus tells the same story [30], but does not name the city, and says that a horse's hide was used; this is probably because the first syllable of Jórvik (York) chances to be a poetic word for horse [31]. The historical basis of the story is that Ælle was killed in battle while unsuccessfully trying to recapture York from the Danes in 867.

In another Icelandic version of the story, a rich man's devoted and cunning steward uses the trick to gain for his master most of the land owned by his peasant neighbours [32].

Strange to say, the oxhide tale seems to be little known in Germany, for even German writers on the subject mostly draw their examples from abroad. The story is told, however, in connection with the founding of Hermannstadt (now officially Sibiu, Rumania) by German settlers in the twelfth century [33]. This version is unusual in that it is the leaders of the settlers who are tricked. The trickster is a shepherd, but whether he is himself a settler, or a native getting his own back, is not clear. At any rate, the leaders allow him to keep the land, and admire his shrewdness in choosing such a fine site for a city.

The last version of the tale I shall give was recorded in Egypt

in 1898 [34], yet is strikingly like that told by Geoffrey of Monmouth. It concerns Abu'l Haggag, the hero and patron (Islamic, of course) of Luxor. There was once a Christian Pharaoh who was constantly defeated in battle by his enemies to north and south. All his sons had been killed, and only a daughter was left. Abu'l Haggag proposed to take charge of the Pharaoh's armies and, if victorious, to claim as a reward as much land as could be covered by a camel's hide (some say a buffalo). The enemy were routed, and then Abu'l Haggag, having cut the skin into a fine thong, surrounded and claimed the whole city of Luxor. The Pharaoh's daughter fell in love with him, but he refused to marry her unless she became a Muslim. This she did, and through her the Pharaoh and his people were converted to Islam. After the Pharaoh's death, Abu'l Haggag ruled in his place.

The parallels with the Hengist story are (a) land given in return for service in war; (b) difficulty due to a difference in religion; and (c) marriage between the stranger and the king's daughter (Egypt) or vice versa (England). It is usually supposed that Geoffrey took his story from classical sources, but could he have got it from the East? He was writing at a time when eastern ideas were being brought to Europe as a result of the First Crusade. But we must admit that it is not known how old the Egyptian story is; so the influence, if any, is just as likely to have been the other way.

As to the origin of these stories, it is disputed whether land was ever measured by thongs of oxhide. Grimm [35] thought that the English land measure called the hide took its name from the practice, but modern scholarship derives hide (skin) and hide (land measure) from different Old English words [36]. On the other hand, several ancient Indian measures took their name from the cow (a sacred animal); in particular, *gôcarman* in Sanskrit means (a) a cow's hide; (b) a hide of land, 300 feet long by 10 broad; (c) it is also defined as that extent of land the crop of which will support a man for a year [37]. In the Vedas it is stated that the Asuras (demons), having defeated the gods, set about dividing the world among themselves by means of oxhides [38]. Does this myth derive from ritual?

Oxhide tales should probably been seen in the context of other legends in which a certain amount of land is assigned [39]. For example, the Roman hero Horatius Cocles was granted as much land as he could plough round in a day; this story may derive from the Etruscan ritual of ploughing a furrow with a cow and a bull round the limits of a new city. Again, a man might be given as much land as he could pass round in a day, like Coirbri in Irish legend, and we might link this with the custom of beating the bounds of a parish.

Finally, there is at least one record of a ritual in which a bull's hide cut into a thong played an important part. This took place in Bechuanaland (now Botswana) on the founding of a new town [40]. A bull had its eyelids sewn together and was allowed to wander blindly for four days. On the fifth day it was tracked down, killed, and eaten. (We expect to read that the town was founded where the bull came to rest, but this is not stated.) The 'doctors' took

the hide and marked it in some secret way. It was then cut into a single thong, and this was divided into pieces about two feet long, one of which was pegged down in each of the paths leading to the new township. 'After that, if a foreigner approaches the new town to destroy it with his charms, he will find that the town has prepared itself for his coming.' Frazer [41], quoting this account, comments: 'The Bechuana custom suggests that the mode of measuring by a hide may have originated from the practice of encompassing a piece of land with thongs cut from the hide of a sacrificial victim in order to place the ground under the guardianship of the sacred animal.'

References

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Bob Trubshaw

EXPLORING PAST & PLACE

- WHERE NEXT?

This article is intended to run as a sequel to 'Exploring past and place' in *At the Edge* No.1

If Dr Julian Thomas, one of the front rank of the 'new thinkers' in academic archaeology, could address *The Ley Hunter* Moot in October 1995 then, thought I, it is time the 'alternative archaeologists' put in at least a nominal presence at the holy-of-holies of serious prehistorians. The 17th conference of the Theoretical Archaeological Group (TAG to all in the trade) at the University of Reading in December 1995 offered the best part of four days of heavy-going presentations. Most of the time there were four parallel sessions to chose from, with hectic session-surfing being the norm.

However, TAG is not what it used to be. Gone are the savage debates between Processualists (the now-outmoded 'New Archaeology' of the 60s and 70s) and Post-Processualists (the philosophically-correct, post-modernist doyens of deconstruction and hermeneutics). Indeed, the chief protagonists of Post-Processualism at early TAG conferences, such as Christopher Tilley and Michael Shanks, were absent. In their place we were offered a few papers which offered some high-level overviews but most of the papers offered innovation while avoiding areas of dispute on theory.

Thankfully 'alternative archaeology' blinked and missed the academic in-fighting over Processualism and Post-

Processualism. If Post-Processualism was archaeology's embracing of post-modernism then it has pulled back from the brink of the nihilist abyss which post-modernism seems to offer as its final destination. 'So what?' you retort. Well, now the dust has settled, the consensus is that there is no one way of 'understanding' the past but a plurality of ways of recreating the past. The public should be encouraged to interpret the past for themselves. Yes, this means the ideas of *At the Edge* readers are potentially as valid as those of the most august professors.

Scientific materialism has been sidelined and in its place analogy becomes the predominant method of reasoning. Above all, the 'in thing' is now inter-disciplinary approaches. Not the superficial borrowings from ethnology which have passed for such approaches in recent decades, but bringing to the TAG conference eminent speakers from the fields of cognitive science, primate research, geography and such like.

New ideas and interpretations!

But, the acid test is, did any of these notables and wanna-be notables bring any new ideas and interpretations to the podium? Happily, yes, in abundance. It is impossible to

do justice to the breadth of scope of a conference which has four sessions running simultaneously. I aimed for the lectures which seemed to offer the most regarding understanding landscapes. During the thirty papers which I heard there were many specific insights and ideas which caused me to ponder further. It would take much of this issue of *At the Edge* to put these remarks into meaningful contexts so, instead, I will focus in on just a few of the lectures, especially those which dealt with topics that may be close to the interests of readers. However, this gives a somewhat distorted impression of the scope of the conference.

Midwinter sunset at The Good Stones

The work of Richard Bradley on Cranbourne Chase and prehistoric rock art has deservedly found a wider awareness [1]. Professor Bradley has now turned his attention to the passage tombs at Balnuam of Clava in Scotland (NH757445). Clava means 'The Good Stones' and there are three cairn-like passage tombs forming a row, each surrounded by standing stones. As had been noted by Professor Thom [2], the entrances passages of two tombs align with the midwinter sunset. The effect is emphasised in one tomb by the use of red boulders on the back wall of the

chamber (the stones that are lit by the shaft of winter sunlight) and on the exterior facing the setting sun.

Bradley's paper, entitled 'The good stones: architecture, imagination and the neolithic world', took as its central topic a challenge to the long-standing notion that the neolithic period is defined by the onset of agriculture. Instead, in Britain and parts of northern Europe, the first evidence for farming comes *after* the earliest monumental structures. Their scale and near-permanence generated a novel sense of time and place. Some of these large-scale non-domestic structures incorporated sophisticated abstract concepts of the natural world. The builders achieved this at the same time as finding new ways of overcoming the physical constraints of the materials they were using. For Bradley, it is this 'interplay between cosmology and engineering' which characterises the onset of the neolithic.

Cursuses and the emergence of 'social landscapes'

If archaeoastronomy is a topic which is broadly familiar outside academe, then the enigma of cursus monuments has likewise caught the interest of amateurs. *Altering the Earth* and its precursors had drawn attention to the possibilities of understanding how prehistoric people perceived large-scale monuments such as the Cranbourne Chase Cursus. Christopher Tilley took this several steps further - literally - by discussing the experience of walking along this cursus [3]. Jan Harding, who worked with Richard Bradley researching Cranbourne, picked up on these recent descriptions of the sensual experience associated with movement along the interior of cursus monuments. However, as Harding argued in a paper entitled 'Pathways to

new realms: cursus monuments and symbolic territories', in addition an essential part of the significance of these sites must have been their effect upon everyday experience in the landscape which surrounds these formal paths.

Cursuses, apart from their length, are comparatively small earthworks and - on the basis of tentative interpretations of excavations - appear to have been built in short sections over extended periods of time. Despite this 'minimal' substance it is possible to imagine that the cursus was connected with various 'taboos' prohibiting movement across the broader landscape. Harding has studied the four cursuses at Rudston, Yorkshire. He notes that they cut across and contrast with the local topography, linking funeral monuments which both predate and post-date their construction. Evidence of settlement evidence for this period seems to be removed from the vicinity of the cursuses: even the closest contemporary settlement is hidden from the cursus by a small hill.

Harding's conclusion is that the cursuses transform the 'social landscapes' of the early neolithic and may be the earliest detectable evidence for 'group power' being embedded into the landscape. One way of approaching this would be to regard cursuses as symbolising formal patterns of spatial perception and separation which were linked to mythical land ownership or more exclusive territorial divisions. Dr Harding has kindly offered to prepare an article summarising his research in this area, which should appear in the next issue of *At the Edge*.

Watery places

Moving on from cursuses to henge monuments, Colin Richards noted that many henges are on low-lying land where the massive ditches could have been flooded, at least for part of the year. 'Watery places' were used for ritual depositions

during the neolithic (although attention tends to be focused on similar undertakings in the bronze and iron ages). Eight henges in the vicinity of Millfield in the Cheviots are all on the flood plain; six henges around Thornborough (North Yorkshire) are all located close to the natural spring line. Most impressively, the henges at Brodgar and Stenness (Orkney) are situated either side of a large sea inlet, ringed by hills. Richards argues that here the henge banks standing beyond water-filled ditches may be intended to mimic the local topography.

His conclusion is that water provides a hitherto-overlooked 'natural architecture' of neolithic henges. Given the symbolic potency of water and 'watery places' this may mean that we have so far overlooked a fundamental element in understanding the way neolithic people gave meaning to the physical world.

Megalithic cosmology

A different approach to the meanings intended by megalithic architects was developed by Jeremy Dronfield. His research was recently featured in *The Sunday Times* under the headline 'Raves in the caves: Stone Age Britons took drugs' [4] which is a tabloid version of a statistically-overloaded paper in *Antiquity* [5] demonstrating that the motifs in Irish passage-tomb art are linked to the entoptic patterns naturally generated by the brain during altered states of consciousness. This is a British extension of ideas first proposed for southern African rock art in the mid-80s by Lewis-Williams and Dowson [6] and a topic which has been repeatedly discussed in the pages of *The Ley Hunter* during the 90s [7].

Dronfield's paper for TAG, entitled 'The stone universe: cosmos and architecture in later neolithic Ireland' challenged the idea that megalithic architecture symbolises aspects of socio-

political power. This should be rejected, he avers, in favour of socio-religious and, above all, cosmological factors. One idea deserving further exploration is that the tunnels in passage tombs may be structured to imitate the so-called 'blue tunnel' entoptic, itself linked to the altered state experience of 'spirit travel'.

The spirit of place

If I might be allowed one further neolithic example, it would have to be the paper co-written by Barbara Bender, Sue Hamilton and Christopher Tilley. They had made an intensive two-week study of a small, rock-strewn hill on Bodmin Moor, known as Leskernick. Among the natural rocks there are two stone circles and a stone row (probably late neolithic), plus two small early to middle bronze age settlements (probably not contemporary with each other) on the slopes of the hill nearby. A quoit stone and a cairn survive on the summit of the hill. The impressive summit of Roughtor is just visible from a few locations, such as half-way along the stone row and from the southern stone circle (but not from the northern stone circle). A two-metre high triangular-shaped stone formed the terminus of the stone row but had been deliberately 'decommissioned', to use the speaker's terminology, in antiquity by being buried *across* the socket hole. Smaller triangular stones were found near the doorways and in the back walls of some of the houses in the settlement, strongly suggesting that they were intended to be linked in some symbolic sense with the terminal stone of the stone row and might be considered to be 'domestic shrines'.

The authors state: 'we believe we can begin to discern a prehistoric world in which every movement in and around the settlement, and out beyond the settlement was imbued with ritual. In their engagement with

the stones there was a cosmological reiteration that worked to and fro between the most intimate house interior, the compounds and enclosures, out across the landscape and up to the punctuated skyline of the tors.' The paper was entitled 'Leskernick: the spirit of place' and this subtitle was no sales-pitch rhetoric as the presenter, Sue Hamilton, concluded by affirming that Leskernick 'was indeed a magical place for all those who worked on the study'.

One other paper touched on a topic frequently debated among 'fringe' researchers of leys and the like - to what extent were monumental ritual sites recognised or even reused in later millennia? Richard Hingley demonstrated that on the Atlantic coast of Scotland some of the neolithic and early bronze age chamber cairns were re-used in the late bronze age and early iron age - sometimes with clear evidence of habitation. At first impression this might seems to be no more than 'squatting' by marginalised, 'primitive' people living in an inhospitable landscape. Instead, Hingley considers that these iron age people should not be thought of as 'primitive' and 'were deliberately re-interpreting monumental aspects of their past as part of active strategies related to the

projection of contemporary identity'. Although these iron age people erected no funeral monuments, the house was seen as a central 'social symbol'.

Iron age orientation

The potential richness of the symbolism inherent in domestic iron age buildings was also affirmed by Mike Parker-Pearson in a paper called 'Food, sex and death: kinship and social structure in the East Yorkshire Iron Age'. Behind the academically-respectable title was an enthusiastically-presented lecture [8] which began by noting that East Yorkshire is probably the most important region in the British Isles for studying the iron age because a unique combination of funerary and settlement evidence has survived. Too little work has been done on the settlements but the excavated evidence from the burials is rich - and enigmatic.

These iron age cemeteries are mostly found near the streams which flow seasonally on the chalk uplands. Such intermittent water sources might readily be regarded as liminal gateways to a watery underworld. The cemeteries also predominate near major land boundaries and intersections of boundaries, affirming their liminal position.

Rough Tor. Photograph by Bob Trubshaw.

The graves within each cemetery tend to form long linear 'clusters', suggesting lineage groups. Although DNA analysis is needed for full verification, the examination of the bones suggests that some inherited traits, such as crowding of the teeth, are shared by more men than women - a strong indication that we dealing with a patrilocal, and probably patrilinear, social system.
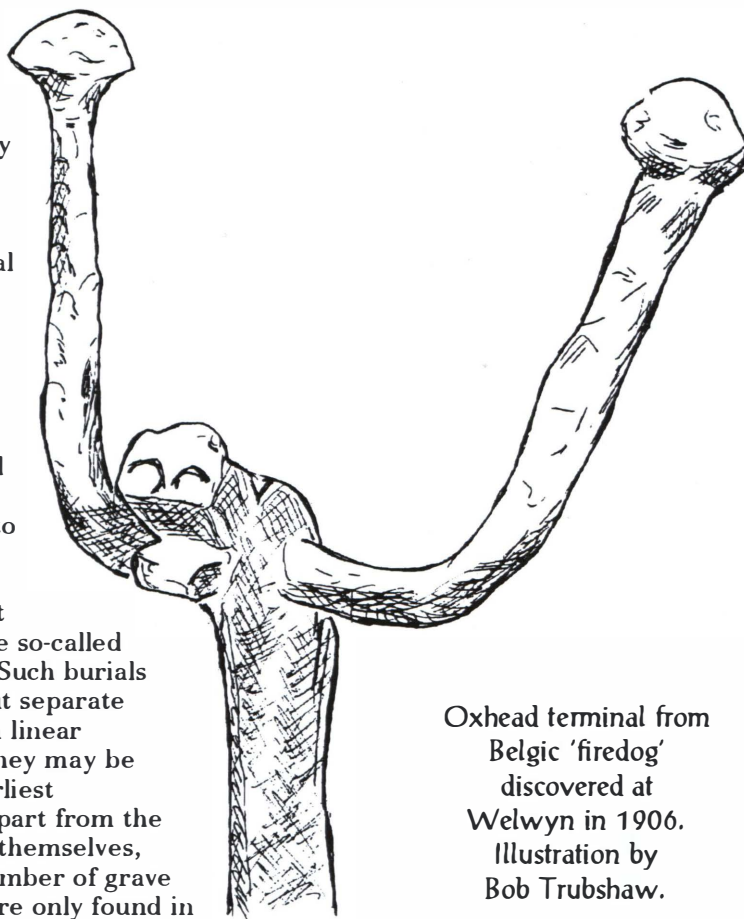
Early attempts to interpret the evidence from the cemeteries had taken the clear differences in grave goods to be related to status. Parker-Pearson rigorously rejects this 'social rank' hypothesis and has looked anew at the way the corpse was placed in the grave, the orientation of the grave, as well as the gender and accompanying objects. Typical inhumations are 'crouched', that is the body was laid on its side. Predominately the head was to the north and the face to the east. Accompanying the body was usually the *left* foreleg of a sheep and maybe a pot or, more rarely, a brooch. The pot and sheep bone were found at chest/shoulder level with female skeletons but near the feet of males. A restricted group of graves had no sheep bones, pots or brooches but did have the foreleg and/or shoulder of a pig. Within this group of burials most were buried with their faces to the east; they contained the left leg/shoulder of the pig. Some burials were facing west; they had the leg/shoulder from the *right* side of the pig.

None of the burials were accompanied by cattle bones. We know that cattle appear on the decoration on iron age cauldrons and so-called 'firedogs', both of which can be considered very domestic items. In contrast, pigs, especially in the form of wild boars, appear on weapons and the like. But it is the evidence from the contemporary settlements which offers the most interesting parallels with the burial orientations. The doorways in iron age round houses predominately look to the midwinter sunrise, or to the equinoctial sunrise. The exceptions all fit with other significant sunrises or even sunsets. These unusual west-facing houses seem to be linked to a type of burial special to East Yorkshire - the so-called 'cart burials'. Such burials are near to but separate from the main linear cemeteries - they may be among the earliest interments. Apart from the wooden carts themselves, there are a number of grave goods which are only found in these burials. The only animal bones are from the front parts of pigs. The left shoulder joints are found to the north of the head of the body; the right leg/shoulder joints are placed to the south of the abdomen.

These ideas triggered a number of associations in my mind with Celtic and Indo-European mythology, some of which I develop in 'The five directions' article elsewhere in this issue. Readers are invited to speculate on the possible links between the 'cart burials' and the pagan Gothic rituals involving 'cult carts' discussed in Alby Stone's article. Although Parker-Pearson did not venture far beyond the physical archaeological evidence, he was prepared to argue that the evidence all supports the idea that in the iron age there was a clear mental map in which east equated to front, west to back, north to left, and south to right. Our word 'orientation' still embodies this sense of facing to the *orient* i.e. east, a trait shared with many Indo-European languages.

Oxhead terminal from Belgic 'firedog' discovered at Welwyn in 1906. Illustration by Bob Trubshaw.

Celtic heritage and cultural bias

Using the word 'Celtic' as a broad terminology for iron age cultures has been hotly debated in recent years. Yet the word has indelibly entered popular consciousness as a synonym for the European iron age, a culture deemed to have survived until the early Christian era in the peripheral areas of Europe. One of the direct consequences is that the iron age archaeological evidence of Scotland, Wales and Ireland is presented as a pan-Celtic cultural package. Angela Piccini has studied how three Welsh heritage sites - the iron age village reconstructed at the Museum of Welsh Life at St Fagan; the Castell Henllys iron age hillfort in Pembrokeshire; and the new Celtica centre at Machynlleth - reflect the academic bias towards south and south-east England. For instance, the houses are reconstructed in imitation of

excavations which took place in Hampshire and, tastefully propped against the walls, are replicas of shields recovered from Witham (Lincolnshire) and Battersea (London).

The implication is of a 'seamless Celtic iron age' - a concept which is not supported by the regional and temporal variety of the excavated evidence. Given that all these heritage sites have a major role in shaping public awareness (and are all frequently visited by school groups) it seems that intellectual rigour has fallen victim to 'entertainment'. Given that the present-day local people of Scotland, Wales and Ireland give much emphasis to their 'Celtic roots' in their debates with the political monoculture emanating from south-east England, it is perhaps more than ironic that their 'Celticness' is being presented with the same, intensely intrusive, cultural biases.

Majority missing

If most of these potted summaries suggest that the 17th TAG Conference was dominated by discussions on the neolithic and ritual monuments then nothing could be further from the truth! They simply reflect some of the ideas which I considered to be most interesting from the small minority of papers which I was able to attend. This meant I missed whole chunks of ideas on gender studies, body politics, art, Mediterranean prehistory, Irish archaeology and modern material culture.

Where next?

This article is subtitled 'where next?'. Well, part of the answer to that question has to be where things are *not* going. Although intense debates on the interpretation of Foucault were still possible in question time, in general even the most intensely philosophically-inclined of the theoretical archaeologists are

Illustration by Andy Norfolk.

Wood block print of Nagarjuna

now recognising that real 'day-to-day' issues of the past need to be addressed. Overall, it seems that everyone recognised that it is too easy to be an out-an-out sceptic:

If I have presented any theory
Then I am at fault.
But if I have not accepted any theory;
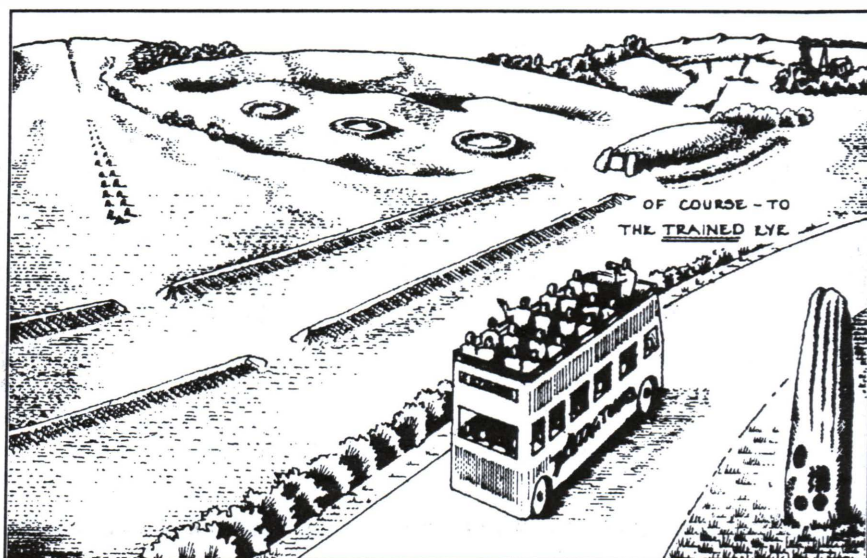I am totally free from any blame. [10]

Rather, the post-processualist excursion by archaeologists has confirmed:

Since they have no essence, phenomena do not exist as true or false, as delusion or non-delusion, but because the mind has identified the objects, saying, this is a faculty, these are senses, and this is a house; and it discriminates and clings to

them as subject and object. [11]

Both these quotations are from the second or third century AD Buddhist, Nagarjuna, but the wisdom is perennial. If the post-modernist trip is passé, the coach driver is now calling 'All aboard!' for an outing into interdisciplinary studies. In Steven Mithen's introduction to a leading session of the TAG conference, on the archaeology of creative thought, he emphasised that interdisciplinary studies were now in vogue, especially those involving cognition, that is, the ways in which the brain perceives and conceives external events. Now, over the last thirty years the non-academic 'fringe' has been nothing if not interdisciplinary in its outlook. The scope expressed in the subtitle of *At the Edge* emerges directly from this broad range of interests, and the formative planning for the magazine, in mid-1995, was specifically directed at enhancing awareness of overlapping disciplines. More specifically, the out-going editor of *The Ley Hunter*, Paul Devereux, has been directing his attention to the cognitive sciences for several years. Could it be that the charabanc of academe is heading to venues well-known as picnic places for the 'fringe'?

As is clear from some of the above outlines, these 'picnic

OF COURSE - TO THE TRAINED EYE

places' include understanding the key role of ritual and cosmological symbolism in prehistoric societies. Welcome, fellow travellers, to some fun country!

Acknowledgements:

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enthusiasm for his subject was a rare pleasure, I might observe, among the dry style of delivery favoured by many of the profession's leading figures. However, like any other major academic conference, TAG is bogged down by the need for the multitude of post-graduate students to establish their careers. Compared to my fairly extensive experience of technical conferences relating to the plastics industry I was astonished by a prevailing ignorance of basic presentation skills. Given that these post-graduates are, by definition, among the best of UK academe's Bright Young Things it seems quite inappropriate that they seem, almost without exception, to be offered no advice on how to put over their information effectively. From personal experience I know it takes time to build up confidence when speaking to an audience but there are basic ground rules which cannot be ignored. Poor use (if any) of visual aids was frequently combined with gabbled or mumbled speech. Given that almost all speakers chose to quite literally read their presentations, this seems to be a fundamental failing in communication skills essential to their profession – yet one which could be easily corrected with the most rudimentary of tuition. Putting things another way around, the amateur speakers at The Ley Hunter Core Moot last October presented their ideas considerably better than almost all of these wanna-be professionals. Amen and end of self-indulgent editorial rant.

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Bob Trubshaw

The Glossy Pages

Well, as you note, the paper here is the same as elsewhere. The 'gloss' here is in the erudite sense of 'glossary'. Oh dear, dull and dusty stuff, I hear you mutter. On the contrary, this short piece is intended to put a shine on your mental 'furniture'. Much as I try to keep the contributions to *At the Edge* as free from jargon as is sensibly possible, in putting together this issue I realise there are a small number of terms which keep recurring and which are difficult to paraphrase without periphrastic excesses.

So, here are three jargon-busting definitions.

liminal

This derives from the Latin *limen* meaning 'boundary' or 'threshold'. As an adjective it can refer to liminal places (physically liminal as with the seashore; politically liminal as with territory boundaries; or mythically liminal such as bridges, springs and crossroads) or to liminal times (midnight; New Year) or to bodily and social changes (birth; puberty; marriage; death). A key aspect of liminality is that there is not just A and B but also a 'liminal zone', a supernaturally dangerous space in between, which is 'neither up nor down'.

FFI: An article in *Mercian Mysteries* No.22 (back issues still available for £1.50 incl. p&p) was intended to provide a more complete introduction to liminality. This article drew in large part on *Boundaries and Thresholds* (ed. Hilda Ellis Davidson, Thimble Press, 1993; available £12 + 80p p&p from Heart of Albion Press at editorial address.)

cognitive science

Cognition is an all-encompassing term which refers to the ways in which the brain perceives and conceives external events. 'Cognitive sciences' developed out of psychological and neuro-physiological research but the current academic fashion is to link with other disciplines, including linguistics and anthropology. Professor Colin Renfrew has advanced the concept of 'cognitive archaeology'. A discussion of his book *The Ancient Mind* (Cambridge University Press 1994) appeared in *Mercian Mysteries* No.22.

In essence, cognitive archaeology is an attempt to recreate past ways of thinking from the artifacts recoverable by excavation, especially the symbolic meanings given to these objects. More specifically, cognitive archaeologists must consider to what extent our culture imposes preconceptions on how we conceive and 'structure' the world, and to what extent our predecessors may (or, more likely, may not) have shared these same preconceptions.

FFI: Those with access to Grolier's Encyclopedia on CD-ROM or via Compuserve on-line services will be led to the equivalent of about five A4 pages of useful information on cognitive psychology and cognitive science (but not cognitive archaeology) if they enter the search word 'cognitive'.

cosmology

This is a word which has developed two meanings. For most of us (including the compilers of encyclopedias), cosmology is a scientific quest for the origins and nature of the universe by physicists and mathematicians - via mental models too complex for mere mortals to understand. But, all human cultures have created a mythical explanation for the origin of the stars, the Earth, the seas, the plants and the animals. The Bible opens with the account in *Genesis* of just such processes. Those who study these tales have revealed that the underlying ideas belong to a small family of myths which must have their origins at an early stage in human cultural development.

Such 'In the beginning . . .' creation myths are given their own specific jargon - **cosmogenic**, leaving 'cosmological' to carry a much wider sense of the way the mind imposes symbolic order on the physical world. My article in this issue on 'The fifth direction' deals specifically with one aspect of a widespread Indo-European cosmology, the way we create an arbitrary number of cardinal directions and then link them with various 'secondary' levels of symbolism.

To what extent modern-day physicists are simply creating a novel cosmogenic mythology is a matter of debate. For most people (*At the Edge* readers perhaps excepted) neither the scientific or the spiritual concept of cosmology has much impact on day-to-day life. However, scratch the surface of any culture, and densely-woven and deeply-rooted cosmological symbolism is prevalent but taken for granted.

FFI: Keep reading *At the Edge*!

As these short accounts suggest, both cognitive sciences and cosmological studies are thoroughly pervasive. Now that academics in archaeology are developing inter-disciplinary interests in both these fields, the terms are becoming 'jargon', a useful shorthand for the whole gamut of complexity. To state the blindingly obvious, much of the content of *At the Edge* deals with cognitive issues and/or cosmology. Indeed, the 'archaeological fringe' has, unselfconsciously, been happily operating in these areas for

some time. Like Molière's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, who asks 'What is "prose"?', we must come to terms with the fact that we have been speaking prose all our lives. Simply accept that words like 'prose', 'cognitive' and 'cosmology' can be useful as 'shorthand' terminology, even though they might seem a tad pretentious or may be deemed 'jargon'.

However, I still aim to keep all such 'jargon' firmly under control. Any rumours that *At the Edge* is about to change its name to *Journal of Cognitive Cosmology* are unfounded!

From
Dr Mark Patton

Thank you for sending me a copy of *At the Edge* No.1. I must correct the entry on La Hougue Bie on page 38. No traces of opium or cannabis resin have been found on this site. In common with Richard Bradley, I have been interested for some time in the question of entoptic imagery in passage graves. Andrew Sherratt has plausibly suggested that this could be related to the religious use of narcotic substances. These issues all came up during a long discussion between myself and a journalist during the excavations at La Hougue Bie. I mentioned to him that, if suitable samples of pottery were recovered, I would be undertaking a programme of analysis to test the hypothesis, and he referred to this in an article in *The Independent*. This article was in turn read by Paul Devereux, who mentioned it in a review of my book, *Statements in Stone*, published in *The Ley Hunter*. His review was presumably the source of your information, since these ideas are not mentioned in my Antiquity article, which you quote.

For the record, no suitable pottery sherds were found at La Hougue Bie, and consequently no analysis was conducted. I still believe that the religious use of narcotic substances in the European Neolithic is a distinct possibility, though I would add that hallucinogenic fungi are far more likely to induce entoptics than either cannabis or opium. The hypothesis, however, must be considered as unproven until such time as appropriate material is recovered for chemical analysis. I would be very grateful if you could correct this error in the next edition of your magazine, and thus bring an end to this unfortunate, if amusing, example of academic 'Chinese Whispers'.

From
Dr Ronald Hutton

[This is a short section of a personal letter which Dr Hutton has kindly agreed to being published. Readers may be interested to know that recently he has been appointed Professor of British History at University of Bristol.]

Thank you very much for the first issue of *At the Edge*. I think that you have fully achieved your avowed aim of bringing mainstream and alternative scholarship together, and would only take the risk of offering you a caution upon one point: your statement in the editorial that peer-review and career-building inhibit innovative ideas in academe. I have to say that ever since I entered the profession in 1976, it has been so mad about new and revisionary ideas that I have repeatedly mourned the way in which promising long-term processes of research are abandoned after only a few years because they no longer have the cachet of novelty and radicalism. Sensational new theories will shoot a young scholar to international stardom, whereas solid, useful and unspectacular work usually means relegation to a backwater and the slow lane of promotion.

From
Henry Ford

Re King John's chariot in 'The Wise Men of Gotham', *At the Edge* No.1. We all have an idea of what a chariot was like - a two-wheeled vehicle without seats, open at the back, drawn at break-neck speed by two horses harnessed to a pole.

There are other definitions, one of which is 'an eighteenth century light four-wheeled carriage, with back seats only'. I cannot answer for late nineteenth century Nottinghamshire dialect but in 1920s Essex, any gentleman's carriage was called a 'chariot' by elderly dialect speakers.

In view of these facts, we cannot deduce any dating information from the use of the word 'chariot'. Who can tell what a twelfth century 'gowk' meant by 'chariot'? Or, indeed, a nineteenth century ditto.

ABSTRACTS

Pit constellations

Rescue excavations at Schagen-Muggenburg (30 miles north of Amsterdam) revealed a complex of 57 pits dated to c.AD 300. Some of the pits contained cattle bones, some horse bones, some dog bones, and some contained human artifacts such as hammers and whetstones. When plotted out on a map, the pattern of the pits with cattle bones matched the pattern of the stars in Taurus; the pits with horse bones matched Pegasus, the dog bones with Canis Major and those with human artifacts matched Orion. [Although not stated in this article, these constellations are those which feature prominently in Germanic astro-mythology.] The excavator and discoverer, Linda Therkorn, maintains that there is nothing 'chance' about the correlations. Indeed, there are two accurate depictions of Taurus, both exclusively with cattle bones. The site is now a housing estate.

Govert Schilling 'Stars fell on Muggenburg', *New Scientist* 16th December 1995 [cutting and additional information from *Sky lore of the north*, O.S. Reuter (English translation 1987) kindly submitted by Graeme Chappel].

Ancient Egyptians worshipped simulacra

New investigations by an academic Egyptologist have revealed that a number of New Kingdom Egyptian temples are situated under rock-faces which have (or have been given) human features.

Anthony Donohue, 'Secrets of the Nile' *The Ley Hunter* No.124 Feb 1996 p2-6.

Sacred geography conference papers

The first Core Moot organised by *The Ley Hunter* last October included a number of especially fruitful contributions. Most of these are reproduced, or at least summarised, in the latest *TLH*. Although Julian Thomas's paper on 'Monuments, materiality and modernity' is not reproduced, Paul Devereux's summary of cognitive interpretations of the non-human and anciently-built environment is a concise yet cogent introduction to ideas which are emerging as much within academe as from the 'fringe'. Helen Woodley posed some suggestions that modern visual perception may differ from that of our distant ancestors. Philip Heselton introduced the work of Professor Jay Appleton, a geographer, on prospect/refuge theory and discussed the relevance to interpreting sacred landscapes. Jeremy Harte's stimulating paper on holy hills is also reproduced in full. John Michell's work on sacred centres is summarised, and Philip Burton's dauntless investigation of magnetic anomalies at megalithic sites is reported in more detail. All-in-all, a briefer but more inspiring version of the TAG Conference reported elsewhere in this issue of *At the Edge*!

Paul Devereux and Danny Sullivan, 'Sacred geography and the experience of landscape' *The Ley Hunter* No.124 Feb 1996 p13-24.

Head cult in Roman temple

Myth and speculation have long supported the opinion that there was a 'Celtic' head cult. But direct evidence has been hard to find. A recently-excavated pit dated at around AD 190, associated with a temple in St Albans, contained the skull of a teenage boy with at least 90 cut marks, suggesting that his head had been skinned. Bone damage suggested that he had been battered to death and that the skull had then been placed on a pole.

'Skinned human skull suggests head cult' *British Archaeology* No.11 Feb 1996 p5; Simon Mays and James Steele, 'A mutilated human skull from Roman St Albans', *Antiquity* Vol.70 (No.267) 1996 p155-61.

Bronze age axes as *tjurunga*

A suggestion that Irish early bronze age axes may have been intended less as practical tools than primarily as sacred gift objects. The author draws parallels with the Australian ritual traditions relating to *tjurunga*.

Jane Dickins, 'A remote analogy? from Central Australian *tjurunga* to Irish Early Bronze Age axes', *Antiquity* Vol.70 (No.267) 1996 p161-7.

One Celts or many?

The much-debated issue of Celtic 'ethnicity' has recently also been paralleled with the way modern-day Australian indigenous people trace their ethnic identity.

J.V.S. and M.R. Megaw, 'Ancient Celts and modern ethnicity', *Antiquity* Vol.70 (No.267) 1996 p175-81.

When is a rubbish tip a ritual site?

A massive late bronze age and early iron age 'rubbish tip' (located within the Army's Salisbury Plain training area) has recently been surveyed. It reveals that there are no less than 65,000 m^3 of deposits surviving - covering an area over 200 m across. Although field walking had revealed substantial deposits of pottery, no one had recognised the mound as its large diameter seemed to be a natural feature! Although much further work is needed, the

provisional indication is that this 'the massive remains of feasting activity'. The authors suggest that the usual terminology, 'midden', is quite inappropriate for such deliberate deposition of residual bones and pots.

[*Editor's note*: I calculate the deposits at very roughly 150,000 tonnes! Even in our prodigiously wasteful society it takes a fair number of people to generate a tonne of rotted-down rubbish - it would take many years of neolithic 'Glastonbury Festivals' to generate the amounts cited.]

David McOmish, 'East Chisenbury: ritual and rubbish at the British Bronze-Age-Iron Age transition', *Antiquity* Vol.70 (No.267) 1996 p68-76.

Romans invaded Ireland

The Irish have long believed that they never came under Roman rule. But a coastal site at Drumanagh, 15 miles north north of Dublin, has been turning up Roman jewellery and ornaments for over 10 years. The site is now thought to have evolved from a military 'beach head' into a major Roman town, suggesting a Roman involvement in Ireland from as early as AD 79 to about 138. This is considered to be a 'staggering' development in Irish archaeology and adds credence to the long-held 'heresy' that Cashel, Co. Tipperary owes its name to the Latin *Castellum*. The implications are that many more Roman remains are lurking in the Emerald Isle (or should that be *Insula Veridis* ?).

'Irish dig dispels a bit of blarney', *The Sunday Times* 21st January 1996 [cutting kindly submitted by Chris Fletcher].

Romans did not invade Ireland

A response to the *Sunday Times* article maintains that Drumanagh is only one of many sites which suggest that 'Ireland had extensive contact with the Roman world' - but Drumanagh should not be interpreted as evidence of a Roman military invasion.

Professor Barry Raftery, 'Drumanagh and Roman Ireland', *Archeology Ireland* Vol.10 No.1 (issue 35) Spring 1996 p17-19.

Neolithic concerts

More radical rethinking of past preconceptions are needed following the discovery of a four-hole flute in Slovenia, dated to around 45,000 years old - with remains of Neanderthal man. This is a pentatonic musical instrument - rather than just a bird imitator - and suggests the much-maligned Neanderthals were intellectually closer to *Homo sapiens*.

David Keys 'Flute discovery blows a hole in the Neanderthal myth', *The Observer* 25th February 1996 [cutting kindly submitted by Alby Stone].

Vikings v. Columbus

A map, discovered in 1965, showing part of the Newfoundland coastline suggests that Norse explorers knew of the New World at least 50 years before Columbus set sail. Experts in the 60s dismissed it as a forgery because of the presence of titanium. Recent work has revealed that such trace quantities are quite normal with works of this age - so the map could be 'real' after all.

Nigel Hawkes 'Discredited Vinland map may be genuine after all', *The Times* 26th February 1996 [cutting kindly submitted by David Taylor].

Stonehenge used for 1400 years

Sophisticated new techniques based on radiocarbon dating have enabled the construction phases of Stonehenge to be dated far more accurately than before. These suggest that main ditch was constructed in about 50 years, starting in 2950 BC. The first stones were erected some 300-350 years later and the main trithilons put up about 300 years after this, around 2300 BC. After about 1400 years

of continual activity, Stonehenge ceased being used in about 1600 BC.

John Young 'Scientists pinpoint main dates in building of Stonehenge', *The Times* 11th March 1996 [cutting kindly submitted by David Taylor].

Latvian goddesses

Latvian mythology, folklore and traditional religion are recorded in a large quantity of poems and love songs, known collectively as *Dainas*. Insignificant amounts of this heritage have been translated yet, overall, they reveal that Latvian religion has a cosmology and deities which are distinct from most other Indo-European cultures. This brief but informative article provides some insights.

Valters Grivins, 'Goddesses in Latvian religion', *Folkvang-Horg* No.2 1995 p3-5

Cerne Abbas Giant a stripling!

The conventional wisdom that the Cerne Abbas hill figure perhaps predates the Romans is brought into doubt by Ronald Hutton, who observes that there are no written references to this prominent landmark from before the seventeenth century. Could the ithyphallic figure simply be an attempt to tease local Puritans? Other experts respond with counter-arguments and the debate continues.

Jonathan Leake 'Is the chalk giant a great big joke?' *Sunday Times* 3rd March 1996. [Cutting kindly submitted by David Taylor.]

Harrows and wigs

Well, strictly *hearg* and *weoh* - two Old English words which provide place-name experts with tantalising clues as they both translate as 'heathen temple/shrine'. There may be ways of distinguishing them, and the words themselves may link more deeply with OE words for 'hawthorn', 'witch', the rune *hagalaz* and 'whole'/'holy'.

John Thornberrow, 'Horg Stone', *Folkvang-Horg* No.2 1995 p15-19.

Odin gets an outing

The Old English word *ergi* denotes women with 'excessive sexual desire; when used for men it means performing the sexual act like a woman; in other words being the one penetrated during anal intercourse.' As Odin was accused of *ergi* this raises some interesting implications for north European religion and resembles the sexual ambiguity prevalent among shamans.

Alby Stone, 'Odin's shame', *Hoblink* No.37.

Neo-medievalism for boyz

If all these abstracts are getting tediously self-important, then I'm happy to conclude with something distinctly less reverent - all though nonetheless relevant. The above-mentioned *Hoblink* has developed over recent years as a pagan newsletter for gays, lesbians and bisexuals but, with this issue, adds the term 'neo-medievalism' to its subtitle. This is justified by a wicked little article, written with tongue firmly in cheek but finding accurate parallels between medieval and modern-day depravity.

'Neo-Mediaevalists 'R' Us', *Hoblink* No.37.

Addresses for periodicals cited (excluding newspapers):
Overseas readers send two IRCs for details.

British Archaeology
Council for British Archaeology, Bowes Morrell House, 111 Walmgate, York, YO1 2UA
Annual subscription (10 issues and membership of CBA) £17

Folkvang-Horg
20 Ascot Drive, Longford, Cannock, Staffordshire, WS11 1PE
£2.30 for single issue

Hoblink
Box 22, OUT!brighton, 4 & 7 Dorset Street, Brighton, BN2 1AW
£2.25 for single issue

The Ley Hunter
PO Box 258, Cheltenham, GL53 0HR
Subscription (3 issues) £7.00

Help!

Would all readers please help with the compilation of the 'Abstracts' section by keeping their eyes open for interesting information in daily papers and obscure journals. I do not have the time to read a daily or Sunday paper, still less spot the occasional gem in unlikely sources. Your help will, of course, be gratefully acknowledged.

Next issue

At the Edge issue 3 could include any, many or (just possibly) none of the following.

Subscribers will find out in August!

Dr Jan Harding
Cursus monuments and symbolic territories

Gavin Smith
A religious paradigm for some English place-name elements

Alby Stone
The three destinies of Lleu Llaw Gyffes

Bob Trubshaw
Paganism in British folk customs - modern myth or subversive survival?

Ruth Wylie
Newly-discovered Green Men

Plus:
Letters
Abstracts
Reviews

REVIEWS

Nigel Pennick
CELTIC SACRED LANDSCAPES

Thames and Hudson 1996
235 x 160 mm, 224 pages, 64
illustrations, hardback £12.95

Pennick is a prolific author but has rarely benefited from having his work promoted by major publishers. Last year saw the publication by Routledge of the solid and academically-oriented work coauthored with Prudence Jones, *A history of pagan Europe*. In *Celtic Sacred Landscapes* he takes a different approach, offering a broad overview of many of the themes which have recurred in his
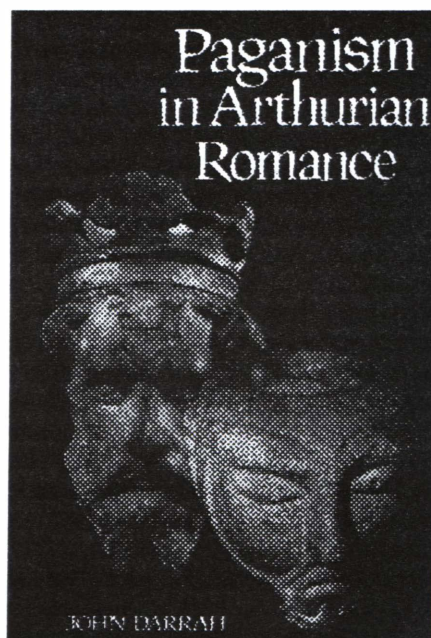

CELTIC SACRED LANDSCAPES

earlier writing - sacred trees, sacred stones, wells, holy mountains, sacred caves, holy islands and much else. Such a wide scope means, inevitably, that there is too little information on any one theme. This tendency to superficiality could have been countered by some more explicit references to the the lengthy list of works cited for further reading.

On the 'plus' side, the examples of places given in the main text are often little-known - no mere rehashing of well-worn examples. And there are nearly 40 pages of country-by-country gazetteers, covering not only the British Isles but also France, Germany, Switzerland, Austria and Italy. The book is in some ways rather like an encyclopedia - to be dipped into for summaries on specific topics; information on specific sites; or just opened at random to be informed and stimulated 'serendipitically'.

Although acknowledging that Celtic culture was never homogeneous, Pennick sidesteps any of the controversial debates about what 'Celtic' really means when one strips away the illusions imposed by the modern-day heritage industry. Equally, there is no polemic on what constitutes a 'sacred landscape'. This is not a criticism as the overall approach of the book is to make the author's substantial research available to the 'interested public' in an appealing and accessible manner, avoiding overly-contentious issues. The style of writing, combined with the author's drawings and some excellent input from T&H's design department, should result in the 'interested public' being well-pleased with this work. At a time when many paperbacks cost more than £13, this is a most attractively priced, as well as attractively produced, publication.

Bob Trubshaw

Paganism in Arthurian Romance
JOHN DARRAH

John Darrah
PAGANISM IN ARTHURIAN ROMANCE

Boydell and Brewer 1994
243 x 154 mm, 304 pages,
hardback £29.50

John Darrah's second stab at unravelling the pagan roots of Arthurian romance - following more than a decade after *The Real Camelot* (1981) - is simultaneously novel and old-fashioned. Innovation is evident in the multilateral approach to the apparent mythological content: he begins by giving a skeleton survey of the stories clustering around the calendar of religious festivals and celebrations, and builds up a solid picture of Arthurian romance as an expression of pagan customs centred upon the seasonal cycles, In the next section Darrah discusses the nature of British paganism, adding depth and context to the calendrical themes. Having done that, he locates the entire tradition in the landscape, linking Arthurian adventures to known or likely sites, and to key archaeological discoveries relating to the religion and rites of the Bronze and Iron Ages, The author also gives a handy

'who's who' section and a gazetteer. Darrah's command of the Arthurian texts is excellent, and his knowledge of Celtic mythology and use of folklore are generally sound. The picture he paints is coherent and neatly defined, and not unattractive.

As a theoretical base, Darrah relies heavily on the central tenet of J. G. Frazer's monumental *Golden Bough*. This means that his study is structured according to the ritual struggle for kingship in the sacred grove at Nemi, the rite that was the focus for Frazer's edifice of fertility, seasonal conflict, and hierogamy. This gives Darrah's work an old-fashioned flavour that, while it seems to illuminate Arthurian episodes, does little to elucidate the underlying mythology. There has been a vast amount of work done on the anthropology of myth and ritual since Frazer published his *magnum opus*, and little of his vision remains in currency, One has only to think of Mircea Eliade, Georges Dumézil and Claude Lèvi-Strauss to realise the flaws and limitations of the Frazerian view and the extent to which it has been replaced by ideas that explain far more than Frazer's simplistic skeleton key ever could. Darrah's exegesis would certainly benefit from a transfusion of fresher blood.

Another thing that Darrah would do well to bear in mind is the limitations imposed by assuming the Arthurian *genre* to be almost exclusively drawn from Celtic myth and religion. While it is true that Celtic tradition does constitute the major part of Arthurian material, it is also becoming increasingly clear that it does not explain all of it, For one thing, one cannot ignore the massive Germanic influence in Britain and France in the eight or nine hundred years preceding the first true Arthurian romances, nor, as C. Scott Littleton and Linda A. Malcor have recently insisted (*From Scythia to Camelot*, Garland 1994) should one forget the significant presence of Alans and Sarmatians in Britain and Gaul during the same period, Darrah does nod in the general direction of Germany, Scandinavia and Scythia on a handful of occasions, and even asks some pertinent questions (pages 80 and 141, for example) - but he never gets round to doing the relevant spade-work. This is a great pity, as a bit more digging could have tempted him into research on Indo-European comparative mythology - which would surely have resulted in far more significant revelations than those allowed by the Frazerian structure.
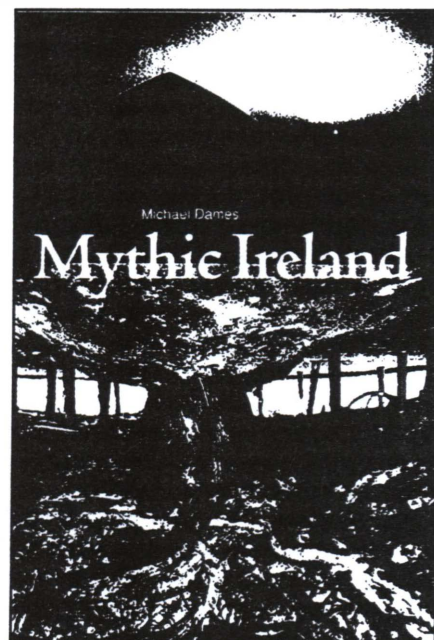
Nevertheless, this is a book of definite merit. It is interesting and intriguing, thoughtful yet lively, and closely argued. Within its declared parameters it works well and - despite the reservations outlined here - has much to offer. Darrah shows that Arthurian romancecan be of real value in clarifying problematic aspects of pagan myth and ritual, even if arguments over the interpretation are likely to persist for a long time. In that respect it is not unlike the above-mentioned book by Littleton and Malcor - the contentious nature of the material is as positive an attraction as the quality of the execution. And an entertaining book that has the potential to spark off such debates is surely a book worth having.

Alby Stone

Michael Dames
MYTHIC IRELAND

Thames and Hudson
Paperback edition 1996
242 x 150 mm, 272 pages,
fully illustrated, £12.95

Any readers who were present at The Ley Hunter Moot in Hebden Bridge in 1993 will remember Michael Dames' appearance - a performance more than merely a lecture. This was fairly soon after the publication of the hardback edition of *Mythic Ireland*. The most-welcome appearance of a paperback edition, with corrections, enables me to once again draw attention to this enormously informative work.

Dames' scope is broad, bringing together a wealth of little-known Irish folklore and tradition and tying it closely to both mythology and specific places, especially those which are deeply-rooted places of pilgrimage. Such an approach could not be dealt with, at least within the confines of one book, in an academic manner. Instead, Dames provides clear evidence of his sources and simply summarises and synthesises. I feel sure that the author would acknowledge that many of his suggestions could be argued over, but this is to miss the overall effect, which is to present this information in an accessible and, above all, stimulating manner.

Some readers may be well-acquainted with Dames' first two books, *The Silbury Treasure* (Thames and Hudson 1976) and *The Avebury Cycle* (Thames and Hudson 1977: second edition 1996 [*review in At the Edge No.3 - R.N.T.]*). These are highly-inspirational works although based almost entirely on personal insight rather than recognised fact. By comparison, *Mythic Ireland* is a more solidly factual work, although still able to offer many moments of inspiration.

As an article elsewhere in this issue suggests, I have a special interest in the places and mythology of Ireland. Yet, four years after its original publication, I have not fully digested the ideas and information which Dames provides. *At the Edge* aims to bridge the overlaps between folklore, mythology and archaeology, and especially bring together academic and non-academic approaches. *Mythic Ireland* is one of the very few books which successfully attempts similar objectives and this affordable paperback edition should be an essential cornerstone for readers' bookshelves.

Bob Trubshaw

Robin Holdate (ed.) CHILTERN ARCHAEOLOGY Recent work - a handbook for the next decade

The Book Castle 1995
A4, 182 pages, illustrated, paperback £16.99

Thankfully planning permission for new factories, houses and roads now requires the developers to fund archaeological evaluation and, where necessary, excavations of significant sites. As a result of this 'rescue' work there has been a substantial quantity of new evidence throughout much of the country. But all is not golden. There is no onus on the developers to fund extensive post-excavation analysis, still less to ensure that the 'dig' is properly written up and published. This is aggravated by the need for competitive tendering, which means that individual projects may be carried out by a variety of archaeological teams, perhaps from outside the region. This leads to the real downside of modern field archaeology - the lack of 'synthesis', of putting the little bits and pieces together to make up a bigger and much more informative picture. Given the hectic workloads imposed by 'rescue' archaeology there is little time - and never any money - to fund excavations which could flesh out the supposed interpretations.

Luton Museum Service are to be congratulated in making effective efforts to fill just this deficit. *Chiltern Archaeology* comprises 24 articles which begin with overviews of the early prehistoric through to medieval eras then deals with details of specific excavations and surveys. The work of amateur fieldwalking teams features here.

The overall impression is of an area which fails to provide sufficient evidence to paint a detailed picture of the prehistoric eras, but acquires significance in the later iron age. The Roman town of Verulamium appears to dominate the Roman landscape (or is just this because more attention has been paid to the environs of St Albans?). Anglo-Saxons, as elsewhere in southern England, are conspicuous by their burials but otherwise lived such a 'green' lifestyle that their occupation sites are all but unknown. The later medieval studies are different in kind, as they look for specific local 'variations' on what are considered to be national 'norms'.

Despite spending my teens on the edge of this area, I opened this book in ignorance of its archaeology. From this 'standing start' I soon absorbed an effective overview and therefore *Chiltern Archaeology* more than fulfils one of its main aims. From a landscape point of view one of the main interests is in the evidence for extensive iron age ditches or dykes. They seem to have begun as single boundaries but, by the immediate pre-Roman period, had become complex, multiple earthworks, especially in the vicinity of key settlements, such as Baldock.

The ability to recognise several major pre-Roman settlements means that a number of 'Roman' roads, such as the Icknield Way, can be confidently considered to be pre-Roman in origin.

Ritual sites have rarely been identified - a general trend with 'rescue' archaeology and aerial photography - although several possible Romano-British shrines may have stood north of Berkhamstead.

All of the contributors concluded with suggestions for future research. In general, these can be summed up as 'more detail to support the suggestions I've just made' and, understandably perhaps, do not address issues of how such activity is to be organised or funded. Despite the good work of amateur field workers there seems to be little encouragement for non-professionals to act as more than 'foot soldiers'. What is unsaid but essential is that, having achieved so much in compiling *Chiltern Archaeology*, Luton Museum Service should maintain their role at the focus of the disparate activities which make up archaeological investigation in the region. The subtitle of this book sets a timescale of one decade - I for one look forward to about ten years' time and a follow-up volume. By then I hope the compilers and publishers will have considered taking advice from a professional designer to avoid some of the quite unnecessary 'quirks' in typography which are this book's recurrent weakness.

One final broadside - if Luton Museums Service can produce such effective region studies, why cannot we have the same for elsewhere in the country? I doubt if funding and workloads are significantly different in Luton from any other 'over-stretched' county museums.

Bob Trubshaw

Jean Marie Chauvet,
Eliette Brunel
Deschamps and
Christian Hillaire
CHAUVET CAVE
The discovery of the
world's oldest
paintings
Thames and Hudson 1996
310 x 270 mm, 135 pages,
fully illustrated in colour,
hardback £28.00

In December 1994 three experienced French caving enthusiasts, who had been meticulously mapping the evidence of cave art in the gorges of the Ardèche region of southern France, made the discovery of a life-time. They removed a rock fall and dropped down into the first of a series of large underground chambers. The calcite deposits formed colourful and dramatic stalactites, stalagmites and 'draperies', sparkling in the beams of their torches. This was a magnificent new discovery and brought an understandable elation. Then one of them spotted some cave paintings, then another, and another. When they came back, better equipped to explore further into the caverns, an incredible wealth of prehistoric art was revealed, almost all of the highest standard and with many unique features.

Despite all these splendours, this cave will never be opened to the public. This is because one of the key concerns is the conservation of the floor, which is littered with the bones and foot prints of bears and a variety of evidence of the human visitors (although there is too little 'garbage' for the cave to have been occupied).

The paintings have been photographed, and nearly 100 have been reproduced in large format in this book, providing clear evidence of what has been found. The supporting text provides the first-hand accounts from the discoverers together with the provisional evaluations of two experts. While there is no doubt whatsoever that these paintings are genuinely prehistoric, such art is always controversial when it comes to more precise dating. Nevertheless, the book's claim that these are the oldest cave paintings is probably quite sound. Some of the paintings do seem to date from around 29,000 BC. Other series of motifs date from around 24,500 BC and from 22,000 BC, indicating that the cave was revisited at quite different periods. If we observe that the Parthenon frieze is around 2,500 years old, the time scales separating the different phases are of a similar order.

Those interested in 'entoptic' patterns will be disappointed to learn that (at least on the basis of the information provided in this book) there are few, if any, such motifs. There is however a 'man-animal', with the foreparts of a bison above human legs, which brings to mind the so-called 'sorcerers' in the caves of Les Trois-Frères and Gabillou.

This is a well-produced book (published exceptionally quickly after the discovery) which fulfils well the role of providing clear illustrations of the dramatic paintings together with a non-technical assessment of the archaeology.
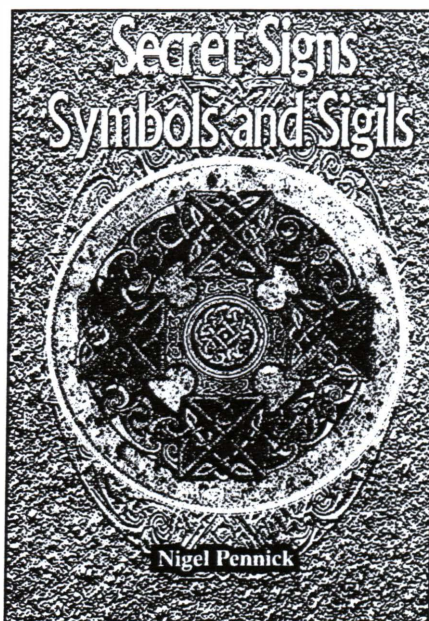
Bob Trubshaw

Nigel Pennick
SECRET SIGNS,
SYMBOLS AND
SIGILS
Capall Bann 1996
A5, 201 pages, illustrated,
paperback £10.95

This is an excellent book but with one major fault - the title fails to describe the full scope of the contents. There are indeed many examples of signs, symbols and sigils but the explanatory text, while concise, extends into a wide range of issues. Most of these - the Cosmic Axis, the Tree of Life, witches' broomsticks, hobby horses, crossroads, labyrinths, maypoles - will be of immediate interest to many *At the Edge* readers. As these topics form only about half the substance of this book, there is also much that may be less familiar but equally informative.

Some of this information is related to the author's various privately-published pamphlets which have appeared over the years. It is excellent to see this material forming part of a wider context and published in less ephemeral form. I must admit that the first four chapters are, for my taste, overly esoteric and failed to make their points effectively. However, the remaining 17 chapters more than make up for this. Those familiar with Pennick's *Practical magic in the northern tradition* (1989; reprinted Thoth 1994) will be aware how much original research he is able to compress into a few pages of inspirational text.

This is not a work in the same league as the academically 'solid' book Pennick coauthored with Prudence Jones (*A history of pagan Europe*, Routledge

Secret Signs Symbols and Sigils

Nigel Pennick

1995) but brings almost the same 'solidity' of research to the attention of a wider readership. *Secret Signs, Symbols and Sigils* is, in some ways, a useful adjunct to *Celtic Sacred Landscapes* (reviewed above), filling in some of the subjects treated too briefly in the wider-scope.

This book greatly enhances the standing of Capall Bann as a publisher, both in content and appearance, and is recommended as a thought-provoking read for all *At the Edge* readers.

Bob Trubshaw

Bill Griffiths
MEET THE DRAGON
An introduction to Beowulf's adversary
Heart of Albion Press 1996
47pp, 14 line drawings, card covers, £2.95

The dragon is a persistent, if hardly commonplace, figure in religion, myth and legend across the world: sometimes greeted as the harbinger of good fortune, sometimes worshipped as a deity, often reviled as the epitome of soulless evil. Stories and poems abound from the literatures of the ancient world in which the dragon plays a prominent part. In the natural human order of things, all our attention as readers focuses on those heroes (Beowulf, Sigurd-r, St George) whose task it is to fight and overcome the repulsive, reptilian foes of mankind. The Dragonslayer is a central character in many mythic systems while the fight

Decoration from an early fifth century Greek cup by the famous painter Douris, depicting Jason being swallowed (or regurgitated) by the snake.

From *Meet the Dragon.*

against the insuperable foe is the crowning glory and bitterest defeat of Beowulf's distinguished career. But what about the dragon? Where does the idea of the dragon come from - given that the creature has no objective reality - and what is its meaning? Why was the business of dragon-slaying the first test that Sigurðr faced, and the final one which Beowulf (and, implicitly, no one else) could pass?

In this neat volume, Bill Griffiths sets out to find answers to the many questions surrounding this richly symbolic creature. In doing so he brings in such matters as human revulsion at the idea of being eaten alive (the fate of animals caught in the coils of the larger serpents) and the relationship between the dragon and the dead - particularly the grave-mound dwelling, treasure-guarding dragons of heroic verse. Bill also discusses the Christian notion of the dragon as one of the beastly manifestations of Satan, and correlates the various concepts

underlying the Anglo-Saxon *draca* to try to bring out the reptile's meaning within the culture (with particular reference to *Beowulf,* of course).

It is a large and ambitious project, and in fairness one must say straight away that a full and proper discussion of the subject of dragon from ancient times to the Beowulfian example on which this book hangs, would need a book ten times the length of this one, and it is probably this constraint on space which has produced the markedly 'slanted' work in question. It is evidently intended to be more than an examination of the Anglo-Saxon Beowulf-poet's concept - hence the brief initial foray into the realm of the Chinese *lung* and later discussions of Persian counterparts, 'Greek fire', and dragon standards in the Roman legions - but so much is left 'hanging in the air' that it would surely have been better for Bill to concentrate his scholarly skills and attention on Beowulf's final adversary *within* the

context of that poem, and leave the more wide-ranging material to footnotes. The overall effect is of an expanded essay on dragons rather than a full exposition of any single aspect of the subject. That said, the book is certainly an entertaining read and represents excellent value for money. For anyone with the inclination to follow up all the intriguing source references this will no doubt serve as a valuable introduction to the subject.

Steve Pollington

Arnaud d'Apremont YGGDRASILL L'Axe de Vie des Anceins Nordiques

Editions de Janvier 1995
A5, 63 pages, illustrated, card covers £6.50 + 40p p&p
Available in UK only from:
Heart of Albion Press,
2 Cross Hill Close,
Wymeswold,
Loughborough, LE12 6UJ

As someone whose schoolboy French was well short of 'O' level standard - and has rusted solidly for the last 25 years - it is a great credit to the clarity of d'Apremont's writing that his ideas make sense to me, with only an occasional resort to an French:English dictionary (well, did you know that *un frêne* is an ash tree?). On the basis that if I can read this booklet then most *At the Edge* readers will find it even easier I offer this concise review.

The title needs no translation and the subtitle makes it clear that we are being offered an overview of the Tree of Life in northern traditions. This is an excellent straight-forward introduction to a subject which has often been intentionally over-mystified in popular writings. There is no equivalent work in English which is as concise yet comprehensive.

The author provides numerous short translations (into French) of passages from Snorri's *Eddas* which refer to Yggdrasil. After an introduction, which discusses the alternative names, there is an extended section on the *axis mundi*/Tree of Life symbolism, especially as it links to the northern traditions of three levels of existence. The second part of the booklet looks at the links to runes, Odin, Irminsul, the *Fleur de Lys* and other related themes.

The scope seems especially wide for a booklet of 63 pages but the treatment is never excessively superficial and often makes suggestions and interpretations which give pause for thought. As the booklet is also well designed and printed, this is a most useful contribution to this area of mythology.

Arnaud d'Apremont is the 'front man' for IRMIN - the Institut de Recherche sur la Mythologie et l'Identite Nordiques. He edits a well-produced 48-page, A4 format quarterly magazine, also entitled *Irmin* which (rather like *At the Edge*) provides a forum for both academic and amateur contributors. In addition, every issue contains a superbly drawn 'comic strip' - although, as these are four-page instalments of an evolving saga, the term 'graphic novel' is perhaps more appropriate. *Irmin* subscribers also receive the informative *OR Briefing*, produced by an organisation called 'Nouvelles du Rite Odinique - France'. Details from Irmin, BP2146, F-51081, Reims Cedex, France.

Bob Trubshaw

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