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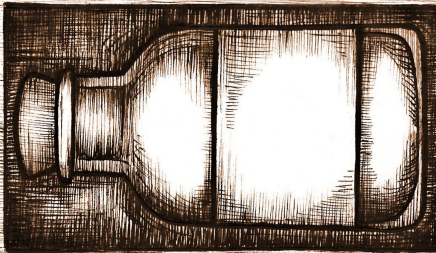
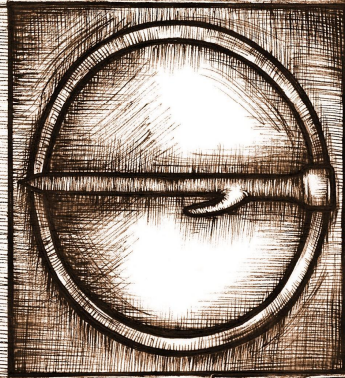
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Hidden Charms

*A conference held at
Norwich Castle
April 2nd, 2016*



Edited by John Billingsley,
Jeremy Harte and Brian Hoggard

Hidden Charms

Transactions of the Hidden Charms Conference 2016

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Hidden Charms

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Hidden Charms conference schedule
Town Close Auditorium, Norwich Castle
April 2, 2016

First session

- 10.00 Brian Hoggard:
Evidence of unseen forces: Apotropaic objects on the
threshold of materiality
- 10.30 Sonja Hukantaival:
Same mental idea, different manifestation? Hidden charms
in Finland and the UK

Second session

- 11.45 Jeremy Harte:
Luck and dread: How household curiosities become ritual
protectors
- 12.15 Annie Thwaite:
The urinary experiment: A re-appraisal of 'witch-bottles' and
their function in early modern England.
- 12.45 Jason Semmens:
Cunning-folk and the protection of property: The view from
the West Country

Third session

- 14:45 Linda Wilson:
'By Midnight, By Moonlight': Ritual protection marks in caves
beneath the Mendip Hills, Somerset
- 15.15 John Billingsley:
The head that works for you: Apotropaic vs show

Fourth Session

- 16:30 Ceri Houlbrook:
From concealers to finders: Putting the (concealed) shoe on
the other foot
- 17:00 James Wright:
Cultural anxieties and ritual protection in high-status early-
modern houses.

Introduction

Brian Hoggard

It was John Billingsley who casually mentioned to me one day that it would be a good idea to have a conference looking at the material culture of magic. It didn't take long for this idea to germinate in my mind and then, with Jeremy Harte getting on board as well, we began to plan for the Hidden Charms conference, which eventually took place on Saturday 2nd April 2016 in the Town Close Auditorium at Norwich Castle.

The materiality of magic has become a much more fashionable subject since my own research project began way back in 1999. Then, even the history of witchcraft was virtually a fringe subject, let alone the archaeology relating to it. At that time the principal source was Ralph Merrifield's 1987 *Archaeology of Ritual and Magic*, which remains an excellent resource to this day. Timothy Easton and June Swann were very busy producing articles on ritual marks and concealed shoes, and there were several other individuals who had conducted regional research and were happy to collaborate. Sadly, though, by this time Ralph Merrifield had died.

The subject area fell into the gaps between the disciplines of history and archaeology, with historians not wanting to consider artefacts for which there were no records (except for witch-bottles) and archaeologists (with a few notable exceptions) not treating these objects seriously when found in otherwise very interesting standing buildings. I have spoken to many archaeologists who have told me anecdotes of finding bottles, shoes and cats which did not find their way into archives or dig reports.

In any case, the main finders of the artefacts are builders, who are not always in the best situation to record and report the objects they find. Many objects end up in the builder's skip or for sale on the black market. To their credit, however, many builders ensure that the objects they encounter do find their way into local museums, where it then depends on the diligence of staff and their collections policy as to whether the finds are properly accessioned and interpreted. One independent museum I visited had a box of old shoes and fragments of bellarmine which people had brought in – but they had not recorded the address of the properties, the context of the objects within the building or even the name of the finder. Most museums are professional of course and uphold good standards in this regard, but that case was not entirely unusual.

Despite all of these challenges there have been so many interested and diligent researchers out there that plenty of records do exist for these

objects (even if it's only the tip of the iceberg), which means we can build a picture and learn something from the patterns of distribution and the changes over time.

Without these carefully recorded examples I doubt whether we'd have been able to round up the fabulous line-up of speakers who, almost thirty years after *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic*, were able to keep the conference attendees riveted from the beginning to the end of the day.

With the exception of Annie Thwaite, who has academic reasons for delaying publishing her material, you will find papers from all of these speakers within this volume. Ceri Houlbrook's contribution is a different title, as she had already submitted her paper elsewhere.

The other chapters here are excellent reflections of the talks which took place on the day, and it is hoped that they will inspire others to go out and conduct research in their own regions.

Work on Hidden Charms 2 is in the pipeline – do drop us a line if you're interested.

Evidence of unseen forces: Apotropaic objects on the threshold of materiality

Brian Hoggard

The main thrust of this paper is to explain that many of the objects found as concealed objects were considered to have transformed from their normal everyday, understood functions to become potent magical objects capable of absorbing, trapping or repelling any malign forces which were attempting to enter the home. Of course they remain physical objects to our senses, but if you can imagine switching your vision to a frequency where magical forces are visible, suddenly these objects are performing a key role on an ethereal level. They have a new existence on the edge of the material world, interacting with non-physical forces. In this paper shoes, witch-bottles, dried cats and horse skulls will all be looked at as examples of this.

Quite apart from the physical trials and tribulations of life in the past, the forces people were afraid of in the pre-modern era were what we now consider to be supernatural. They include but are not confined to witchcraft, fairies, ghosts, demons and wizardry.

With the exception of ghosts, these forces were largely unseen and were diagnosed after observed effects such as illness or bad luck. Sometimes people reached conclusions about what had happened to them in isolation, sometimes in consultation with their friends and family, or they might have asked a cunning-man or wise-woman for help. Belief in these forces was so normal that they were really an intrinsic part of everyday life, not some niche or unusual experience as we consider them to be today.

Since beginning my *Apotropaicos* project back in 1999¹ I've received and mapped many hundreds of reports from people who have found objects in their home during building work. It's interesting to note that when people today (who, by and large, are not predisposed to fearing dark forces) have a strange experience or find something odd within the walls of their home, their world-view can often dramatically change. Down fall the walls of cynicism and disbelief about the supernatural, and in rushes a sense of vulnerability to supernatural forces.

Many times people have asked me for help and advice about what to do with a shoe, a cat, or a witch-bottle which has turned up in their home during some alteration or renovation. The fear and concern they often have about it is palpable. They suddenly become aware of the presence of former

occupants and feel a connection to the same fears they had. Usually they are convinced that whatever the object is must be cared for properly and, ideally, not leave the house.

A perfect example of this comes in the shape of Dave the builder from Pershore, Worcestershire (Dave has no idea how famous he is). Dave was working at Croome Court, now a National Trust property near Pershore. He was one of the team working on converting the stable block into fancy apartments, and reported that the upstairs part of the stable block was all old servants' quarters and that they had to clear it all out. While removing a lath and plaster partition they discovered the body of a dried cat sitting on a large beam. He said it had clearly been deliberately placed on this beam and then sealed in by the panels either side of it. All the builders were terrified of the cat and did not want to touch or move it, but Dave was instructed to dispose of it. Reluctantly he removed it, carried it downstairs and outside to the skip where he said he "felt that it was wrong" to place it in the skip, but that he had to do it. On his way back up the stairs a new plaster panel fell down on to him and gashed his forehead. He said that he and all of the other builders are convinced to this day that this happened because they moved the cat.²

That's just one of many anecdotes reported during the course of this research associating bad luck with the removal of concealed objects. The strong fears associated with these objects mean that it's important to treat correspondents with some care, and I generally recommend that they carefully record what they've found and allow experts the opportunity to examine it before putting it back where it was found. Ideally this would be accompanied by a tiny time capsule recording its discovery and repatriation. Some people choose to place the object behind a screen so that it can be seen forever more – although this does require appropriate conservation advice.

Often (but not always), the type of people who end up living in nice old houses tend to be professional, highly educated people not normally prone to associate themselves with magic and the supernatural. When they discover these objects in their walls or under their floors there is often a distinct and marked change – they suddenly become highly alert and concerned about these topics. It can be argued that this sense of vulnerability and awareness echoes a feeling which was a normal part of the pre-modern psyche and that magical house protection (along with a huge range of other personal charms and edible remedies) was born directly out of it.

There was a belief in the flight of the witch which endured throughout Europe. There are fantastic medieval accounts of the Friulian Benandante from Italy, who would leave their bodies to fight witches.³ Henri Boguet tells us of witches lying 'as if dead' while they were out flying.⁴ There are

some great accounts in this country of people saying that they'd been dragged from their bodies by a witch and flown over great distances.

James I in his *Daemonologie*, however, was sceptical about their ability to do this,⁵ which suggests that beliefs about the flight of the witch varied quite a bit. We probably must conclude that some people thought they could and some that they couldn't.

This scepticism about witch-flight suggests that people believed the witch would raise and direct some kind of magical force towards his or her victim rather than needing to be present in order to deliver their magic at close quarters. Transmission of invisible forces from the witch to his/her victim therefore seems to be the principal mechanism for witchcraft (as we would probably suspect anyway).

There is also the witch's familiar to consider. This could be any kind of small animal which would assist the witch in his or her magical business. They were notably 'ordinary' in appearance, but could be a cat, toad, ferret or bird, amongst other creatures. These creatures could get into places barred to humans and apparently 'carry' and deliver the spells of the witch. The familiar is most commonly encountered in English witchcraft records, and is less common on the continent.

With this sense of vulnerability in mind, people could see all kinds of problems in their homes. A chimney, being always open to the sky, was an obvious point of entry for malign forces. Witch-bottles, shoes and ritual marks in particular are frequently found focused around the hearth. Doorways, windows and roof spaces were also considered problems as they were dead spaces, and often would have objects or even hoards of objects placed within them. Door and window lintels frequently carry marks; sometimes broken knife blades can be found in these locations.

At the Fleece Inn, Bretforton, Worcestershire, right up until the 20th century all the gaps and cracks in the building were whitewashed, perhaps to make them visible so that dark forces couldn't hide in them. There were also three circles drawn in front of the fireplace to protect it – apparently circles have no corners for witches to hide in. This is one good, and slightly unusual, example of someone attempting to address the vulnerabilities in their abode.

So, how to protect the home? What mechanisms could be employed to defeat, repel or trap supernatural dark forces? Concealed objects can tell us a good deal about this. Many of these objects needed to undergo some kind of transition, including 'death', before they became active as counter-witchcraft devices. It is this treatment of the objects which moves them from being useful as objects/animals to being transformed by death into objects which, to quote my title, are on the threshold of materiality.

Concealed Shoes

Concealed shoes are found all over the country and indeed, all over the English-speaking world. The pioneer of research is June Swann⁶, whose work was cited in Ralph Merrifield's *Archaeology of Ritual and Magic*⁷. He thought that there could be a connection with the unofficial saint, John Schorne, who lived in North Marston, Buckinghamshire, in the early 14th century and was reputed to have cast the devil into a boot.⁸



Fig 1: *Concealed shoe from Salford Priors, Warwickshire.*

This legend appears to tie the function of spirit traps and shoes together, although it is thought that Schorne had some talent in curing ailments of the feet. June notes in one of her papers that some shoes in this period were known as devil's horns, because they were so narrow and pointed.⁹ Images related to Schorne usually show a devil being cast into a boot, as in this pilgrim badge. It should be noted that the pilgrimage to Schorne's shrine was at one point one of the most popular in the country, so images relating to boots as devil or spirit traps would have been very widely known.¹⁰

By the time shoes became so worn that they needed to be disposed of, they would have been repaired several times and would have taken on the unique characteristics of the wearer's foot. Perhaps it was hoped that a spirit with evil intent entering the home via the chimney would mistake the shoe, which had strong sympathetic links with the owner, for the owner and plunge into it and become trapped? Or perhaps it just acted as a decoy and the malign force would attack it, release its spell and become spent.

Witch-Bottles

Witch-bottles first appear in the archaeological record in the first half of the 17th century, where usually the bottle chosen was a German Stoneware bottle known colloquially as a 'bellarmine'. The usual contents of these bottles are urine, iron pins or nails and human hair; in various bottles nail parings, thorns, fabric and small bones have been found.¹¹

In the second half of the 17th century several publications described recipes for witch-bottles. Joseph Blagrave in his *Astrological Practice of Physick*¹² of 1671 recommended "stopping the victim's urine in the bottle" with pins and then heating it, which would cause dreadful pain to the witch. It seems that the idea here is that the bottle represents the witch's bladder and that the urine is introduced because of the invisible bond between witch and bewitched. This sympathetic magic, whereby the witch was thought to



Fig 2: John Schorne pilgrim badge

suffer as the urine did, was clearly enhanced by the introduction of sharp pins and nails, which presumably added to the suffering.

Merrifield also quoted from Glanvill's *Saducismus Triumphatus* of the 1660s, which told the story of a woman who was ailing due to suspected witchcraft. First a bottle was heated, and when that proved unsuccessful it was recommended that the bottle be buried, "for that was sure to do the trick". The story continues that a wizard died nearby soon after, and it is assumed in the story that the witch-bottle was successful in its counter-witchcraft.¹³

The texts all talk of urine and pins, and one says that "anything which has a shew of torture about it" should be included.¹⁴ Contents have included bones, thorns, hair, fabric, nail parings, sharp pieces of wood, and insects; two of the bottles are thought to have contained small effigies. In most cases it's clear that the pins have been deliberately bent to 'kill' them, releasing their ethereal counterparts.

Around half of all bottles have been found beneath or near to the hearth. The next most common locations are beneath the floor and beneath the threshold. Others have been found in or beneath walls and in open country. There is always considerable effort in the form of digging, bending nails, and collecting ingredients for these bottles.

It seems likely that people had a notion that a witch could send energy out (a spell) to come and find its victim – it would probably get into the house via the chimney, so it was important to trap it there. The idea with a witch-bottle is that the energy is sniffing you out and finds a human-like bottle which smells of you, plunges into it and get impaled on the ghostly pins within.

Figure 4 shows two bottles discovered in a hearth surround in a manor house in Essex, and date from the late 18th century. A third was discovered just a month or so after these ones. Later research revealed that the lady of the house in this



Fig 3: 'Bellarmine' witch-bottle from Felmersham

period was suffering a lingering illness, so these bottles could indicate that she thought witchcraft was the cause.

The tradition of concealing witch-bottles appears to have begun in the south-east, where the majority of the German stoneware bottles were imported, and fairly quickly spread west and north. This is clear from analysis of the dates and find-spots.



Fig 4: Two 18th-century bottles from Essex

Dried Cats

While it is fairly obvious that cats do crawl away to die, it is less well known that many dried cats are found with clear evidence that they have been placed intentionally in buildings. When cats have been discovered in roofs, inside chimneys and under floors, although it is possible that they did crawl there to die, wouldn't you be concerned about ridding your house of the smell? The fact is that several cats have been discovered positioned in what are considered unnatural positions and certainly in unlikely places. Examples include a cat found wired to a floor joist in Darlton, North Yorkshire; the skull of a cat discovered concealed in the brickwork of a chimney; a dried cat in the roof of St Cuthbert's Church, Clifton, Penrith, Cumbria, was found between plaster and slates; and a cat was discovered in a bricked-up bread oven in Parracombe, Devon.

Speculation has, as with horse skulls, focused on the notion of foundation sacrifices for these animals. In short, this is the idea that if a life is given to the building, it will not take a life later on. The practice may be one peculiar to builders rather than the occupants of the house, but more research is needed to clarify this.

A more evident explanation revolves around the perceived qualities of cats. They are very alert, often slipping out at night, at the same time being beneficial in their role as vermin catchers. Perhaps it was hoped that in death the cat would be able to protect the home from more spiritual vermin such as witches' familiars. So here the cat was transformed into a spirit guardian by death.

It has been suggested that the cats were placed in buildings for the purely practical reason to act as vermin scarers. This however, seems unlikely for two reasons. Rats would soon learn that a dead cat was in fact dead, and the locations of many of these animals seem inappropriate – surely close to the larder would be the best place.



Fig 5: Dried cat from Eckington, Worcestershire.

Dried cats can be found throughout England, Wales and certainly Ireland, although very few examples from Scotland have come to light so far.

Horse Skulls

Investigation into the meaning of concealed horse skulls has so far been limited to two explanations, and authors have been divided over which may be correct.

The main paper on concealed horse skulls concerns Seán Ó Súilleabháin's survey of traditions and beliefs concerning the practice in Ireland. Most of his respondents, having consulted in their localities, reported the belief that horse skulls were concealed under flagstones in front of the fire to make a better sound when people danced in the evenings. Ó Súilleabháin accepted that this was what was now thought, but did not accept that this was the origin of the practice. He was convinced that the practice must have earlier origins and that the horse skulls were concealed as foundation sacrifices.¹⁵

In England many examples have been uncovered. For example, at an inn called the Portway at Staunton-on-Wye in Herefordshire, 24 horse skulls were found screwed to the underside of the floor, allegedly “to make the fiddle go better”.¹⁶ Many more horse skulls were also found beneath another house in the county at Peterchurch.



Fig 6: Horse skull (from the author's collection).

As far as I know, there has been little research into whether concealing horse skulls beneath the floor does actually improve the quality of sound in the room – although it is possible that it might. This theory of horse skulls improving acoustics is widely held and it may have been a way of justifying the practice in periods when practices such as this were frowned upon – the Reformation rears its head as a

possible candidate for when this happened, but that is, it must be stressed, speculation.

Opposing this acoustic theory is the idea that horses were placed in houses as foundation sacrifices. Supporting this is the fact that many horse

skulls are discovered in places which are not under the floor, and would not, therefore, provide any acoustic benefit. For example, in Essex a skull was found concealed by the fireplace between two walls. This could not possibly have served an acoustic function. Merrifield provides very good evidence from 1897 where workers building a chapel in Cambridgeshire required a horse's skull (acquired from a knacker's yard) which they placed on a stake and poured beer over.¹⁷

Again it seems likely that foundation sacrifices and the acoustic theory both play a part in explaining the practice of concealing horse skulls. As with cats, however, it is possible that the horse's benevolent role in human life may have led to it being seen as a 'protector' too.

So, to conclude, in order to protect their homes from malign forces people would 'kill' pins or utilise dead shoes, and it appears they killed cats and acquired horse skulls too. Those objects would then become potent magical objects on the threshold of materiality.

Notes

1. See www.apotropaios.co.uk
2. Pers. comm. Pershore, 1999.
3. Carlo Ginzburg, *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, tr. John Tedeschi and Anne Tedeschi (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966; originally published in Italian, 1966).
4. Henri Boguet, *An Examen of Witches*, tr. E.A. Ashwin, ed. Montague Summers (London: John Rodker, 1929; originally published in French, 1590).
5. James I, *Daemonologie*, in *Minor Prose Works of King James VI and I*, ed. James Craigie, Scottish Texts 4th series 14 (Edinburgh: Scottish Texts Soc., 1982; originally published 1597).
6. June Swann, 'Concealed shoes', *Costume* 30 (1996) pp.56–69.
7. Ralph Merrifield, *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic* (London: Batsford, 1987).
8. Merrifield, *Archaeology of Ritual* pp.134–5.
9. Swann, 'Concealed shoes' p.65.
10. Richard Marks, 'A late medieval pilgrimage cult: Master John Schorne of North Marston and Windsor', in *Windsor: Medieval Archaeology, Art and Architecture of the Thames Valley*, ed. Sarah Brown, British Archaeological Association Conference Transactions (London: Maney, 2002) pp.192–207.
11. I have written extensively about witch-bottles in 'Witch-bottles: their contents, contexts and uses', in *Physical Evidence for Ritual Acts, Sorcery and Witchcraft in Christian Britain: A Feeling for Magic*, ed. Ronald Hutton (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) pp.91–105.
12. Joseph Blagrave, *Astrological Practice of Physick* (London: S.G. & B.G., 1671), quoted in Ralph Merrifield, 'The use of Bellarmines as witch-bottles', *Guildhall Miscellany* 3 (1954) pp.3–15.
13. Joseph Glanvill, *Saducismus Triumphatus* (London: J. Collins, 1681) 2 pp.169–70, quoted in Merrifield, *Archaeology of Ritual* pp.171–2.
14. Cotton Mather, *Late Memorable Providences Relating to Witchcrafts and Possessions* (London: Thomas Parkhurst, 1691), quoted in George Lyman Kittredge,

- Witchcraft in Old and New England* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1928) p.102.
15. Sean Ó Súilleabháin, 'Foundation sacrifices', *Journal of Royal Soc. of Antiquaries of Ireland* 75 (1945) pp.45–52.
 16. Merrifield, *Archaeology of Ritual* p.123.
 17. Merrifield, *Archaeology of Ritual* p.126.

Same mental idea, different manifestation? Hidden charms in Finland and the British Isles

Sonja Hukantaival

Introduction

*When a horse dies one should dry its skull and secretly conceal it under the back wall; no-one must see when this is done. This will drive bedbugs away.*¹

The above folklore account was recorded in 1908 in eastern Finland. It belongs to a corpus of 775 records on practices involving ritual concealments in buildings in Finland comprising part of the research material for the author's PhD thesis.² The other main material for the study is finds of concealed objects made in connection to archaeological excavations or demolition/renovation of old buildings. Due to challenges in recording and interpreting such finds, this material is considerably smaller, consisting of only 234 cases. Additionally, the study discusses seven witchcraft and superstition trials where concealed objects are involved. These materials, from a period of c.1200–1950 CE (Finland's historical period), are analysed from a contextual multi-source perspective in order to recognise patterns in the relationships between a chosen object, its location, and meanings of the act.

Ritual concealments in buildings, or hidden charms, are widely-known and have especially been studied in the British Isles. The hidden charms most often discussed here are concealed shoes, dried cats, horse skulls, and witch bottles.³ While conducting the Finnish study, it became apparent that practices in different parts of Europe share some elements and differ in other respects. The aim of this paper is to briefly explore similarities and differences in practices involving ritually concealed objects in buildings in Finland and the British Isles. At the same time, some results of the study and traditions known in Finland are introduced.

Meanings of the Practices

*A small bottle with quicksilver has been kept inside or under the threshold of a stable and cowshed, for a witch cannot cross such a threshold.*⁴

The meanings of the Finnish concealments are most easily approached from the viewpoint of folklore accounts, since many of these are explicit about this aspect. However, these accounts date mostly to the late 19th and early 20th century, so they describe the customs known at that time. The meanings of earlier practices must be inferred from the choice of object and its location in the building. For the purpose of this paper, the meanings described in the folklore form a sufficient body of evidence for comparison with meanings discussed in the British Isles.

In Finnish folklore, several different reasons are given for practices involving concealment (Fig. 1). Still, the most common meaning (in 35% of the accounts including such information) is protection against some sort of evil (so-called apotropaic practices). Moreover, the evil is most often specified as witchcraft caused by envious neighbours. The second most common reason (31%) for concealment is a more general wish to make the building 'lucky' and the third is repelling pests (15%). Other reasons that occur in smaller percentages are, for example, malignant magic, offering to a guardian spirit, and counter-magic against witchcraft believed to have already occurred. Study of Finnish folklore also reveals that specific meanings are connected to specific types of objects and their chosen location. Concealments of mercury in threshold contexts especially have a very strong correlation with apotropaic practices, while animal remains in hearth contexts are strongly connected with pest-repelling meanings.

Though the author is unaware of studies giving information on the relative popularity of different meanings in the British Isles, there seems to be a consensus that apotropaic meanings are prominent here as well.⁵ Other meanings are discussed less often.⁶ Since living cats hunt rodents, a vermin-scare function has sometimes been suggested for concealed cats, but this explanation is likely to be simplifying or even misleading.⁷ As noted, in Finland pest control is applied to animal remains concealed in hearth structures, but most commonly the object in question is a horse skull, so no modern type of logic explains the choice of animal. Instead, the usefulness of the concealed object is connected to a notion of special (otherworldly) agency believed to be a quality of certain animals, materials, and artefacts.⁸

Concealed objects and their contexts

A copper coin, a coin of the crown, was put under each corner when building a cowshed; then witchcraft could not affect it.⁹

In Finnish folklore accounts, three types of objects chosen for concealment stand out: mercury, coins, and animal remains. Mercury is often described as being put inside a small bottle or the quill of a bird and concealed under or inside the threshold. The most commonly occurring animal remain is the horse skull, which is also prominent in the British

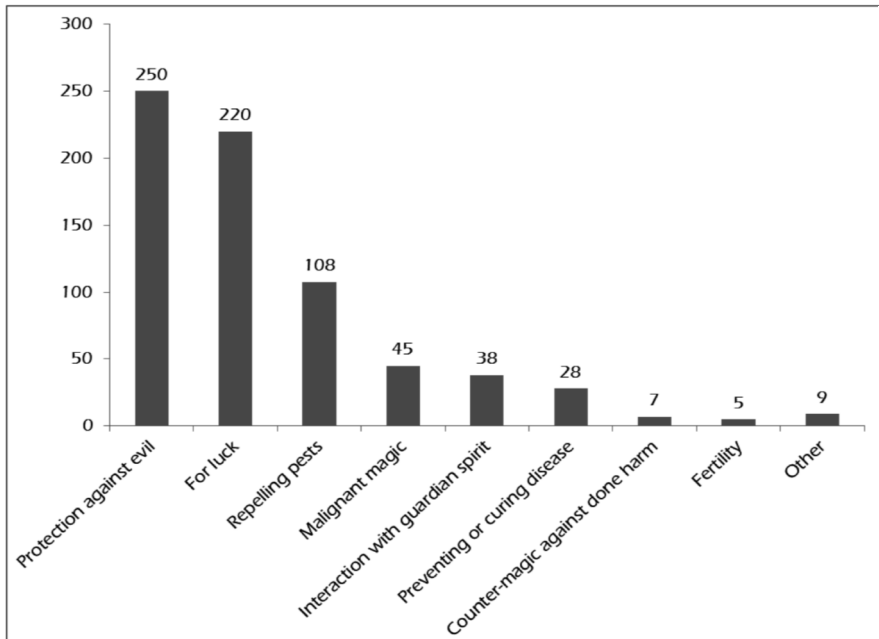


Fig. 1. *Reasons for concealing objects in buildings, as given in Finnish folklore accounts (n=710).*

Isles.¹⁰ Coins have been concealed in the British Isles as well,¹¹ but they are not as often discussed as horse skulls, shoes, and cats. These last-mentioned three types of objects are discussed in more detail below.

In contrast to the folklore, slightly different objects stand out in the Finnish finds. Find material forms a smaller body of evidence than folklore, emphasised by the fact that the finds cover a wider time-span of around 800 years. Still, one major reason for the diverging picture is matters of preservation, recognition, and documentation of finds. In the find material, human-made artefacts especially stand out as concealed objects. Moreover, in cases found in buildings dating to late modern times (c. 1700–1950) wedged Stone Age objects, so-called thunderbolts,¹² form a large proportion (40%). This picture is influenced by the early interests of antiquarians and museums. Finds of Stone Age and other interesting artefacts have been recorded with accuracy, while many other types of objects have not been of interest.

One group of objects occurring in both folklore and finds is sharp metal tools, such as axes and knives. Coins are also present in the find material, but due to problems in recognition and documentation of these small objects, they are clearly under-represented. Animal remains occur in the

whole study period as well, but it is likely that only a very limited proportion of actual practices has been recorded.

The contexts of hidden charms occurring in folklore, in order of popularity, are thresholds, corners, walls, roofs, hearths, and floors. Dwellings and animal shelters stand out as types of buildings receiving a concealment. In the find material, thresholds and roofs are under-represented, while walls, floors, and hearths stand out.

The most common type of building during most of the historical period in Finland was a horizontal log construction with a cross-notch corner technique. The oldest type is called a smoke cottage, since it does not have a chimney. The smoke was simply led out through a small hatch in the wall. Smoke cottages are known from medieval times up to the 19th century, even though log houses with chimneys started to become popular in the 18th and 19th centuries.¹³ This building technique affects concealment practices, as simple log houses have fewer options than more complex structures of where to put a hidden charm.

Even though concealments from the British Isles are often reported in connection with chimneys, hearths and thresholds also seem to have been popular locations.¹⁴ The similarity of preferred contexts is not self-evident, since a study focusing on southern Scandinavia shows that the hearth was chosen as the location for concealments in the Iron Age and a few medieval cases, but not at all in later times.¹⁵ In contrast, it seems that the hearth remained popular throughout the historical period in both Finland and the British Isles.

Horse skulls

In Finnish folklore, horse skulls are most often mentioned as concealed in the foundation of a hearth, but in some cases wall-foundations and floors are also mentioned (Fig. 2). As noted, there is a strong connection between horse skulls and pest control in the folklore. They were usually supposed to keep cockroaches, fleas, bedbugs, and rats outside the building.

Even though horse skulls are often mentioned in folklore, there are few documented finds of such concealments in Finland, although it has been pointed out that in some areas finding a horse skull in an old hearth during demolition has been common – perhaps too common, since people do not think that it is something they should report to the local museum. Only remarkable finds tend to get reported; this is evident in two cases where the complete skeleton of a horse was found in a hearth foundation.¹⁶ Finds from archaeological excavations are rare as well, but instead several cases of cattle skulls in hearths and under floors are known.

Though a pest-repellent function is not present, horse skulls in the British Isles seem to focus on similar locations, under floors and by hearths. Here, a folk belief that a horse skull has an acoustic function as a sound box

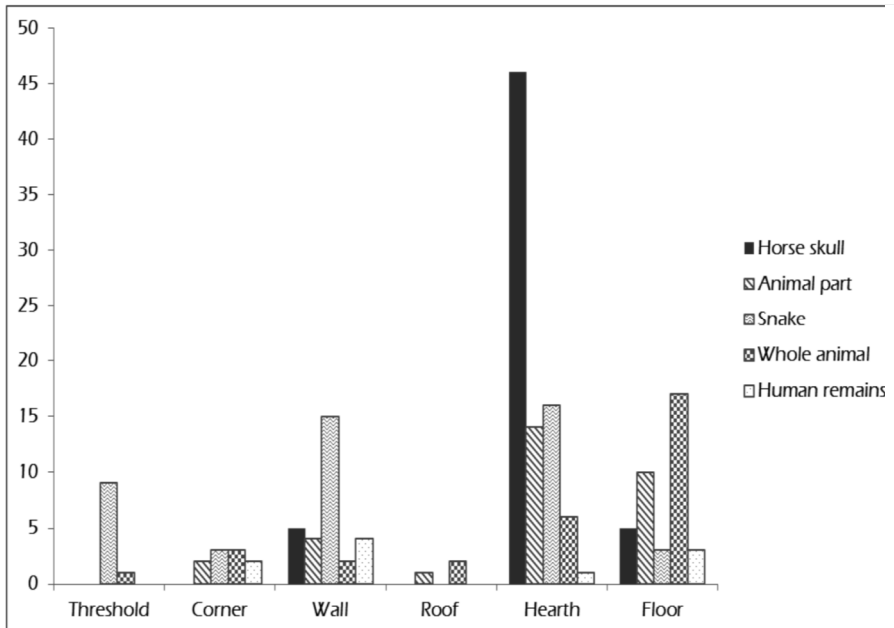


Fig. 2. Relationships between animal and human remains and locations in the building in Finnish folklore (n=174).

amplifying singing or dancing has been discussed.¹⁷ Though recognised in neighbouring Scandinavia,¹⁸ this meaning is unknown in the Finnish tradition. It is also evident that the acoustic meaning is unlikely to have been the only reason to conceal a horse skull in the British Isles.¹⁹

The shifting meanings of practices that outwardly appear similar are very interesting, and a comprehensive comparative study could reveal relevant insights.

Concealed shoes

Only two Finnish folklore accounts describe concealing a shoe: one explains that a worn shoe together with horse bones and a tar pot will repel pests when hidden in a hearth structure; and the other gives the same purpose to a worn shoe hidden together with cattle bones in a hearth.²⁰ Even though these accounts picture a quite different tradition from that known in the British Isles,²¹ there are two cases of finds of concealed shoes in attic structures in Finland that much resemble British traditions. These are both found in towns, in contrast to the folklore gathered from rural areas. One is a find of three shoes placed under a support beam of the attic-floor in the Old Town Hall of Porvoo (built in the 1760s).

The other case is quite intriguing. Ralph Merrifield mentions in his *Archaeology of Ritual and Magic* that the Concealed Shoes Index of

Northampton Museum includes finds from Finland.²² The find in question is a woman's black leather 10-button boot made c. 1910, kept in the Helsinki City Museum. According to the museum catalogue, the shoe was found during renovation of the old wooden main building of Meilahti manor in 1983. The building was built in the early 19th century, but during 1905–1945 the estate was owned by the British Campbell family. The attic of the building was renovated in 1913, and this is the time when the boot was most likely concealed in the roof. It seems likely that the Campbells were the concealers.

Concealed cats at the Naval Academy in Helsinki?

Concealed cats are mentioned in six Finnish folklore accounts. As with shoes, it seems that the practice was not as popular in Finland as in the British Isles. Five of the accounts depict concealing a whole cat, and this was done for malignant purposes, to destroy the luck of others. One certain find of a concealed cat has been recorded. It was found inside a miniature coffin in the attic structures of Kiihtelysvaara church.²³ This kind of practice is also known in the folklore of counter-magic against witchcraft, only this cat-coffin is mentioned to have been buried in the graveyard.²⁴

Recently another possible find of concealed cats became public. The remains of two cats (together with some shoes) were found in the crawl space under the floor of the Naval Academy on Seurasaari Island in Helsinki.²⁵ The building was built as a Russian hospital in 1830. The space could theoretically have been accessible for cats to get trapped there, so this is not a certain case. One of the cats was mummified, and it was found lying inside a bottomless tipped-over barrel, while the other was lying in front of the barrel. The latter was not preserved as well as the one inside the barrel (Fig. 3). The cats were left in place after the renovation. It is possible that the sparse picture of concealed cats in Finland is partly due to issues with documentation, but this is uncertain as things stand.

Counter-Magic against Witchcraft

The best-known objects used for counter-magic practices against witchcraft in the British Isles are witch bottles.²⁶ However, this tradition seems to be unknown in Finland.²⁷ Instead, other practices have been used when misfortune was suspected to be the result of witchcraft.

The remains of rituals including the burial of a miniature (c.15–20 cm long) wooden coffin with a frog or other small animal inside have been found in several Finnish churches, where they have been concealed under the floor or in other structures.²⁸ The oldest known example was found in Turku Cathedral, dated to the late 17th or early 18th century (Fig. 4). Other finds date to the late 18th and 19th century, so these practices have been operative until the late 19th century. Up to a hundred individual coffins have

Fig. 3. *The possibly concealed cats in the crawl-space under the floor of the Naval Academy in Helsinki.*

Photo by Marjo Tiirikka.



been reported, but only nine have been preserved. When they were found in the late 19th and early 20th century, they were not considered worth keeping.

These practices are also known in Finnish folklore from the late 19th century. The burial place was not always in a church in the folklore, but this is the only context where these coffins have been found, during church renovations. According to folklore, these coffins have been part of counter-magic against witchcraft: when some misfortune was believed to have been caused by a witch, a complex ritual ending with the miniature burial was performed in order to reverse the effect and punish the witch. The ritual was often very detailed, and involved a lot of ritual treatment: for example, the frog should be caught without touching it with bare hands and it was bound or impaled before being buried in the coffin. The folklore also often states that something of the victim of the witchcraft should be put in the coffin, sometimes even inside the mouth of the frog. These burials also included some textile as a shroud for the animal.

Ritual marks on timbers

Ritual marks in buildings are not part of my thesis, but since these are widely discussed in the British Isles a short comment on the Finnish situation is in order.

Finnish ritual marks were studied in the 1930s by Sulo Haltsonen,²⁹ whose study mentions the cross and pentagram as the most common marks used in Finland. Other signs discussed by Haltsonen are triangles (including hourglass shapes formed by two triangles), hexagrams, octagrams, looped squares, swastikas, and the *tursaansydän* (heart of a mythical sea creature) symbol, which incorporates a swastika. The M or W symbols, hexafoils, and burn marks well-known in the British Isles³⁰ have not been seen in Finnish discussion. However, hexafoils occur on traditional household objects,³¹ and the current author has recently documented this mark on a window sill of the late 19th-century Makkarakoski sawmill in Noormarkku



Fig. 4. The elaborately made miniature pine coffin containing the remains of a frog wrapped in textile was found inside the jamb of the portal of a burial chapel in Turku Cathedral during renovation work 1923–24.

Photo by
Sonja Hukantaival.

(Fig. 5). Thus, it is likely that a new study might reveal previously un-discussed details on these practices in Finland.

Conclusion

To conclude, there is evidence of both similarities and differences between traditions in Finland and the British Isles. Similarities are the use of horse skulls, and (to a lesser extent) coins and sharp metal tools. In particular, the main purpose, to protect against evil influences, especially witchcraft, is shared in both areas.

Witch bottles were not known in Finland, but the tradition of frogs in miniature coffins served a similar purpose of counter-witchcraft. Concealed shoes and cats also seem to have been less popular in Finland than in the British Isles.

Thus, while the main ideas are similar, chosen objects and practices differ somewhat.

Notes

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2. Sonja Hukantaival, *'For a Witch Cannot Cross Such a Threshold!': Building Concealment Traditions in Finland c. 1200–1950*, *Archaeologia Medii Aevi Finlandiae* 23 (Turku: SKAS, 2016).
3. E.g. Seán Ó Súilleabháin, 'Foundation sacrifices', *Journal of Royal Soc. of Antiquaries of Ireland* 75 (1945) pp.45–52; Margaret M. Howard, 'Dried cats', *Man* 51 (1951) pp.149–51; Ralph Merrifield, *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic* (London: Batsford, 1987); Brian Hoggard, 'The archaeology of counter-witchcraft and popular magic', in *Beyond the Witch Trials: Witchcraft and Magic in Enlightenment Europe*, ed. Owen Davies and Willem de Blécourt (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004) pp.167–86; June Swann, 'Interpreting concealed shoes and associated finds', in *Depotfunde Aus Gebäuden in Zentraleuropa: Concealed Finds from Buildings in Central Europe*, ed. Ingolf Ericsson and Rainer Atzbach, *Archäologische Quellen Zum Mittelalter* 2 (Berlin: Sripvaz-Verlag, 2005) pp.115–19; Ceri Houlbrook, 'Ritual, recycling and

recontextualisation: putting the concealed shoe into context’, *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 23 (2013) pp.99–112; Brian Hoggard, ‘Witch bottles: their contents, contexts and uses’, in *Physical Evidence for Ritual Acts, Sorcery and Witchcraft in Christian Britain: A Feeling for Magic*, ed. Ronald Hutton (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) pp.91–105; Brian Hoggard, ‘Concealed animals’, in Hutton, *Physical Evidence* pp.106–17.

4. *Karjataikoja I*, ed. Aukusti Vilho Rantasalo, Suomen Kansan Muinaisia Taikoja 4 (Helsinki: SKS, 1933), 256 §. Translated by the author.
5. E.g. Merrifield, *Archaeology of Ritual* pp.159–183; Hoggard, ‘Archaeology of counter-witchcraft’; Timothy Easton, ‘Four spiritual middens in Mid-Suffolk, England, ca. 1650 to 1850’, *Historical Archaeology* 48 (2014) pp.10–34; Stephen Gordon, ‘Domestic magic and the walking dead in Medieval England: a diachronic approach’, in *The Materiality of Magic: An Artefactual Investigation into Ritual Practices and Popular Beliefs*, ed. Ceri Houlbrook and Natalie Armitage (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2015) pp.66–84.
6. See also the ritual vs. acoustics discussion in Ó Súilleabháin, ‘Foundation sacrifices’; Albert Sandklef, ‘Singing flails. a study in threshing-floor constructions, flail-threshing traditions and the magic guarding of the house’, *FF Communications* 136 (Helsinki: Suomalainen tiedeakatemia, 1949).
7. Howard, ‘Dried cats’ p.151; Hoggard, ‘Concealed animals’ pp.106–110.
8. About this agency, see e.g. Laura Stark, *The Magical Self: Body, Society and the Supernatural in Early Modern Rural Finland*, *FF Communications* 290 (Helsinki: Suomalainen tiedeakatemia, 2006) pp.254–262; Kaarina Koski, ‘Conceptual analysis and variation in belief tradition: a case of death-related beings’, *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore* 38 (2008) pp.45–66, doi:10.7592/FEJF2008.38.koski; Sonja Hukantaival, ‘Frogs in miniature coffins from churches in Finland: folk magic in Christian holy places’, *Mirator* 16 (2015) pp.192–220.
9. Finnish Literature Society, *Folklore Archives: Alavus. 1936*. R. Hemminki 17. Translated by the author.
10. Ó Súilleabháin, ‘Foundation sacrifices’; Hoggard, ‘Archaeology of counter-witchcraft’ pp.177–178; Hoggard, ‘Concealed animals’.
11. Ó Súilleabháin, ‘Foundation sacrifices’ p.52.
12. See, e.g., Christian Blinkenberg, *The Thunderweapon in Religion and Folklore: A Study in Comparative Archaeology*, Cambridge Archaeological and Ethnological Series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911); Peter Carelli, ‘Thunder and lightning, magical miracles. on the popular myth of thunderstones and the presence of Stone Age artefacts in medieval deposits’, in *Visions of the Past: Trends and Traditions in Swedish Medieval Archaeology*, ed. Hans Andersson, Peter Carelli, and Lars Ersgård, *Lund Studies in Medieval Archaeology* 19 (Lund: University of



Fig. 5. Hexafoil on a windowsill at Makkarakoski sawmill.

Photo by Sonja Hukantaival.

- Lund, 1997) pp.393–417; Kristiina Johanson, ‘The changing meaning of thunderbolts’, *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore* 42 (2009) pp.129–74.
13. Ilmar Talve, *Finnish Folk Culture*, *Studia Fennica Ethnologica* 4 (Helsinki: SKS, 1997) pp.32–43; Liisa Seppänen, *Rakentaminen ja kaupunkikuvan muutokset keskiajan Turussa. Erityistarkastelussa Åbo Akademin päärakennuksen tontin arkeologinen aineisto* (Turku: University of Turku, Archaeology, 2012), <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-29-5231-1>.
 14. E.g. Hoggard, ‘Archaeology of counter-witchcraft’ p.173.
 15. Ann-Britt Falk, *En grundläggande handling: byggnadsoffer och dagligt liv i medeltid*, *Vägar till Midgård* 12 (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2008) pp.105–106; see also Ann-Britt Falk, ‘My home is my castle: protection against evil in medieval times’, in *Old Norse Religion in Long-Term Perspectives: Origins, Changes, and Interactions*, ed. Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert, and Catharina Raudvere, *Vägar till Midgård* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2006) pp.200–205.
 16. Sonja Hukantaival, ‘Horse skulls and alder-horse: the horse as a depositional sacrifice in buildings’, in *The Horse and Man in European Antiquity: Worldview, Burial Rites, and Military and Everyday Life*, ed. Audronė Bliujienė, *Archaeologia Baltica* 11 (Klaipėda: Klaipėda University Press, 2009), p.351.
 17. Ó Súilleabháin, ‘Foundation sacrifices’; Hoggard, ‘Concealed animals’ pp.111–114.
 18. Sandklef, ‘Singing flails’ pp.26–43.
 19. Hoggard, ‘Concealed animals’ pp.111–114.
 20. Finnish Literature Society, *Folklore Archives: Vuokkiniemi*. 1900. I. Marttini b) 141; b) 495. Translated by the author.
 21. E.g. Swann, ‘Interpreting concealed shoes’; Houlbrook, ‘Ritual, recycling and recontextualisation’.
 22. Merrifield, *Archaeology of Ritual* p.133.
 23. Hukantaival, *A Witch Cannot Cross* pp.201–202.
 24. Matti Varonen, *Vainajainpalvelus muinaisilla suomalaisilla* (Helsinki: SKS, 1898) p.29.
 25. Marjo Tiirikka, ‘Merisotakoulun kissamuumion arvoitus’, *Kontrahti* 4 (2015) pp.28–29.
 26. E.g. Hoggard, ‘Witch bottles’.
 27. One bellarmine bottle found in a foundation in Lyttylä is a possible but highly uncertain case: Jussi-Pekka Taavitsainen, ‘Bartmann-Krus i Finland’, *Hikuin* 8 (1982) pp.243–244, 248.
 28. Hukantaival, *A Witch Cannot Cross*.
 29. Sulo Haltsonen, *Suomalaisista taikamerkeistä: Kansatieteellinen tutkielma* (Helsinki: Suomen muinaismuistoyhdistys, 1936).
 30. E.g. Timothy Easton, ‘Apotropaic symbols and other measures for protecting buildings against misfortune’, in Hutton, *Physical Evidence* pp.39–67.
 31. E.g. Haltsonen, *Suomalaisista taikamerkeistä* p.68.

Luck and dread: How household curiosities become ritual protectors

Jeremy Harte

Common sense tells us that things happen in logical sequence. Causes are succeeded by effects, and the arrow of time points forward. So when we encounter the magician and the poet, any suspicions we may feel about their strangeness are disarmed when we find that they talk in the same commonsensical way. Magic, just like craft or science, claims to make things happen. If you do *this* – if you bury a bottle, or stick pins in a heart, or hide an old shoe in the rafters – then *that* will follow: you will earn good luck, marvellous cures, the shattering of witchcraft, and so on. We may feel a little cloudy about the machinery by which magical causes produce magical effects, but we are confident that it follows the familiar direction.

And yet many old houses contain things that defy this specious logic: the lucks, or family amulets. A luck is an object that must not be moved, broken or destroyed, for fear of dreadful consequences. Deprived of its favourite plaything, the ghost will turn sour; the nameless something locked in a bottle will burst free; the fairy charm that protects the house will be broken along with its fragile glass; and the former owner of a skull will return to shrieking life.

Now at first view these lucks seem to be very similar to ritually concealed deposits. In both cases we are dealing with the same sort of things – vessels, weapons, bodily remains and so on, which are carefully secreted about the house. But when examined more closely, they turn out to have a very different magical character. Whereas an apotropaic charm was placed with the sensible intention of achieving some defined magical purpose, the lucks were never positioned deliberately. Their legendary aura developed over time, extending backwards before the date at which the artefacts were actually made, even as the objects themselves became more antique with each passing generation; the arrow of their history points forwards and backwards at the same time.

This history has its bounds, for lucks do not last forever; in most cases only the story is left, and we have lost the physical object to which it was attached. Sometimes the luck itself has outlived its own magic, as with the Luck of Edenhall, now residing prosaically on the shelves of the Victoria &

Albert. In museum terms, this is a gilded and enamelled glass beaker, probably mid-13th century, and of Islamic origin, ironically given its long preservation in a leather case embossed with the sacred IHS monogram. As a magical object, however, it first appears in a ballad refrain of 1729:

*God prosper long from being broke
The Luck of Eden Hall.*

The hazardous implications of this belief – on one occasion the luck was only prevented from shattering by an adroit catch from the butler – convey, paradoxically, a level of security. If the house will fall if the cup is broken, we can feel confident that while the cup remains whole then the house will stand. Unfortunately, this is an error in logic, and in fact the house was demolished in 1934, eight years after the Luck went on loan to the V&A.¹

At some point in the 18th century, the story of the Luck acquired a prequel, which told how a group of fairies were making merry at St. Cuthbert's Well, not far from the Hall, when strangers broke in on their merriment, and sent them into sudden flight. Their cup remained behind, and the last of the small crew turned and yelled

*If this cup should break or fall
Farewell the Luck of Edenhall²*

The rhyme elegantly conveys the double character of this fetishised object – a physical vessel called the luck, but also an embodied presence of luck itself, so that this abstract quality, having been substantiated in glass, can now be kept safe in the butler's pantry. The same double meaning is found in the distich:

*If this dish be sold or gi'en
Farewell the Luck of Burrell Green*

a verbal parallelism from which you might suspect that the traditions of Burrell Green, a farm near Great Salkeld, grew up in the shadow of those of Edenhall five miles away. Once again, the story tells of a servant going to the well to draw water, this time for a wedding feast, and meeting hobgoblins who offer to bless the wedding with the gift of a brass dish. This, in more prosaic terms, is a 15th-century vessel which once (before the application of vigorous cleaning methods) bore on its rim the words 'Mary, Mother of Jesus Saviour of Men'.³

Still in Cumberland, we have the Luck of Muncaster near Ravenglass, also 15th-century, a green glass bowl decorated with gold and white enamel. This time it was a royal heirloom, not a fairy gift. After a calamitous defeat of the Lancastrian forces, their troubled king Henry VI was found by shepherds wandering on the fells, a broken and defeated man. They took him to Sir John Pennington at Muncaster Castle, where he stayed until his strength was regained. On the ninth day he left, and with

regrets that he had nothing better with which to repay his hospitality, presented Sir John with this cup. Why the king should have gone into battle carrying a green glass bowl, and what had persuaded him to flee from the defeat of his cause clutching this rather vulnerable object, are things on which legend is silent.

When a story doesn't make sense, it is often a clue that some deeper thought is bubbling to the surface – in this case, the magic of royalty, and the value of loyalty: keeping the bowl intact is a materialised way of talking about unbroken faith in the royal line. Anyway, the Penningtons treasured the bowl. Every child of the family was baptised with water from it. For a time it went out of sight – because it was thrown from an upstairs window, or because it was concealed with the failure of the Lancastrian line; at all events, it was uncovered again when the danger seemed past, and was found to be uninjured.⁴

Other similar objects are found further north, in Scotland. The Luck of Arniston was a Venetian glass cup. Katherine, the second wife of the 17th Dundas of Dundas, who died in 1612, left the estate of Arniston to her son. Accompanying these lands, so they say, was the Luck, handed down with strict instructions that if it were lost or broken, misfortune would follow. The line of Dundas flourished at Arniston through twelve successive proprietors, but the family subsequently moved.⁵

The Blackadders of Tulliallan had great faith in the Lady's Purse, their affectionate name for a cauldron which hung from the rafters in the Great Hall. The cauldron was of modest size – eight inches in diameter, and five and a half deep – but would have been large enough to keep gold and jewels in security. When the Lady's Purse fell, said tradition, the House of Blackadder would fall: and fall it did. The house became a ruin and the family died out, but the Purse, disinterred from the ruins of their hall by a tenant farmer, continued to be revered in the district.⁶

Further out among the Hebrides, in Skye, a fairy cup was one of many strange things tied up with the fortunes of the Macleods of Dunvegan Castle, along with the more celebrated Fairy Flag. The cup, carved out of oak with silver mounts, is supposed by some to have been taken from the chieftain Niall Glúndubh in a raid on Ireland, but others say it was stolen from the fairies. A man from Harris was out with the cattle when he came to a fairy hill, where he was made welcome, and handed the cup, full of whisky. He was doing justice to this when a mortal girl who had been trapped among the fairies quietly warned him what was going on: he would follow her fate as soon as the cup was finished. So, drinking and joking, he edged bit by bit nearer to the door, and as soon as there was only one swallow of the whisky left, he raced for home. The fairies were in hot pursuit, and he would have been lost if it had not been for his wife, who ran to the door, saw what was going on, and threw the contents of a chamber-

pot over the angry host: that is something the hidden people cannot abide, and they slunk away. The man was left clutching the cup, which he gladly presented to Macleod in exchange for a farm of land.⁷

There seems to have been something of a market for fairy cups. Already in the 12th century, when Gervase of Tilbury passed on the first stories about theft from the fairies, these were attached to the kind of beautifully-worked vessel which could tempt the covetousness of a king. Curiously, though, stories of this kind were usually to be found away from aristocratic circles, in Yorkshire, Man and the Isles, as well as Cumbria. Since stories of the theft of a fairy cup are also common in Scandinavia, they are likely to have been spread by the Vikings in their settlement of these regions.⁸

That would explain the popularity of similar tales in Shetland, a Norse colony. Here, however, the rules of the story are different: instead of being seized as mementoes of a trip into the fairy realm, as is usual in Gaelic tradition, they are kept as records of an otherworlder's incursion into this one. This is part of the mysterious activity of the trows, who etymologically derive from the trolls of Norway, but who in a gentler landscape have taken on the same character as the fairies further south. Several farms lay claim to a trowie vessel, among them Siggy Taft, where the man of the house was riding home past Stakkaberg. This was a hill which had the reputation of being home to the trows, so he was not surprised when out of the gathering darkness he heard a voice say 'Tell Tona Tivla that Fona Fivla is fallen in the Velyna Vatyna'. These were strange words: but what was stranger, when he got home and told people what he had heard, a trow woman rushed out of the cattle byre and sped away to the hill. The farm people went into the byre and found that she had been milking the best cow into a pan which she had left behind her in her flight. The pan, of curious workmanship, was kept for many generations in the farm, where they were careful to make the sign of the cross over it each night, and keep it hanging by the fire. One night someone neglected this precaution, and in the morning the pan was gone. After that the trows were always troublesome at Siggy Taft.⁹

Another story tells how Henry Farquhar – Forker in the Shetland spelling – had drowsed off on the bench by the fire, and woke with a start in the small hours of the morning to see a glimmer of light. A trow woman entered the house, her newborn baby at her side, and settled herself down comfortably by the dying fire. Unable to move or speak, Forker watched the uncanny woman as she pulled out a tiny jar, or pig, of peculiar workmanship; it was full of ointment, with which she proceeded to anoint the baby. Up on the beams of the roof, a white cock crew, but the woman looked at it and carried on. Then the black cock crew, and she fled, dropping her ointment. The spell broken, Forker jumped up and seized the jar, which was handed down in the family and known as Forker's Pig. The pig or jar, a vessel of unglazed clay, was preserved carefully, and lent out to

neighbours who had been hurt by the subtle power of the trows.¹⁰

It seems that here, as at Edenhall, objects have come first and the stories have adhered round them later. That explains why fragments of unrelated legends have been pieced together in recollection; thus the trow at Siggy Taft uses words in the manner of the King of the Cats, a story in which a traveller hears some nonsensical phrase on the road, repeats it when he gets home, and sends an unearthly being scurrying off. And Forker's jar, which contained ointment for anointing a baby, has drawn on the story of the Fairy Midwife, in which the ointment has an important part to play in the narrative, whereas here there is no motive for it.

If something was strange, or old, or beautiful, or simply lying around the house for no apparent purpose, then the best way to explain its presence was to claim that it came from Faerie. There is a curious Yorkshire story, rather muddled by its literary Victorian retelling, of how a lad from Midridge went to the fairy hill and shouted defiance to the hidden people. The fairies pursued him and he fled to the shelter of the great hall. Night fell, and no-one dared venture out, but in the morning they opened the great door and found, stuck fast in it, the javelin of the fairy king, which had passed through oak beams and iron plating. This singular relic was kept for many years at the hall.¹¹

You can see how a great metal spear, kept long after the memory of its mundane origin was lost, was the ideal peg on which to hang a story. Out-of-place artefacts become mythologised, or sometimes ritualised, like the Good Sword of Winfarthing. This sword was celebrated throughout East Anglia; it had a chapel dedicated to its service in the parish church, and people thronged to pay their respects to it, and to pray for various blessings, such as the return of stolen property or, for women, a liberation from husbands that they disliked. Such at least is the report made after the Reformation, when Norfolk people took a more jaundiced view of relics. Then a Protestant revealed the real story of the sword, which he had heard when a child in the days of ignorance: it had belonged to a violent thief who took sanctuary in the churchyard, still tooled up, and afterwards escaped but left behind his weapon; it was fixed out of harm's way to the wall, where in course of time it came to be venerated.¹²

Hanging in a church with other relics, the Good Sword partook of their nature; it had positive powers, which could be invoked for good, at least from the perspective of property-owners and disgruntled wives, if not that of thieves and husbands. But in a domestic context, lucks are more likely to show negative power. At Edenhall, Tullallian and Siggy Taft, the protection of the object is manifested through the harm that does not happen so long as it is not fallen, broken, or lost. Negative protection is sometimes the only gift offered by fairies or royalty, and is certainly all that may be expected from ghosts. The Old Five Bells Inn at Morecombelake in Dorset had a

sword which hung in a cupboard, and could never be moved, otherwise the house would be haunted.¹³ There was no story to explain this – and as both pub and sword are now gone, there never will be – but elsewhere the careful preservation of artefacts is associated with stories of exorcism.

At the Combermere Arms Hotel in the Cheshire village of Burleydam, a bottle is buried under the doorstep of the entrance to the hotel – a classic liminal location. This is the receptacle in which two clergymen imprisoned a ghost, and if the bottle is ever broken, the ghost will return worse than ever.¹⁴ This story, though recorded comparatively recently, is typical of local lore about exorcism. In the most fully developed versions, the ghost takes on a threatening gigantic form, and is gradually prayed down by a company of priests. Sometimes they are not up to the task – one by one, the dozen exorcists fail, their candles going out as the ghost begins to loom larger again, until only one (the oldest, or the youngest, or an Oxford scholar) is left, when the rest are able to relight their tapers from his and so finish the task. At the end the ghost is reduced into a bottle or some other container and concealed, often in a pool.

In Shropshire, for instance, we have Kinlet, where Sir George Blount died full of rage against his daughter, because she had made a marriage against the will of the testy old gentleman. Once he was dead and buried, she and her husband inherited Kinlet Hall but found it uninhabitable, what with the shapes that used to come up out of the pool nearby, and the phantom coach rattling down the grand staircase. The parsons came, and Sir George went into a bottle which they took to Kinlet church and left rather carelessly lying under his monument. Children playing in the church would be earnestly warned by the cleaning lady not to meddle with the bottle, for if it should fall and break, Sir George would come again. The bottle was last seen in the 1870s; ten years later it had vanished, and of those who remembered it, some said it was a small, flat bottle very much like the ones used for developing chemicals, which an amateur photographer might be expected to leave behind after a visit.¹⁵

In the same county, they told how Madam Pigott of Chetwynd was a very wicked ghost indeed, although legend says nothing about her moral character in life; but she died in childbirth, and that has always been a bad death for a woman. She would perch on a tree, or sit on a high wall, compulsively combing the hair of the baby that never was, and then desert her insubstantial child to leap on some benighted traveller. It was all too much, and a ring of parsons were gathered to exorcise her into a bottle, which they threw into Chetwynd Pond, and breathed a sigh of relief. Only the next winter was a hard one, and the pond froze, rendered into a single solid block of ice, so that the antics of the skaters far above broke Madam Pigott's bottle, and when the thaw came she was back to her old haunts. They brought in twelve more parsons and a fresh bottle, which this time

was thrown into the Red Sea, and there has been no more trouble since.¹⁶

The same elements appear in on the other side of England, in the haunted waters of Lincolnshire. Unlike stories from the West Midlands, which dwell on great houses and wicked aristocrats, these tales deal with hauntings in natural surroundings; there was a spirit or a witch (apparently much the same thing to the Lincolnshire mind) that sat on a bridge at Normanby, and pushed people into the water. Three parsons came and asked what it was she wanted, and she cried ‘Life!’, so they gave her a cockerel, and while she was busy tearing it to pieces, they popped her in an iron pot. There they left her, but if ever the pot was raised she would come again as bad as ever.¹⁷ There is something archaic about that story, with its hints of sacrifice, and the tradition may go back to the Middle Ages. Iron pots have been found concealed in watery locations on the other side of the North Sea, in Holland: it may be one and the same ritual preserved differently in two corners of the same cultural area – the legend in English folklore, the practice in Dutch archaeology.

Ghost, witch or spirit – it makes little difference what is in the exorcist’s vessel: story-tellers were thinking more about the vessel than its content. In East Halton, also in Lincolnshire, it was a hobthrust, one of those domestic fairies who will do good if respected and is capable of indignant harm otherwise. He occupied Manor Farm, the house of the estate bailiff. The proprietor came by one day, when the bailiff’s wife was at home, and asked to be shown round, but the tour of inspection stopped short at the cellar. The wife of the house wasn’t keen to open this, and when pressed for an explanation, said she didn’t want to disturb the hobthrust. Well, the owner would have his way; so she opened the door, locked it again carefully behind them, and pointed to an iron pot in the middle of the floor. There, that was it; on no account was he to touch it; the hobthrust had been in that pot for two hundred years or more, and so long as he was left undisturbed, he would do no harm, but if there were any attempt to move him, then there was no knowing what misfortune might follow.¹⁸

I hope the iron pot is still there, still undisturbed; it would be a shame if it were to join the Luck of Edenhall as a trophy of the disenchantment of the world. These ritualised objects hold stories which are missing from the much larger archive of concealed deposits and apotropaic charms. And they remind us of something which we may forget when analysing the rituals behind mummified cats, witch bottles, and so on: that the apparent reasonableness of magical practice may in fact be a cover for other psychological needs. The sober functionalism of magic – follow the instructions, do *this* and then *that* will happen – is often a surface discourse behind which wells up the more elemental need to tell a story about spirits and hauntings, protection and disaster, luck and dread.

Notes

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Cunning-folk and the protection of property: The view from the Westcountry

Jason Semmens

Much of our knowledge of apotropaic practices in past centuries derives from the surviving physical traces found within archaeological contexts. The wide geographic and temporal distribution of witch bottles, concealed shoes, horse skulls, other hidden animal remains and ritual protection marks found across England and Wales attests to a pervasive vernacular belief in the apotropaic properties of certain kinds of objects and symbols. These were purposively deployed and deposited in response to specific crises (oftentimes associated with witchcraft) or to serve a prophylactic role against more diffuse but usually malign spiritual threats.

Studies conducted in the years since Ralph Merrifield's pioneering work on the archaeology of ritual and magic in the 1980s have demonstrated that knowledge of certain protective rituals and their application seems to have been commonplace,¹ yet contemporary evidence affirms that at times of often deep personal crisis, people could also turn to a group of specialists in the ritual combat of malifice, known as cunning-folk.

This group has been slow to attract scholarly attention. Keith Thomas's *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971) provided the first comprehensive overview of their activities in the early modern period, followed some while later in the 1990s and 2000s by the studies of Owen Davies,² Ronald Hutton³ and others, that explored their social-historical position within British society into the first half of the twentieth century. In addition to resolving cases of witchcraft focused upon the person of the bewitched, cunning-folk also offered a wider service for the protection of personal property. This chapter explores how these individuals employed folk-magic and the trappings of high ritual magic for apotropaic purposes and details the kinds of cases they were involved in, taking for its geographical scope the far South-West of England, specifically the counties of Cornwall, Devon and Somerset, the surviving sources making the region ideal for a discrete study.

I.

Cunning-folk were purveyors of counter-magic who, from as early as the sixteenth century, were to be found living in or around urban centres, as the focus of economic and social activity, across the country. As a distinct

group within the medical market place of the early modern period, cunning-folk seem to have filled a particular niche left void by the final suppression of Catholicism in Elizabeth's reign, following on from the Reformation, providing a ritualism and spiritual succour akin to the use of sacramentals at a time when the official state church forbade what it viewed as 'popish mummerly' by laying emphasis on bodily chastisement, spiritual fortitude and prayer as antidotes to temptation to doubt and despair.

Most cunning-folk specialised in detecting the malevolent effects of witchcraft, and it was in this role that people resorted to them when they became sick of chronic or otherwise untreatable illnesses, usually of uncertain aetiology, or had animals ill, demanding some idea of who had bewitched them and what might be done to break a run of ill-fortune. In this role they were specialists in folk-illness rather than folk medicine, focusing rather on identifying the cause of a malady. Cunning-folk were popularly known variously as conjurors, cunning-men and women, witch-detectors, wise-men and women, and wizards. In Cornwall the dialect word 'Peller' came into common parlance during the mid-nineteenth century to refer to them.⁴ The compound 'white witch' is also found, originally employed by the Protestant firebrands of the early seventeenth century and later popularised by the folklorists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. All these terms were interchangeable. Besides witch-detection, cunning-folk incorporated other occult arts into their repertoires, such as fortune-telling and divination in its various forms, for the finding of lost or stolen goods. Some also offered their skills as herbalists. Since they provided a service, using techniques they had learned and acquired, conjurors charged for their expertise, usually anything from a few shillings to a few pounds, depending on the particular ministrations provided. Most cunning-folk practiced their trade part-time, in addition to regular employment: for example, Billy Brewer (1818–1890) ran a grocer's shop at Taunton, Somerset, while the Tuckett dynasty at Exeter ran a business selling herbal medicines while receiving clients.⁵

A conjuror's clientele could be fairly varied, but consisted mainly of farmers, whose livelihoods, then as now, depended upon the continued welfare of their livestock and the fertility of their landholdings. While farmers had access to veterinary medicine, undefined and persistent illness amongst their cattle led to suspicions of witchery and took them to their local conjuror for a cure. Some conjurors also visited neighbourhoods offering prophylactics for the coming year, in effect running protection rackets, threatening ruination if their services were refused.

In the South-West of England, the sources for cunning-folk overwhelmingly date from the nineteenth century, in large measure due to the growth of the regional press at that time. As promoters of Enlightenment attitudes, newspapers printed accounts of cases involving

conjurers to illustrate the ignorance of their ‘dupes’ and to expose what were regarded as surviving superstitious beliefs – anachronisms in an age of progress. Conjurers are generally recognized today from contemporary newspaper accounts or reports of the more sensational court cases that resulted when one was brought to trial, oftentimes after a disgruntled client had lodged a complaint with the authorities, while some survive as literary characters in the later nineteenth and early twentieth-century folklore collections and in fiction. Devon and Cornwall are well served by published folklore collections from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, while similar compendiums exist for Somerset and Dorset also.⁶ In comparison with some other areas of the country, manuscript materials by or relating to cunning-folk are comparatively scarce, although quotations from these sources in press accounts help fill this lacuna.

II.

For the most part, cunning-folk in the South-West are recorded as receiving clients into their homes for consultations, although some of the more peripatetic conjurers also approached prospective customers in the open air or conducted their business in the client’s own premises. The general course of a consultation is well illustrated by the account of a visit to the Cornish cunning-woman Thomasine Blight (1793–1856) at Redruth in January 1841, taken from a client of hers:

In consequence of various troubles & losses, a horse & bullock, & 7 pigs feeding & not fattening, &c., on the 2nd he trudged to Redruth to consult Tammie Blee, a wise-woman or witch detector. He had to wait in a lower room from morning till dusk before his turn came, so many were the applicants for the results of her supernatural wisdom. On being admitted, she said ‘I know what you are come about’, and then told him his initials, his wife’s & his son’s, that he was a parish officer, that he had a horse & bullock ill, which she described minutely & correctly, that he had lost a pig & that several more were doing badly, & that he had been for some time disabled from work by something in the right arm. The accuracy of all her statements made his hair stand on end & the sweat issue freely. She further explained to him that it was all the work of an ‘ill wisher’, & that there was a certain minute in every day when evil wishes took effect. She could guard him from their power, which she did by a written paper, which he was to hang around his neck &c. For his cattle she gave him powders, which he was to rub into their bodies after pulling out a few hairs, repeating during the operation, ‘May the power of God keep me from evil’. This he has done & finds them already improving. He as much believes in the power of the old lady as in the truth of any of the Gospels.⁷

Several themes are developed in this narration, principally the apparently preternatural foreknowledge displayed by Blight when addressing the purpose of the querent's visit and the rehearsal of his personal circumstances. In this case, Blight did not identify the 'ill-wisher', although cunning-folk oftentimes confirmed clients' suspicions concerning the agent of their misfortune; at other times, clients were offered the opportunity of seeing for themselves, being required to gaze upon some reflective object or surface until the features of their malefactor might at last be discerned.

Of further note is mention of the written paper – a textual amulet to be kept about the client's person. These were a common feature of conjurors' repertoires, the contents of which usually drew upon books of ritual magic republished during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that were reprinted in the early nineteenth century, either whole or as compendia. The texts included the formula 'ABRACADABRA' – written in the form of an inverted triangle, the terminal letter missed off each line, which first featured in Cornelius Agrippa's *Three Books of Occult Philosophy* (1533, published in English translation in 1651), as well as astrological signs and figures drawn from grimoire texts such as the Goetia or from Reginald Scot's *Discovery of Witchcraft*. This latter volume was originally published in 1581, intended as a riposte to the 'witch-mongers' of the period, and later became a sourcebook for conjurors on account of the textual charms Scot gathered together. An element of secrecy surrounded the textual amulets dispensed by conjurors, in that querents were enjoined never to open or read them. The kinds of textual amulets dispensed by cunning-folk were intended to be retained about the person for the duration of an illness, although there are suggestions in the historical sources that they were meant to be retained for life. Either way, they were ultimately disposable and few of the many thousands that must have been produced now survive. As noted by Don Skemer, the textual amulets of the early modern period and thereafter continued a tradition from the Middle Ages of harnessing the power of the written word via a mix of divine names, scriptural quotations, liturgical formulae and common prayer, the physical proximity of which guaranteed their prophylactic potency as a counterpoint to bewitchment.⁸

III.

In addition to prophylaxis intended for the bewitched person, cunning-folk also responded to the more general protection of personal property, either by offering specific prescriptions or by running protection rackets, renewed on a rolling annual basis. These latter services were often non-specific in nature, but guaranteed the good fortune of a venture for the coming year, such as successful catches by fishing boats, although conjurors' reputations could be broken by such promises. For the protection

of property, clients were sent away with instructions for a set of ritual actions to perform in their own time, usually with a sachet of salt or some other powder to sprinkle over animals and fields, at the same time repeating verses given by the conjuror. These were usually prescribed for use at specific hours of the day, when an ill wish was said to take effect. The elaborateness of the actions and words prescribed depended upon the conjuror concerned, but apotropaic texts utilised by cunning-folk in the South-West circulated across the region, and since aspiring conjurors seems to have learned or picked up aspects of their trade from other cunning-folk, the general uniformity of their respective businesses is not surprising. Take, for example, the following instruction used by Robert Tuckett at Exeter in the late 1830s:

For the Ground do this,—strew a little of the powder across the house doors, great gates, barn doors, reading the first 13 verses of the 28th chapter of Deuteronomy, and no more. Then strew across every gate and bar on your estate, saying these words,—As thy servant Elisha healed the ground and waters of Jericho, by casting salt therein, so I hope to heal my ground, that no evil may come to it, and that the earth might yield to me its full strength, and that there might now be any barren land on all this estate, in the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost.—Amen.⁹

The same prescription is found in a manuscript archive from East Cornwall created in the late 1840s, and attests to the diffusion and persistence of such texts:

Take a little of this powder into your right hand and strew it over the back of the Beast same time say these words:

As thy Servant Elisha healed the waters and divers diseases of Jericho by casting salt thereon Lo I hope to heal this my Beast that no more harm shall come upon it forever and never more in the Name of God the father God the Son and God the holy Ghost Amen

The cattle this will be done on Monday morning begin at five o clock one by one¹⁰

The appeal to Biblical characters and to the Trinity as sources of power reflects the pervasive belief of Christianity at this period. Along with the cattle, the conjuror directed that the salt be taken up and that the farmer should “strew it across your path, Fields, Gates and bars, court gates and out house doors”, repeating the textual formula above, and this should “be done the same day after the cattle is finished”. The animals might also ingest the powders, as a further prescription from the same archive suggests:

*Put a little of this powder into the Hay or Corn you give your Horses, likewise the Bullocks, Cows and Yearling. Strew a little where the Sheep lay most. Some to the Barns' doors, great gates & principal entrances.*¹¹

In this manner the physical buildings and land owned and inhabited by clients were used as performance spaces, the ritual actions serving to emphasise the potency of the textual incantation prescribed. There are narratives that describe the personal interest cunning-folk took in cases, when they were persuaded to undertake a visit to clients to perform the ritual action themselves. The Callington folklore researcher William Paynter recorded such an instance, although it is unknown when the event took place and who the participants may have been:

*A farmer in the neighbourhood of Tintagel experienced persistent misfortune on his farm and betaking himself across the Tamar sought the assistance of a conjuror in Plymouth. The cunning-man suggested that he should visit in person to ensure the successful removal of the evil influences afflicting the farm, and upon payment of the appropriate fee, the conjuror, the farmer, and his friends, assembled one night at midnight, armed with lighted candles and lanterns. They "commenced to perambulate the farm; every field, stable, linhay and house was visited—the [white] witch walking in front "saying words" and reading something out of a book.*¹²

Robert Hunt recorded a somewhat similar account in 1865, one that captures that theatrical nature of the conjuror's presence:

*The St. Columb conjuror J _____ H _____ was a famed exorcists, and began his operations by beating a heavy stick against the wooden furniture, screens and partitions of a house, all the while shouting "Out! out! out! — Away! away! way! —to the Red Sea—to the Red Sea—to the Red Sea," adding "with violent enunciation and much action, a torrent of incoherent and often incomprehensible words."*¹³

The reference to the Red Sea reflected its location as the resort for banishment of evil spirits.

The textual prescriptions of cunning-folk were not apt to have left trace in the archaeological record, but there were certain kinds of apotropaic activities cunning-folk suggested that have been discovered associated with buildings. Chimneys, both as the site of domestic fires and points of exit and possible entry in the house, were locations for ritual actions and secretion. An East Cornish cunning-man named Frederick Statton (1820–1854) instructed a client of his as follows:

*Take the calf and kill it. Take the heart out and prick it full of pins. On Thursday morning next, at the first hour the sun rises, put the heart into a fire and roast or burn it to ashes. The person's name you suspect of ill-wishing you, must be written on a piece of paper and put in the heart, with the pins run through the name. During the time the heart is roasting the 35th Psalm must be read three times.*¹⁴

Examples of animal hearts, as described filled with pins and desiccated by fire, have been found across the region. Another form of apotropaic practice discovered within certain contexts was the witch-bottle, intended as a substitute bladder. The method by which a witch-bottle might be made was first described in print in Joseph Blagrave's *Astrological Practice of Physic*, in 1671. As one of several methods given to overcome a witch's curse, Blagrave advised that:

*Another way is to stop the urine of the Patient, close up in a bottle, and put into it three nails, pains or needles, with a little white Salt, keeping the urine always warm; if you let it remain long in the bottle it will endanger the witches life: for I have found by experience that they will be grievously tormented.*¹⁵

Witch-bottles could be heated or buried, the one method promising instant relief from bewitchment if the bottle burst before its contents spilled out under pressure, while the other suggested a lingering decline in torment for the witch while a curse remained in force. From Cornwall comes an instruction for the manufacture of a witch-bottle, dating to 1701, that illustrates the process and the belief in its efficacy:

*For Thamson Leverton on Saturday next being the 17th of this Instant September any time that day take about a pint of your owne Urine and make it almost scalding hot then Emtie it into a stone Jugg with a narrow Mouth then put into it so Much white Salt as you can take up with the Thumb and two forefingers of your lift hand and three new nails with their points down wards, their points being first made very sharp then stop the mouth of the Jugg very close with a piece of Tough cley and bind a piece of Leather firm over the stop then put the Jugg into warm Embers and keep him there 9 or 10 days and nights following so that it go not stone cold all that mean time day nor night and your private Enemies will never after have any power upon you either in Body or Goods, So be it.*¹⁶

Examples of witch-bottles have been found across the region.

IV.

In conclusion, cunning-folk both supported and were themselves sustained by the widespread belief in maleficent witchcraft and the wider immaterial world from the early modern period into the twentieth century. Their role in the recommendation and diffusion of apotropaic practices in the wider population should be recognised when considering the material remains of such beliefs surviving in the archaeological record. By bringing together textual sources with material remains, a greater appreciation of the role cunning-folk played in diffusing cases of witchcraft and offering spiritual support can be gained. The Westcountry provides ample resources for this study that can be replicated elsewhere in the country.

Notes

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4. Jason Semmens, 'On the origin of "peller"', *Old Cornwall* 14, No. 1 (2009) pp.43–50.
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10. Cornwall Record Office DDX.223.15.

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'By Midnight, By Moonlight': Ritual protection marks in caves beneath the Mendip Hills, Somerset

Linda Wilson

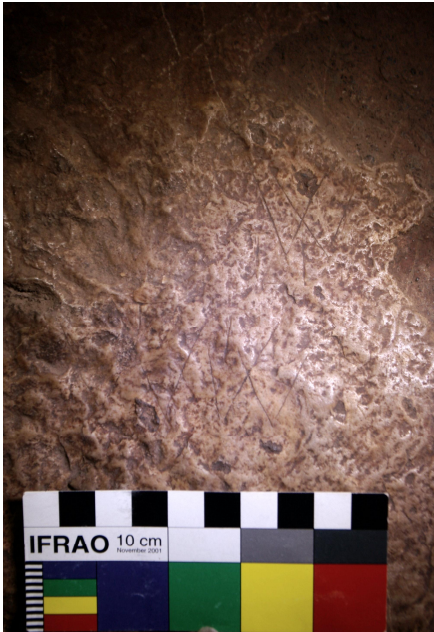


Fig. 1: Conjoined 'V's in Goatchurch Cavern, Burrington Combe.
Photo: Chris Binding

On 29th November 2003, during some conservation work by cavers in Goatchurch Cavern on the Mendip Hills, some inscribed marks on calcite flowstone were noticed. Cleaning with water sprays revealed three finely-cut marks resembling the letter W. It was immediately apparent that the patina was considerably darker than the lighter exposed calcite that can be seen nearby in graffiti dated 1704. The marks were photographed and filed in the mental space labelled 'interesting and unusual', but at the time, no conclusions were drawn as to their age or significance.

Five months later, an article in *The Guardian* newspaper,¹ entitled 'Scare witch project. Repairs at Kew Palace uncover a tradition of superstition' brought the marks in Goatchurch back to mind. The article described

"witchmarks" cut into timbers in the palace "to keep witches from flying in at the window or down the chimney", which had been discovered by the curator, Lee Prosser, during recent renovations. The article quoted him as saying "They had been spotted before, but dismissed as carpenter's marks, but these are quite different, sun symbols, eye shapes, M-shapes to invoke the protection of the Virgin Mary, classic witchmarks – and from exactly the period, and in the positions near the potential points of danger, the door and window entry points, where you would expect to find them." A photograph of one of the marks was included, an M shape, with the middle branches of the letter crossed.

The similarity to the markings in Goatchurch was immediately apparent, although the ones from the cave resembled Ws, rather than the M illustrated in the *Guardian* article. Contact was made with Lee Prosser, who kindly supplied copies of various papers, including one by Timothy Easton dealing with marks found on timber beams in old buildings in East Anglia. These articles made reference to marks resembling Ws.² Contact with Easton led to a collaboration on a paper describing the marks and their possible meaning.³ Easton is of the opinion that these marks represent two interlocked or conjoined Vs, which he believes were intended to invoke the protection of the Virgin Mary. In his Appendix,⁴ Easton draws on the popular Marian prayer attributed to Fr Claude Bernard (1588 – 1641) which includes the sentence ‘I fly to thee, Mary, Virgin of virgins, mother of Jesus Christ’ in the edition of *Coeleste Palmetum* of 1741. Easton cites some examples of pre-Reformation carved and painted forms to support his interpretation.

Matthew Champion⁵ comments that purely in terms of quantity, the appearance of the W or VV symbol apparently outweighs the entire collection of other ritual protection marks by a ratio of nearly 2:1, although particular or recognisable distribution patterns have been difficult to identify. Champion states that what is clear, however, is that the use of this symbol continued into the 18th and possibly even into the early 19th century, which makes it likely that its meaning changed over time, surviving the Reformation, and possibly eventually being seen simply as a generalised good-luck symbol, or something to keep misfortune away.

The marks found in Goatchurch are all the W mark. They are small and difficult to see without raking light from the side. They are all very finely incised and appear to have been made with a metal blade. They are all in the immediate vicinity of a feature known as the Giants’ Steps, a natural chimney in the rock about 7m deep that links the upper passage of the cave to a lower route leading to another entrance opened c. 1923. One set of marks is at approximately shoulder height on the left-hand wall at the top of the Giants’ Steps. In this area there is often a noticeable coldness in the air caused by a draught of air rising from the lower part of the cave.

In buildings, as explained by Lee Prosser in the *Guardian* article, ritual protection marks often guard those parts of the dwelling believed to be at risk of entry by evil spirits and witches’ familiars. They are found on or over windows, doors and chimneys. In Goatchurch, the position of the marks is consistent with this. As noted above, they are immediately above a hole from which a noticeable cold draught issues. There is also a particularly obvious mark on a boulder immediately facing that hole.

The position of the marks is believed to be the major indicator of their purpose. It seems likely that they were placed there in an attempt to prevent something of supernatural origin coming out of the depths of the cave,

was Long Hole, in Cheddar Gorge. A check of similar ‘chimney-like’ features quickly immediately revealed one such mark in the classic situation, high up in a chimney, known to cavers as an ‘aven’. There is a notable similarity between this mark and one recorded by Timothy Easton in the Swan Inn in Worlingworth, Suffolk.⁶ Further investigations in Long Hole have revealed numerous other similar marks.

Another obvious place in need of investigation in this context was a local cave that has been associated with witchcraft legends for hundreds of years, probably the most famous cave in Somerset: Wookey Hole.

On 21st June 2007, a preliminary visit very quickly revealed a large concentration of engravings, many clearly identifiable as ritual protection marks, clustered in a small aven known to show-cave guides as The Witch’s Chimney. The existence of such marks in conjunction with a natural feature such as a chimney or aven is by no means surprising, especially taking into account findings in other caves. The surprising thing in Wookey Hole, however, is the sheer number of marks of different types and the large concentration in one small area. However, again the location provides much of the necessary explanation. Here, in a chimney feature the size and shape of a large stone fireplace, a cold convection draught rises up, quickly chilling anyone standing in there for any length of time.⁷



Fig. 3: *Conjoined V on boulder above the Giant’s Steps, Goatchurch Cavern. Photo: Andrew Atkinson*

again can only easily be seen by means of side-lighting from an LED torch, of the kind commonly employed to provide raking light for making out very faint graffiti. Nearby there are also three other letters on the same panel. This second panel comprises a capital I (with a horizontal line crossing the upstroke), in conjunction with an H, followed by a letter resembling a P, which appears to have been converted to an R by the addition of a more lightly engraved stroke.

The letters IH are the first two letters of the Greek form of Jesus, and IHC and IHS are common Christograms, an abbreviation for the name of Jesus Christ, traditionally used as a Christian symbol. Whether the two letters IH found here and elsewhere in the cave do form a Christogram is not known, but the possibility cannot be ignored. A parallel can also be drawn with the Chi-Rho symbol, which uses the first two letters of the



Fig. 4: *The entrance to Long Hole, Cheddar Gorge.*
Photo: Graham Mullan



Fig. 5: *Linda Wilson in an aven in Long Hole.*
Photo: Chris Binding

name of Christ. In the case of the letters IH, the C or S has possibly been dispensed with because of the difficulty of inscribing a curve on an uneven rock surface such as in caves.

Another common marking found in Wookey Hole is the ‘butterfly cross’ sometimes compared with the runic Dagaz symbol. The Witch’s Chimney contains a plethora of such marks, as well as numerous instances of the crossed I. The letter J, which was not used in Latin, is a late introduction to the alphabet and what is now J was originally written as I. Although English printers had introduced the letter I by the mid-17th century, the use of I to represent it continued for many years. The crossed I is found in at least nine places in the Witch’s Chimney, sometimes by itself and sometimes in conjunction with other letters.

As with Goatchurch, it was necessary to consider Wookey Hole as a context for ritual connection marks, and here there is a very simple and obvious connection with witchcraft. Wookey Hole is famous for the large stalagmite known as the Witch of Wookey. An early account of a visit to the cave by William of Worcester in about 1470 referred to a figure of a woman; as yet, no reference is made to a witch. He describes “*the figure of a woman ... clad and holding in her girdle a spinning distaff*”.⁸ In 1628, the first account appears that describes the formation as the Witch of Wookey. A lawyer called Bulstrode Whitelock describes a visit to the cave in

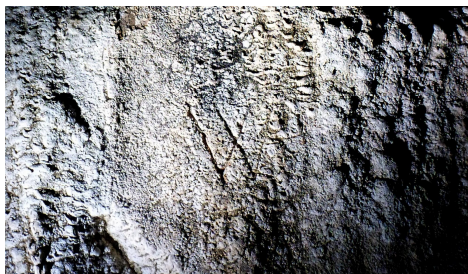


Fig. 6: Conjoined V with P, Long Hole.
Photo: Chris Binding

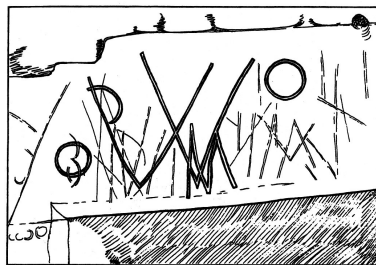


Fig. 7: Conjoined V with P, from *The Swan, Worlingworth, Suffolk*.
Drawing by Timothy Easton

company with a guide. He was shown, amongst other things, “... *the Porter, the Witch of Ochies Hole, stones resembling their names...*”. His visit was by candle-light and Whitelock was clearly relieved when it was over.⁹

In 1681, John Beaumont describes the River Axe, which resurges from the cave: “*the cattle that feed in the pastures through which this river runs have been known to die suddenly sometimes after a flood. This is probably owing to the waters having been impregnated either naturally or accidentally, with lead ore...*”. Although Beaumont, a man with extensive knowledge of mines and mining, made the connection between cattle deaths and the high concentration of lead in the area, it is easy to see how, in such deeply superstitious times, such unexplained cattle deaths could well have been taken as evidence of the association of the cave with the various forces of evil that were believed to play a large part in visiting trials and tribulations on the world.¹⁰

It is worth noting that recorded instances of the supposed bewitchment of cattle were in fact much more common than reports of attacks on sheep, even in areas where sheep farming predominated. Owen Davies believes that this can be explained by the practice of cows being a more integral part of the social space of a rural community.¹¹ As a result, it would not be surprising to find the deaths of valuable animals like cattle being explained as the result of malevolent forces at work in the vicinity.

Later written accounts of the cave demonstrate that by the early 1700s, the story of the Witch of Wookey Hole was very strongly associated with the cave. By 1748, the Witch had even started to make her appearance in poetry, and it’s from these poems that we’re able to get some glimpses into the local folk-magic of the area and the means used to banish evil spirits from dwellings. A poem by Anna Sawyer from 1801, *The Witch of Wokey Hole*, follows a common format and purports to tell an ‘ancient’ story said to be well known in the area:

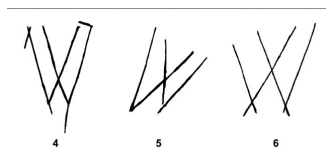


Fig. 10: Conjoined Vs near entrance to Wookey Hole.

Drawing by Linda Wilson



Fig. 11: IHR near entrance to Wookey Hole.

Drawing by Linda Wilson



Fig. 12: Butterfly cross from the Witches Chimney.

how to banish troublesome spirits.¹³

The poem of the Lost Lady tells the tragic tale of the lovely Lady Blanche, beloved daughter of Sir Archibald of Hospitality Hall. As is usual in such tales, Lady Blanche had two suitors, the nice one and the nasty one. As it's a tragic tale, Lady Blanche is murdered and her father falls into despair. When it appears that her spirit has returned to trouble the house, the servants aren't too happy, and John the butler is sent on a quest to consult:

The old Wight, who liv'd far, far away,

*How to lay the lorn Spirit which troubled the house,
And to give it eternal repose!*

The old Wight is naturally a sinister sort. When John the butler finds him, the Wight tears a page out of an old book and starts chanting: "Wookey-Hole, Cheddar-Cliffs, the Red Sea!" No one knows what the words mean until an 'old Dame' who lives nearby is consulted. She's a bit more forthcoming than her male counterpart and explains that:

*To lay the lorn SPIRIT, you o'er it must pray,
And command it, at length, to be gone far away,
And, in WOOKEY's deep HOLE, to be under control
For the space of SEVEN YEARS and a DAY.*

So here we have evidence of folk belief concerning the banishing of spirits into the cave of Wookey Hole, already believed to be inhabited by a malevolent witch. But that's not all, as spirits have a nasty habit of coming

back – but if that happens, our handy old Dame has some more advice:

*If then it return, you must pray and command,
By midnight, By moonlight,
By Death's ebon wand,
That to CHEDDAR CLIFFS now, it departeth in peace,
And another SEVEN YEARS its sore troubling will cease.*

This provides a link to the caves in the Cheddar Cliffs, including Long Hole, a cave in which ritual protection marks have been found. So our lorn spirit has now been bounced from house, to cave, to cliff. So far so good? Well, maybe...

*If it return still,
As, I warn you, it will,
To the RED Sea for ever
Command it, and never return,
Or noise more or sound
In the House shall be found.*

So there you have it. Exorcism 101, Somerset-style. The poem provides a vehicle for Jennings to record a superstition which he believed to be well known in Somerset. For our purposes, Jennings's poem provides a link between Wookey Hole and the caves in the cliffs of Cheddar Gorge, all sites in which ritual protection marks have been found. At the time Jennings was writing, there was far less vegetation on the Cheddar Cliffs and the large open entrance of Long Hole would have been very obvious in the cliff.

The more puzzling inclusion in the poem is the reference to the Red Sea. Owen Davies cites various examples of this practice, the earliest of which appears to date to 1650.¹⁴ There is also another reference to the practice in Somerset. Davies records the story of the ghost of a wicked old man of West Harptree, on the other side of the Mendip Hills, which was first laid for a period of seven years by the local vicar, but when the allotted time expired he turned up again to annoy the locals. This time the vicar cast the spirit into the Red Sea.

There appear to be two possible explanations for this practice. The first, and perhaps most obvious, is that the Red Sea was associated with the drowning of Pharaoh's army in pursuit of Moses and his followers, and so might have been seen as a place where good triumphed over evil and thus was an appropriate place for the containment of troublesome spirits.

However, a second explanation for the term also needs to be considered. It is possible that the reference to the Red Sea in this context derives from the Hebrew myths that associate Lilith, Adam's first wife, with the Red Sea, a region where demons are said to have abounded, which Lilith then added to with her own children. It has been suggested that

Lilith's flight to the Red Sea after her dispute with Adam recalls the ancient Hebrew view that water attracts demons.¹⁵ As an explanation for the practice of banishing spirits to the Red Sea, the connection with the folklore surrounding Lilith cannot be discounted.¹⁶

Comparison with symbols found elsewhere, in particular with those in timbered buildings and churches, demonstrates that the scribed marks found in various Mendip caves are ritual protection marks. The similarities seem too numerous to allow any other conclusion to be reached. These marks have now been found in Goatchurch Cavern, Long Hole and Wookey Hole, with by far the greatest number appearing in the latter, a cave that has been associated with stories of a witch since at least 1628. The marks provide a very direct physical link between the prevalence of witch belief in the area and attempts made to obtain some measure of protection from malevolent spirits.

The meaning of the array of marks illustrated here has been hotly debated by researchers, with some claiming that these types of marks are nothing more than carpenters' marks or masons' marks, and that there is no arcane motive for them. Owen Davies states: "If the same symbols crop up on other surfaces, then one can eliminate carpenters' and masons' marks and brack marks or timber marks". He goes on to say: "They [Binding and Wilson] have found incised marks carved into the rock, probably dating from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century... in contexts that cannot serve any construction or building function".¹⁷

My collaborator, Chris Binding, and I believe, if you'll forgive the pun, that we have only just started to scratch the surface of the instances of protective marks in caves and mines, and that the underground world has a very definite part to play in the study of ritual protection marks and other magical practices.

Acknowledgments

With thanks to: Chris Binding, Andrew Atkinson, Graham Mullan, Timothy Easton, Brian Hoggard, Lee Prosser, Owen Davies, Ronald Hutton, Sir David Wills, Hugh Cornwell (formerly of Cheddar Caves and Gorge) and Daniel Medley of Wookey Hole.

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The head that works for you: Apotropaic vs. show

John Billingsley



Fig. 1: Wood Lane Hall porch



Fig. 2: 'Devil's arrows' at Birchen Lee Carr, above Mytholmroyd

At Wood Lane Hall in Sowerby, West Yorkshire, a couple of miles west of Halifax, an impressive porch commemorates the date of its construction – 1649 – and the man who had the hall built, John Dearden. He was of a family that had grown prosperous in the textile trade of Halifax and the South Pennines in the four or five generations over which it had developed a national profile. Around the house, on window and door moulding finials, troughing ends and downpipes, there are a host of carvings: most are carved faces which are clearly not intended to be of Dearden; some are horizontal arrow or heart shapes – known locally as devil's arrows;¹ and a string of corbel ends celebrate the good life of the *nouveau-riche* yeomen and aspirant gentry – smoking, hunting, fleecy sheep, and the insignia of the Stuart dynasty.² On the porch datestone, too, alongside initials, there is a carved head – pear-shaped, flat relief, but sporting a beard and long wavy hair. Presumably this is a rough likeness of John Dearden with the facial and head hairstyles of the period, but it isn't quite a portrait. It could be any well-to-do male of his generation.

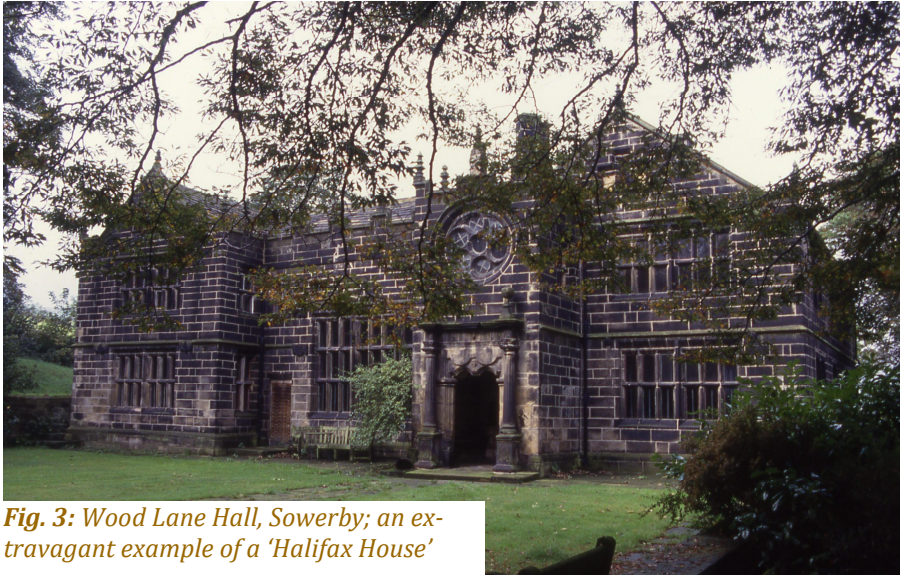


Fig. 3: Wood Lane Hall, Sowerby; an extravagant example of a 'Halifax House'

Barely a foot or so above the datestone, below the horizontal stone frame of the outer design, is another carved head, markedly different in character from the quasi-portrait below it, and a lot cruder than the other face carvings on the mouldings. This could not be described even as a quasi-portrait – no one commissioning it as an act of personal display would be likely to pay the mason's fee. It may possibly have come from an earlier provenance somewhere, and incorporated into the new hall, but even if so this does not negate the implications I shall draw from its positioning and appearance. It is not a part of the house's overall ornamental scheme, and does no justice to the pomp of the porch. Still, both builder and patron evidently approved its prominent location over the front door. Its choice and location are evidently deliberate.

All across this area of West Yorkshire round about the first half of the seventeenth century, affluent clothiers were rebuilding their homes in stone.³ The aggrandised farmhouses and aspirant halls used traditional local building styles, frequently including symbols and designs, and are classic examples of vernacular architecture. They came at something of a cusp in British social history – their development was in the rise to ascendancy of strict Protestantism against a background of contested traditional governance, a social change that had more than a smattering of the values that became mercantile capitalism. The new thinking vied with older traditions and beliefs particularly in the first half of the seventeenth century, and this is shown, I suggest, in the added detail of the architecture. In the Pennine areas outside Halifax parish, the Great Rebuilding came slightly

later in the century, and embellishments at doors, windows, gables and so on are markedly fewer. By happy chance, therefore, in this part of West Yorkshire a wealth of evidently customary protective signs and symbols were preserved in stone, a vernacular style caught looking both backward and forward.

The building of these impressive Halifax Houses, as they came to be known, set them apart from their less affluent neighbours, in a local culture where showing off one's wealth was – or had been – not the done thing. It is a situation where we might expect envy to be aroused and to be expressed toxically via what we know as the evil eye. The evil eye is frequently associated with witchcraft, as if part of the latter's compendium of skills – which may well have been so, but I would argue as a secondary fact arising from the economic and social circumstances of the seventeenth century which allied witchcraft with poverty. The evil eye, however, is not at root a witch's malice, but a rather universal concept by which the destructive power of envy is projected, consciously or otherwise – a standard negative emotion which exists within every human, albeit expressed more bitterly and powerfully by some individuals. It is here that the link to witchcraft was made in contemporary thinking, removing the responsibility for wealth disparities from the affluent to the poor. The prosperous yeomen families of the Great Rebuilding, visibly better off than their neighbours but not yet of the gentry class, knew implicitly that by breaking the accepted economic balance of their community they needed protection. Their closeness to traditional cultural heritage informed them of measures they could employ against unseen attack from both metaphysical and human sources.⁴

In a restored farmhouse about three miles away from Wood Lane Hall, a 14ft beam, estimated to perhaps date from the late-14th century,⁵ has been incorporated into the living room of a family home. My first impression was of a late-mediaeval comprehensive insurance policy, because along its length were a variety of protective symbols that are familiar to seekers of the apotropaic – a sacred monogram, tree of life, pentagram, variations on the diagonal cross, god's eye, and more.

Among the amuletic designs is a carved face, very crude and basic, looking like nobody on earth, or at least nobody who would particularly relish looking like that. Ranged as it is alongside known protective devices, one can assume function by association – this is a face to ward away misfortune and malice, and an example of what John Castillo, the early-19th-century builder, stonemason, dialect poet and head-carver of the Cleveland district of North Yorkshire, called T'Owd Man's Face,⁶ and what I've termed generically the archaic head.⁷

The archaic head can be generalised as a minimalist depiction of the human head, typically featuring only eyes, nose and mouth, frequently with the eyebrows and nose continuous in a T-shape, ears optional and barely



Fig. 4: Lower Height, Wainstalls

developed, the face pear-shaped and executed in flat relief. It is neither a fully human face nor a skull, though it stands within the artistic spectrum between them. The Old Man's Face and archaic head are characterised by the same thing – a studied avoidance of realism. Going back to Wood Lane Hall, the crude head on the porch made no pretence to a likeness of John Dearden – at least we hope not, for his sake. And the face on the beam isn't exactly a pin-up, either.



Fig. 4a

These things were made to adorn the outside of often relatively grand buildings, and according to our modern expectations we might expect something to assist their owners' demand for status and claim to refinement; yet these masks shun the aspirant display clearly apparent in the later preference for carved heads with noble, even classical, features. There is thus a dissonance in visual form, and I would like to suggest a way by which this may be understood.

The crucial difference between concealed and visible protective devices, surely, is visibility. With a concealed item, some esoteric chemistry between the object, the deposition and the depositor is presumably the means by which to effect the desired result. No one else's perception or witness is required.

With visible items, however, the implication is that witness *is* required. Not only is the device doing its work, or so it is hoped, but it needs to be *seen* to be doing its work. Its appearance must display visual cues that impart sense and meaning to the onlooker.

The archaic head is part of a long-established esoteric and apotropaic tradition associated with liminal situations across a wide geographic area. Its backstory appears to stretch into prehistory, where it encompasses stylised carvings of various kinds including the minimalist archaic form, as well as human skulls themselves; and the motif of what the French call the *tête coupée*, the severed head, has been a recurrent feature of archaeology, folk narrative and architecture in the historical period. In the Middle Ages particularly, a side branch explored stylisation, as seen in ecclesiastical grotesques, but the main bearer of the motif in secular contexts was the simple archaic form, reaching something of an apogee in 17th-century Britain, especially West Yorkshire.⁸

Carvings of the human head have remained in vogue, over doorways in particular, in more recent centuries – but more recently they are, while still *coupée*, rather different in character, in that they take on a more naturalistic, or classical portrait form. The preferred modern mask is noble and aspirational – a far cry from the deliberately downbeat archaic form. It is more attractive in itself, and hence it is a decorative addition. It is also the kind of face we might very well happen to see on an individual in the street, which cannot generally be said of the archaic type of face.

The dual heads at Wood Lane Hall seem to anticipate this shift of preference from the archaic to the portrait – the lower head approximating to contemporary worthy gentlemen, the upper head, like all archaic heads, caught between a living visage and the post-mortem skull. Fieldwork indicates that while archaic heads are folklorically associated either with alleged deaths during construction, or more commonly with protection of the home from malignity,⁹ no such folklore is attached to the more naturalistic head – no one has told me, at least, that a head is supposed to look like so-and-so unless it actually looks a bit like an actual person, and similarly no one has told me that their naturalistic portrait head is supposed to ward off bad luck, not even when it's placed over their front door. The naturalistic head is exactly what the archaic head is not.

Similar apotropaic powers are alleged for certain variants of the church grotesque, although this is too broad an area to be explored here.¹⁰ Folklore and tradition seem to prefer their protective heads to be anything but realistic. Perhaps that was what the builder of Wood Lane Hall was thinking when he inserted – or prevailed upon Mr



Fig. 5: Naturalistic head above main door, Field House, Sowerby

Dearden to have inserted – the archaic head above the quasi-portrait on the datestone. The implication here, as in every archaic head or stylised grotesque, seems to be that to do the job of averting the evil eye or witchcraft or any daemonic threat, it was necessary for the head *not* to look like anyone in this everyday reality. If it should look like someone in this world, then it loses its power, its essential liminality. That's the key visual cue.¹¹

So the first thing the archaic head dispenses with is extravagant fleshiness. Also, typically but not invariably, any hairstyle, on the face or head, is eschewed. Ears, too, retreat back to basics. The archaic head is the living head exarnating before our eyes in order to deal with its own liminal agency. It clearly is not a living being, not one of this world.

Yet it is not one of the dead, either. It is not a skull, though the features – eyes, brow ridges, nose and mouth – are those that remain to view on the defleshed skull. The archaic head, in other words, removes life, but does not embrace death – it pauses the mask midway. The deliberate evasion of portraiture begs the question – Why? Perhaps it makes enough intuitive sense on its own, perhaps it represents an implicit threat against anyone daring to direct malevolence towards the household; but I would like to suggest a possible underlying rationale for the 'otherworldly' understanding of this long-standing visual statement of a face apparently poised on the threshold, neither here nor there.

In December 1995, a Sheffield man was driving along a road in the Peak District, arguing with his stepfather, but he felt he wasn't being listened to or even being given the opportunity to have his say. So he pulled over into a lay-by and stabbed his stepfather to death – but such other details need not concern us. What does concern us is that he then dragged the body out of the car and cut off his head with a Japanese ceremonial sword he happened to have with him. Whether he knew that the lay-by he'd pulled into was at a place known from a legendary historical event as Cut-throat Bridge is a psychogeographic avenue I can't follow here, but he said in court that the murder was a spur-of-the-moment thing. He stated that he had heard that the brain remained conscious for twenty minutes after decapitation – enough time, he reckoned, for him to be able to put his point across to his stepfather, and for his stepfather to hear and understand that point, while helpfully



Fig. 6: A fairly typical example of an archaic head at Shibden Hall, Halifax

being unable to interrupt. So he put the man's body in the boot, the head in the passenger seat, and talked to it for twenty minutes.¹²

Now, this is, I think, an astonishing modern instance of a very familiar trope, that the head remains conscious and even puissant after it has been cut off. Celtic narratives feature this notion frequently – the classic is the Wondrous Head of Bran in the *Mabinogion* story, as do later tales and testimonies, such as 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight' and 'The Three Heads in the Well'. More locally, there is an anecdote regarding the Halifax Gibbet – a guillotine method unique in England – that attests to such beliefs, even if jocularly: it speaks of a woman on her way to market riding past a crowd at the Gibbet at the exact moment the axe fell on an unfortunate's neck. The axe is said to have done its work more by weight than by keenness, so that the head flew up and over the crowd, and landed in the woman's lap, whereupon its mouth clamped securely on her apron and could not be prised open for some time.¹³ The Halifax Gibbet ceased its work in 1650, but at the end of the eighteenth century witnesses at the Paris guillotine noted how the Queen's lips continued to move as if in prayer as her head flopped into the basket, and several instances where victims' eyes widened as they looked at the crowd in their descent into the basket. Then, Charlotte de Corday, Marat's assassin in 1793, was said to have scowled when a man picked up her severed head and tweaked her cheek. Twenty minutes is pushing it though. Current scientific opinion puts survival of consciousness in a severed head at between ten and twelve seconds¹⁴ – certainly long enough to be a bit unsettling, even upsetting.

So a persistent perception, apparently scientifically confirmed, is that when one's head is removed, one is to all intents and purposes dead, but life and consciousness remain for a certain period. By this means, the liminal point between life and death is extended, as is awareness. The implication, it seems to me, both symbolic and actual, and especially to those who watched the severed heads at the guillotine mouth something at them as they fell, is that for a certain period of time the *tête coupée* can perceive both this world and the next simultaneously.

Is this the key to the archaic head's typology? This is a head perched at a multivalent esoteric threshold – not just that of the building, but of life itself: it is caught between states, asked to protect the goods and persons of this world, while gazing into some other dimension to address any malevolent presence or influence that might irrupt into this place or into this family's everyday reality. Some stylisation is necessary to indicate differentiation from this world, but not so much stylisation as to denote utter separation. This way it can deliver the visual message to both this-world and otherworld onlookers, that a guardian has been deployed at the threshold between human and extra-human dimensions.

So perhaps in 1649 a Halifax builder said something like this: "Putting a head above your door, Mr Dearden, sir, is all very well and good, but if you want it to work for you like the people you employ, yours is much too handsome. You want a face that's a bit different from yours or mine – the Owd Man's Face is what's needed there, you know...".

And since builders knew what they were doing, and their houses are still standing 450 years later, they reached a compromise and put them both up. The semi-portrait head proclaimed the worldly status of John Dearden and his family, as did similar faces across the district and beyond; but the archaic head spoke to older sensibilities of an implicit magical force or daemon charged with the care of that family's interests from wherever they may be threatened. At this crucial cultural cusp of change in Britain's socio-economic organisation, both were necessary components of the aspirant home.

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Ritual recycling and the concealed shoe

Ceri Houlbrook

Introduction

As the papers in this volume evince, all manner of objects were secreted away within buildings, for all manner of possible reasons. However, as Brian Hoggard noted in 2004,¹ one category of concealed deposit stands out as the most common within the British Isles: the humble shoe.

The shoe was first recognised as a category of concealed deposit in the 1950s by June Swann, former Keeper of the Boot and Shoe Collection at Northampton Museum, to whom I am most indebted for her research. Having observed a pattern in the finds being donated to her department – a range of shoes belonging to men, women, and children, dating mainly to the 18th and 19th centuries and found in unusual locations within buildings – Swann implemented the *Index of Concealed Shoes* (hereafter the *Index*).² This began its life in 1969 as a catalogue of 129 such finds, but subsequently grew as more shoes were (quite literally) brought to light. In 1987 Ralph Merrifield cited the *Index* as detailing 700 concealed shoes,³ while today it stands at close to 2000, with examples hailing from locations around the world – although England is by far the most common – in a wide variety of buildings, ranging from rural cottages to townhouses; farms to hospitals; manor houses to factories; churches to military barracks.⁴

The custom of shoe concealment was evidently well-established and widespread during the 18th and 19th centuries. However, the purposes behind the practice remain a mystery to us, simply because no contemporaneous written record has been found detailing it; an absence which Swann attributes to the belief that ‘the superstition, if disclosed, ceases to be effective’.⁵ Why were these shoes concealed? What were their concealers hoping to achieve? With few literary sources to utilise in our quest for answers, it is the shoes themselves that will offer the most useful testimony. Therefore in 2013 I en-listed the aid of archaeological methodologies – combined with the relevant folkloric sources I had identified – in my endeavour to unearth the motivations behind this enigmatic practice and to set it in context.⁶



Fig. 1: Lane End Farmhouse, Middleton, Ilkley



Fig. 2: The Ilkley shoe



Fig. 3: The fireplace in which the Ilkley Shoe was found and over which it is currently displayed

The Case-Studies

I drew on two previously unstudied case-studies: the Ilkley Shoe and the Otley Cache. Both Ilkley and Otley are in Wharfedale, North Yorkshire, and are about six miles apart. In limiting myself to two case-studies, I aimed to provide very concise reference points from which to explore the more general subject of shoe concealment, by comparing these specific examples to the vast catalogue detailed in the *Index*. In my choice of location – Yorkshire – I was hoping to rectify the geographic biases evident in other studies, which focus largely on the southern counties of England. I do not believe this south-centric bias reflects the reality of the practice; as an example, at least eleven cases of concealed shoes and caches have been recorded in the relatively small northern town Otley, suggesting that the custom was similarly well-established in England's north.

The Ilkley Shoe was found up the chimneybreast of Lane End Farmhouse, Middleton, Ilkley, a 17th-century farmhouse (Fig. 1). It is a Victorian-style children's leather shoe (or clog), 17.4cm in length, with hobnailed wooden soles, seven sets of eyelets, and no adornments (Fig. 2). This style of clog was particularly popular amongst the working classes in the northern counties of England during the 18th century,⁷ and it remained widespread throughout the 19th century also, only fading out of use in Lancashire and Yorkshire at the beginning of the 20th.⁸ The Ilkley Shoe, therefore, probably dates to no

later than 1900. It appears to have been a straight shoe, as was common for 19th-century children's shoes,⁹ but the emphasis of the wear on the left side indicates that it may have been worn more often on the left foot. It is in a poor condition, old and worn, with a large hole in the toe. It was discovered on a ledge up the chimneybreast by the farmhouse's previous owner in c.1996. The finder re-concealed the shoe up the chimneybreast but, upon moving out in 1998, informed the farmhouse's new owner of its location. The new owner, Ms. Armitage, took the shoe out of the chimneybreast and displayed it on a shelf above the fireplace (Fig. 3).

The Otley Cache (Fig. 4) was discovered in the roof space of 2-4 Market Street, Otley, which seems to have originally been a barn or workshop before the town's redevelopment in the 17th century. The cache consisted of a family of six shoes: a child's working-class shoe (Fig. 5), a man's court shoe with a black cotton bow (Fig. 6), a man's court shoe with a latchet tie front (Fig. 7), a barely-recognisable



Fig. 4: The Otley cache



Fig. 5: The child's shoe



Fig. 6: The man's court shoe with a black cotton bow



Fig. 7 (above): The man's court shoe with a latchet tie front

Fig. 8 (right): The lace-up boot, kept in its original state



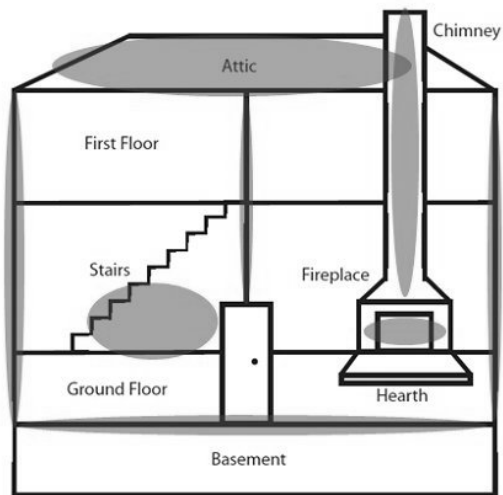


Fig. 9: The common locations of concealed deposits within a building

lace-up boot (Fig. 8), a woman's button-boot, and one unrecorded shoe. They have been dated to the latter half of the 19th century.

The *Index* lists at least 28 examples of footwear caches that include shoes of men, women, and children, which Eastop terms 'families',¹⁰ so it is certainly not uncommon to find caches of shoes concealed together. This cache was found in 1994 by

workmen renovating the building; the Keeper of the Otley Museum collection, Christine Dean, had asked the builders to search for shoes while doing their work. They had already disposed of one shoe, but following her enquiry five more were discovered.¹¹ They were then donated to Otley Museum, where four out of the five shoes were catalogued as O/MP/ft/1-5, and placed into storage.

The Locations of the Shoes

In order to contextualise the custom of concealment, a consideration of the shoes' physical contexts is an obvious place to start. Accidental loss could account for some (erroneously labelled) 'concealed shoes', while simple storage could account for others, such as the three shoes found in a box in the attic of a house in Chichester. However, the vast majority of shoes detailed in the *Index* do appear to have been deliberately secreted away: under floors, above ceilings, within walls, in the roof space, and in the fireplace, hearth, or chimneybreast (Fig. 9).¹² These statistics are consistent with the Ilkley Shoe (found on a narrow ledge up a chimneybreast) and the Otley Cache (found in the roof space). One thing unites these different locations: their liminality.

The roof space of a building, with its peripheral location separating sky from house, represents marginality.¹³ The chimney also inhabits that indeterminable, transitional area between inside/outside; a hazardous access point for the plethora of malevolent supernatural forces that, according to popular belief, threatened the household. Scot, writing his *Discoverie of Witchcraft* in 1584, listed the many forces to be feared: 'bull beggars, spirits, witches, urchens, elves, hags, fairies...';¹⁴ forces that were

threatening the safety of homes across the British Isles for many generations after Scot's time. These forces were believed to infiltrate the household from outside via any tiny access point, and so it would be unsurprising to learn that inhabitants went to some effort to protect these access points; to employ methods of evil-proofing the home. And it is the general consensus that the concealing of shoes was one such method; a theory that is consistent with interpretations of other concealed deposits, detailed throughout this volume, such as bottles, garments, and animal remains. However, this begs the question: why the shoe?

The Symbol of the Shoe

Despite the fact that the shoe is a seemingly innocuous, mundane object, it has been imbued with ritual significance and symbolism throughout much of its history and in a vast range of cultures. Murray credits this to the foot being 'a liminal extremity, on the cusp between us and the soil...Feet are on the frontier and it is around frontiers that rituals accumulate'.¹⁵ Is it therefore the liminality of the shoe itself that has resulted in its prominence in worldwide ritual and superstitious beliefs? Its symbolic location on the 'frontier' would certainly fit with its association with journeys. It was, for example, considered good luck to throw an old shoe after somebody as they began a journey; as John Heywood wrote in 1598: 'And home agayne hytherward quicke as a bee, Now for good lucke caste an olde shoe after mee'.¹⁶ This is why in Fig. 10 we see Queen Victoria throwing a shoe at her soldiers as they departed for the Crimean War.



Fig. 10: Queen Victoria in Punch magazine, 1854

The shoe is also associated with concepts of fertility¹⁷ and with protection against disease; in the northern counties of England, for example, laying shoes across each other would prevent cramps, rheumatism and nightmares.¹⁸ They were also believed to protect against supernatural, malevolent forces; the practice of throwing shoes at a wedding, for instance, may stem from some notion of deterring demons who inflict barrenness.¹⁹ Why would the shoe be considered a symbol of protection? One theory is that, in British folklore, supernatural creatures did not like the smell of burning leather; fairies, for example,

were believed to be repelled by strong odours, such as garlic or the burning of an old shoe,²⁰ and as Radford and Radford write, it was a widely held belief in early England that '[t]he smell of burning shoes keeps off demons and serpents'.²¹ This theory may also explain why so many concealed shoes, such as the Ilkley Shoe, were deposited in/near chimneys, fireplaces and hearths; locations which suggest the metaphorical burning of the shoes.



*Fig. 11:
A 15th-century pilgrim badge
depicting John Schorne
holding a boot*

Another theory regarding the protective function of the shoe is put forward by Merrifield. He hypothesises that the tradition stems from the tale of John Schorne, one of England's unofficial saints, who was believed to have conjured a devil into a boot (Fig. 11).²² The shoe, therefore, became a type of 'spirit trap' in popular belief,²³ and this may be due to its bowl-like shape which can act as a type of container.²⁴ However, the shoe is also believed to act as a 'lightening conductor', to use Easton's phrase, in diverting the supernatural force;²⁵ the evil spirit 'sees' the shoe and, believing it to be a member of the household, attacks the shoe instead, becoming trapped. But why would the spirit perceive the shoe as a member of the household?

The Shoe and the Wearer

Shoes are highly personal items. Murray believes that '[a]s bearer of the individual's imprint, the shoe functions as a signature – a spiritual graffito';²⁶ it is intrinsically linked with its wearer. The concealed shoe, therefore, is believed to have originally been intended to represent a member of the household. 'Why the shoe?' Swann asks; because it is 'the only garment we wear which retains the shape, the personality, the essence of the wearer'.²⁷ By retaining the foot's shape – and smell – the shoe becomes a metaphorical symbol of the wearer, imbued with their essence. However, this metonymical link with the wearer makes the shoe more than just a lure or a diversion; it becomes a protective force in itself, endowed with the person's power.

Other items of clothing can be imbued with a similar power, a belief that is evident in the tale told by Hartland: when fairies came to steal a newborn baby near Selkirk, the mother covered herself and the child with her absent husband's waistcoat. Upon seeing the waistcoat, the fairies immediately departed, causing no harm. As Hartland writes, the 'suggestion seems to be that the sight of the father's clothes leads "the good people" to think that he himself is present watching over his

offspring'.²⁸ The same could indeed be true of shoes, and this may explain why the vast majority (97.81%) of shoes recorded in the *Index* are old and damaged, much like the Ilkley Shoe and the shoes of the Otley Cache – all of which were in poor conditions before restoration. Perhaps shoes are only imbued with their wearer's essence and power if they have been worn by them for a long time, making their imprint unambiguous.²⁹

There is, however, a simpler explanation for the old and damaged conditions of the concealed shoes. Shoes were expensive items that would not have been casually disposed of, but will have been repaired, modified, and altered until they were no longer servicable. Then, and only then, would they have been discarded – or recycled as concealed shoes. However, I do not believe that old shoes were used in such a way only because they had *lost* their value as footwear, but also because they had *gained* value, as old and well-used, by being imbued with their wearer's essence. It was perhaps for both reasons that old and damaged shoes were recycled as ritual objects.

There are evidently a multitude of theories surrounding the concealed shoe. However, it is probably not the case that only one theory is correct. When considering the symbolism of the shoe, and purposes of concealment, we must remember that roughly 2000 concealed shoes have been recorded – a figure that is likely to be only the tip of the iceberg, accounting for the many shoes that probably remain undiscovered. And for every concealed shoe there was probably a different concealer or set of concealers, with their own backgrounds, beliefs, and motivations. We must, therefore, account for the very likely possibility that shoes were concealed for different reasons by different people at different times. I have written previously on the 'mutability of meaning', observing that while 'participation in folk customs tends to be formulaic and ritualized... the reasons behind participation and the 'meanings' ascribed to the custom will be as varied as the practitioners themselves'.³⁰

Ritual Recycling

I referred above to the transition of old and damaged shoes into ritual objects. This process of 'ritual recycling' is based on the observation that concealed shoes are not inherently 'magical'; they were not originally crafted or conceived as objects with ritual or protective purposes.³¹ They were initially made as footwear, intended for the secular function of separating foot from ground. However, an object's biography can prove to be just as complex as that of a person's, consisting of a series of 'ages' from 'birth' to 'death',³² a series that is far from linear. Concealed shoes are not static, immutable objects; they can shift from one context to another, reaching the 'death' of one stage and being 'reborn' in another, undergoing a wealth of 'recontextualisations'.³³ When a shoe had become

too old or damaged to continue serving its original utilitarian purpose – as footwear – it was appropriated as a concealed deposit.

However, it is important to remember that these processes of adaptation and reutilisation are *human* activities;³⁴ the concealed shoes do not recontextualise themselves. Their biographies are intrinsically linked with the people they come into contact with: their makers, their wearers, their concealers, and – the primary focus of my research – their finders.³⁵ The project I am currently working on, *The Concealed Revealed*, is primarily interested in considering how these finders engage with concealed deposits; how they discover them; how they perceive and feel about them; and what they ultimately do with them, recontextualising them once more.

Following discovery, a concealed shoe can take one of four paths. It can be disposed of as rubbish, such as the first shoe of the Otley Cache, which was discarded before Christine Dean rescued the remaining five. Sadly, but unsurprisingly, many concealed shoes meet similar fates, their ‘biographies’ ending in the rubbish tip.³⁶ However, there are three other paths a concealed shoe can take following discovery: it can be kept *in situ* by its finder; displayed by its finder; or donated to a museum.³⁷

The Ilkley Shoe experienced the first two paths: kept *in situ* up the chimneybreast by its original finder and then displayed by the farmhouse’s later occupant. Displaying the shoe on a shelf above the fireplace in which it was originally found, Ms Armitage claimed to have wanted to keep it as close as possible to its original place of concealment.³⁸ This desire to keep a concealed deposit *in situ* or close by is not unusual; out of the 31 concealed garments in the Otley Museum records, 17 were returned to their finders. Some finders retain the shoes in the house out of respect for the original concealers; while for others it is the belief that removing a concealed shoe will result in bad luck that motivates their retention. When a cache of shoes was found in Colby Estate, Pembrokeshire, for example, the farmer’s wife demanded that they be boarded up again immediately³⁹ and Swann recounts the experiences of another finder who ‘reported that while the boots were out of the house for exhibition, they had nothing but bad luck, the death of pets, flooding and the shed fell down. They now wished to leave the boots strictly alone, no publicity, no photography’.⁴⁰ The custom continues to be observed, and in this cycle of continuity, finders thus become concealers themselves,⁴¹ and the concealed shoe becomes the *re*-concealed shoe.

As for the shoes that are removed from their places of concealment – the Otley Cache for example, which was donated to Otley Museum – they also undergo recontextualisation, entering ‘another social sphere’, to use Eastop’s phrase.⁴² These shoes transition from concealed objects to *displayed* objects; from deposit to museum artefact. The four shoes of the Otley Cache which have been restored can be especially perceived as

having lost the protective agency they were once imbued with; unlike the lace-up boot which was kept in its original old and damaged state, the other shoes now lack the ‘essence’ of their past wearers. Instead, they are now valued as historical artefacts, to be studied by textile conservationists and archaeologists of folklore such as myself. Once more, these shoes have been re-appropriated, recontextualised, and re-articulated; from footwear, to concealed deposits, to archaeological evidence. They have entered yet another of the multitude of stages that the concealed shoe passes through during its life-span. And I doubt it will be the last.

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Cultural anxieties and ritual protection in high-status early-modern houses

James Wright

Introduction

The study of historic graffiti has taken a sharp upturn in mainstream popularity, community interest and academic research during the last decade. Spurred on by the sheer excitement of peering into the raking light of a torch to discover inscriptions, images and symbols that have perhaps not been seen for hundreds of years, it is a very absorbing subject indeed. There are currently at least a dozen county surveys taking place, the most well-known being those in Norfolk and Suffolk run by one of the foremost experts in the field, Matthew Champion. The year 2015 saw the publication of two seminal books relating to the subject.¹ The work is demonstrating that, during the medieval and early modern periods, graffiti was not necessarily a transgressive act. It was a physical rendering of the psychological experience expressing the hopes, fears and desires of ordinary people.

Much of the reported data on historic graffiti has been surveyed in parish churches and cathedrals. The open accessibility of this class of building easily lends itself to community archaeology. So long as there is a friendly vicar or churchwarden, success is guaranteed. However, it is clear that historic graffiti abounds in almost every type of physical structure encountered – from natural caves and rock faces to the arboglyphs on trees to domestic, industrial, agricultural, civic and military architecture. The walls all have voices, and often the stories that they tell are astonishing.

Assessment of the data in East Anglia has revealed that of 64,000+ inscriptions, recorded in over 800 churches to date, fully 25% are ritual protection marks.² These include an array of designs including compass drawn, pelta, pentangles, double-V, merels, Star of David, lightning, butterfly, mesh patterns, ladders and burn marks. The various marks are interpreted as having been imbued with the power to repel, trap or deal with the perceived threat of witches, demons and evil spirits.³ In a society where formal education was still for the minority of people and the transferral of ideas very much related to an oral tradition, the symbols may have been understood in the loosest sense as bringing good luck or protecting from evil.

Research in domestic houses has shown that protective symbols are common in the homes of tenant farmers, merchants, artisans and the gentry.⁴ The study of graffiti in these buildings is more difficult, and the dataset less complete, due to problems associated with accessing private houses. However, ongoing research at a number of higher-status residences from the 16th and 17th centuries has revealed many examples of ritual protection marks in the houses of the aristocracy. Such results have been gleaned from graffiti surveys of properties including Little Moreton Hall, Cheshire (c 1504-1610); Bolsover Castle, Derbyshire (1612-27)⁵ and Belton House, Lincolnshire (1685-88).⁶ The advantage of survey in such buildings is that access is often simplified as they are open to the public on a regular basis by curatorial organisations sympathetic to researchers.

Many of the same observations can be made of the apotropaic marks recorded in high-status houses as those found in churches or lower status domestic structures. Clusters are found around windows, doors and fireplaces. Such liminal zones were considered vulnerable to possession by evil spirits and became a focal point for ritual protection. A passage from *Daemonologie* published by James VI of Scotland (later James I of England) in 1597 is often quoted to explain this phenomena:

*‘...being transformed in the likenesse of a little beast or foule, they will come and pearce through whatsoeuer house or Church, though all ordinarie passages be closed, by whatsoeuer open, the aire may enter in at.’*⁷

Types of ritual protection marks

The belief in symbols which protected against evil in the Abrahamic faiths derives from the Jewish text *Tractate Gittin* from the Babylonian Talmud, in which Solomon is given a seal ring that had the power to repel demons. Arabic sources later developed this legend to depict the ring as a six-pointed star, whereas in Western traditions it is a five-pointed star.⁸ The Middle English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, set down c1400, contains a reference to a pentagram upon the eponymous hero's shield which was intended to ward off evil and indicates that the belief in the protective power of the endless line of the design was current in medieval England.⁹ The continuity of belief into the early modern period is demonstrated by the playwright Robert Greene's reference in his c 1588-92 play *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*:

*The great arch-ruler, potentate of hell
Trembles when Bacon bids him or his fiends
Bow to the force of his pentageron*¹⁰

Detailed surveys of two early-modern high-status buildings – the Queen's House at the Tower of London¹¹ and the King's Tower at Knole, Kent¹² – have yielded dense distributions of ritual protection marks with

links to the cultural anxieties released during the period. Four principle types of marks were recorded in these buildings:

Mesh patterns (Fig. 1) acted as demon traps intended to create an endless line which would arouse the curiosity of the evil spirit, leading it to want to find the end of the line – thus becoming trapped by the grid, which literally pinned the malefactor to the wall.¹³

Compass-drawn designs (Fig. 2), such as the hexfoil or triskele, also relate to the unbroken line which an evil spirit could not pass. The hexfoil is a very ancient symbol which can be found dating back at least 2000 years, and although its Christian ecclesiastical use seems to have died out in the late medieval period, continuity occurred in domestic settings.¹⁴

Double-V designs (Fig. 3) are Marian symbols, invoking the protection of Mary the Mother of God, standing for either ‘Maria’ or ‘Virgo Virginum’.¹⁵ An anonymous German illustration (Fig. 4) made c1600 shows a double-V apotropaic symbol on the left-hand side of a fireplace lintel.¹⁶ Notably the symbol has been crossed out, and therefore nullified. Consequently the chimney is providing a portal for witches who are no longer deterred by the presence of the symbol.

Burn marks (Fig. 5) were made by directly charring timber with a candle or taper, and may be a form of sympathetic magic – using fire to fight the fires of hell. By temporarily touching a timber with flame a more catastrophic blaze could be averted.¹⁷ Other forms of ritualistic behaviour such as Candlemas traditions, healing, prayer and purification may also have been related to this phenomenon.

Queen’s House, Tower of London

Standing in the south-western corner of Tower Green, the Queen’s House (Fig. 6) is something of a misnomer, as it is traditionally said to have been ordered by Henry VIII for Anne Boleyn. More prosaically, it was the residence of the Lieutenant of the Tower and construction of the extant timber-framed building was not underway until June 1540, four years after





Fig. 5



Fig. 6

(13.5%), common rafters (11.8%), collars (6.7%), windbraces (1.7%), and studs (1.7%). The vast majority were recorded in locations either surrounding or directly adjacent to doors and windows.

The carved apotropaic symbols were created in a variety of ways, including the use of a pointed tool such as a knife for the mesh patterns, compasses or shears for the triskele, and a double-V cut with a carpenter's rase knife (Fig. 3). It is possible that the latter was cut by a craftsman during the framing process, rather than one of the subsequent occupants of the Queen's House, as the rase knife is a specialist tool used uniquely by carpenters. The other symbols were probably created by the occupants of the building.

Recent experimental archaeology has demonstrated that to create the classic tear-shaped burn marks with a candle, or more likely a taper, would take extraordinary patience and skill. The taper has to be applied at a consistent angle for 15-30 minutes, and repeated scraping out of charcoal build-up would be necessary to complete the depth of burn.¹⁸ Failure to follow these techniques, or attempting to produce such marks by leaving a candle or taper unattended, resulted in very amorphous charring entirely uncharacteristic of the types of burn marks observed at the Queen's House. It is therefore rejected that the burn marks were the result of accidental charring created by an unattended source of lighting. This is particularly true of the classic tear-shapes on a purlin in the South Range, which has no related means of supporting a candle, taper or lamp. Similarly impractical locations of burn marks have been recorded on the external face of 17th-century window shuttering at Bolsover Castle and the interior of the 16th-century west door at St Mary's, Newark.¹⁹

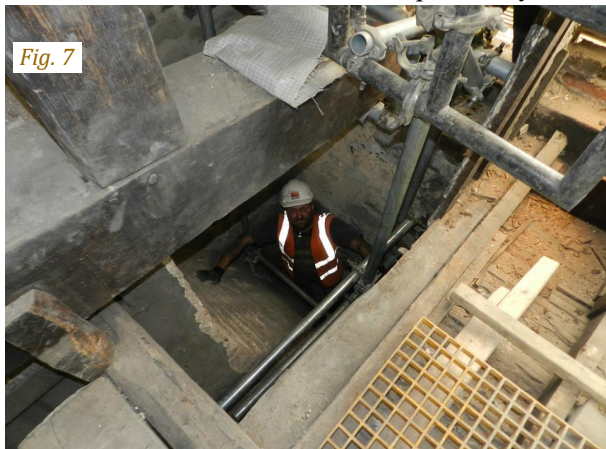
Archaeological evidence suggests that ritual protection of the Queen's House continued well into the 18th century. The east gable of the South Range contains a projecting double-flue chimney which has an associated L

-shaped void wrapping around it, the top of which is accessed at attic level (Fig. 7). The void was found to be full of debris and was excavated to a depth of 2.5m. A sealed layer, 0.45m in depth, contained scraps of leather, a broken bladed tool, a spade shoe and a clay pipe dated to the period 1700-1770. Also recorded was a discreet cache of 46 butchered animal bones, which must have originated in the kitchen, two storeys below the attic, accessed via two flights of stairs and a very narrow hatch.

Depositing meat carcasses in such a manner is impractical – rubbish was usually disposed of in pits, not by making a difficult journey to the top of the house. The purpose of this type of deposit – known as a spiritual midden and invariably associated with chimneys - appears to be related to the fear of conflagration, which was often blamed on malevolent forces. Such beliefs can be linked back to the reasons behind the presence of burn marks, with the spiritual midden protecting the house by diverting the evil forces from the hearth and into the deposit by the presence of so many well-used domestic artefacts within. Once inside it was presumably believed that the evil spirit became trapped. Intriguingly, the kitchen of the Queen’s House was substantially damaged by fire in 1604-5, so this was clearly a structure perceived to be especially vulnerable. The presence of similar deposits in spiritual middens associated with the ritual protection of domestic houses have been observed in a relatively small number of buildings,²⁰ although the example from the Queen’s House appears to be the first time that one has been excavated under archaeological conditions.

Cultural Anxieties

The early modern period was an era of extreme tension caused by extensive social, religious, political and economic turmoil. Recurrent outbreaks of plague, high infant mortality and an average life expectancy in the mid-40s meant that life was perilously short and matters of religion



dominated all concepts of life, death and the afterlife. It is possible that the sense of spiritual neuroses and fear created by the rejection of Catholicism during the Reformation may have led to an exaggerated reliance on existing folk traditions which sought to offer ritual protection in a world

that no longer sanctioned the appeal to saints through relics. The resilience of such practices throughout the period may have been the psychological necessity of a nation gripped by a tremendous fear of the incarnate perception of evil.

Social upheavals such as the doubling of population between c1530-1630, a rise in the price of food, the enclosure of common fields which disenfranchised the rural population, and a drop in wages leading to a widening gap between rich and poor created a sense of consuming fear. This terror often manifested itself in the tendency for slightly richer members of society to attempt to settle old scores through identifying witchcraft amongst their poorer neighbours within the community.²¹ Whether or not the accusers genuinely believed that the accused had actually perpetrated witchcraft is irrelevant – the fear was instilled within society and the perceived protection afforded by apotropaic symbols became a widespread, if unreported, phenomenon.

The Queen's House was one of the very first buildings in England which had dormer windows lighting a deliberately planned attic space laid with floorboards. The function of these spaces seems to have always been associated with the lower-status occupants of the building, such as service staff or craftsmen employed in building or remodelling the structure. This notion is supported by the negative distribution of apotropaic marks noted on the roof timbers of the Council Chamber. Until the first decade of the 17th century, its roof was open to the floors below, but after the insertion of the current floor level in 1607, it became the location for meetings of the Privy Council. It appears that the enormous importance of the space would have put it out of regular use by lower-status occupants, who were probably responsible for carving and burning the other ritual protection marks onto the building.

Over time it is possible that the meaning and interpretation of ritual behaviour became somewhat confused and in itself led to a certain degree of fear. There are three occurrences of burn marks in the West Range which have been deliberately obscured by either chiselling away the charring (Fig. 8) or by filling in the shallow cavity with lime plaster. Perhaps the association with evil was all that was understood at a later stage in history, and the apotropaic attribution was no longer appreciated.

The Tower of London certainly began to achieve a grim reputation during the 16th and 17th centuries. The culture of fear may have had an effect on the residents of the Queen's House, leading to ritualised behaviour intended to bring some spiritual relief. Many high-profile political prisoners were housed in the building – the Bell Tower was where both Sir Thomas More and Bishop John Fisher were held prior to their executions. The corridor leading through the Queen's House to More's former chamber passes by the door, which has 15-20 burn marks on its framing (Fig. 9).

This door allows access into a windowless room which may once have also acted as a prison cell. It is intriguing to consider the possibility that the burn marks, only recorded on the inner face of the frame, may represent the prayers of the incarcerated or a purification of the space after its incumbent no longer required it.

In November 1605 the Powder Treason plotter Guy Fawkes was interrogated in the Council Chamber after his arrest at the Palace of Westminster. The torture and eventual execution of Fawkes adds yet another dark dimension to the architecture of the Queen's House. The feverishly paranoid days which followed the discovery of the Powder Treason plot also led to the ritual protection of another building 25 miles to the south-east.

King's Tower, Knole, Kent

A dense distribution of apotropaic symbols have been recorded in the first and second-floor chambers of the King's Tower at Knole (Fig. 10). The stone building originated as a mid-15th-century tower which was extensively remodelled in the spring and summer of 1606 as part of the transformation of Knole into a Renaissance Progress house by the Lord Treasurer and Earl of Dorset, Thomas Sackville. As a high-ranking member of James I's government, Sackville was hoping to engender further patronage for his family by attracting successful visitations by the king. The amenities offered by the tower and its accompanying apartments were intended to provide for James when in residence.



In the second-floor chamber there are 11 ritual protection marks (mesh patterns, interlocking-Vs and burn marks) on the north face of an underfloor beam (Figs. 1 and 11), placed directly opposite an early 17th-century fireplace (Fig. 12). The beam has been dated by dendrochronology to the winter of 1605²² and documentary analysis indicates that it was laid in the spring or summer of 1606.²³ A lightning design and double-V were also recorded on the jamb of the fireplace itself and two further double-Vs on the threshold of the door into the room. Later evidence for ritual protection comes from a mid-17th-century shoe deposited in the throat of the chimney itself. At first floor, in the King's Bedroom, several burn marks were found on the corresponding beam laid opposite the fireplace.

The apotropaic symbols on the second-floor beam were carved using a carpenter's rase knife during the construction process in 1606. Equally illuminating is the fact that the burn marks are horizontal to the timber, indicating that the beam was standing upright in the framing yard when the marks were administered. It seems that ritual protection was added by the carpenters in a planned system on-site under orders from Sackville's master carpenter Matthew Banks.²⁴

The marks created a zone of protection between the fireplaces and beds of the two chambers. The links between demonic possession and sleep have been made extensively. There was a belief that the devil would steal semen from dying or sleeping men to use during intercourse with witches.²⁵ Equally potent was the belief in the Old Hag or Night Mare, an incubus who would sit on the chest of a sleeper during the act of possession.²⁶

James I was a studious monarch known for his great interest in witchcraft. Following a perceived attempt on his life in 1590, he presided over the North Berwick witch trials and composed two tracts on the subject – *News From Scotland* and *Daemonologie*. The king then enshrined protective measures against witchcraft in law in 1604 when he decreed it to be a capital offence to summon spirits for the purpose of injuring people.²⁷ Despite this, James maintained a balanced opinion on the subject and helped to expose fraudulent claims of witchcraft in the trial of Anne Gunter at Oxford during the autumn-winter of 1605-6.²⁸

Fig. 10





Fig. 11



Fig. 12

A state of hypertension was created amongst all levels of English society by the discovery of the Powder Treason in November 1605. James controlled the official reaction, which included a rendition of his own personal interpretation of events to Parliament, public sermons by leading churchmen, the trials of the surviving plotters, published statements of those involved and patronage of plays obliquely dealing with the subject (such as *Macbeth*). An Oath of Allegiance was demanded of all English subjects in June 1606. Meanwhile, government statements were specific that the plot had been directed from Hell itself, including the attribution by Robert Cecil that it was an ‘*abominable practice of Rome and Satan*’.²⁹

The nation was whipped up into a frenzy of fear and hatred for witchcraft by a government bent on survival in the aftermath of a Catholic threat with a perceived demonic origin. Given that the beam in the King's Tower can be confidently dated as being laid during 1606, the cluster of apotropaic marks must be seen in the light of the national reaction to the Powder Treason. Whilst it is going too far to suggest that either James I or Thomas Sackville deliberately ordered the application of the ritual protection marks at Knole, it is entirely possible that the master carpenter Matthew Banks and his team of labourers were directly influenced by the widespread anxieties and propaganda. The dense distribution of ritual protection marks placed on a beam laid in the aftermath of the Powder Treason, in a building intended for use by a king known for his interest in witchcraft, is an altogether compelling juxtaposition.

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About our contributors

John Billingsley received an M.A. in Local History, Literature & Cultural Tradition at the University of Sheffield in 1992 for his thesis 'Archaic head-carving in West Yorkshire and beyond'. He taught Yorkshire Cultural Tradition as part of the Regional Studies course at Bradford University in the 1990s, and has published widely on related topics. Email: jgbillingsley52@gmail.com

Jeremy Harte is a researcher into folklore and archaeology, with a particular interest in landscape legends and tales of encounters with the inhabitants of other worlds. His book *Explore Fairy Traditions* won the Katharine Briggs award of the Folklore Society for 2005, and his other publications include *Cuckoo Pounds and Singing Barrows*, and *The Green Man*. He is curator of Bourne Hall Museum in Surrey, where he can be contacted at bhallmuseum@gmail.com

Brian Hoggard has been conducting independent research into the archaeology of folk beliefs since 1999. Over that time he has collected and mapped thousands of examples, many of which are reported via his website at www.apotropaios.co.uk. He is currently writing up his research for publication in the near future.

Dr Ceri Houlbrook is an Early Career Researcher at the University of Hertfordshire. She obtained a PhD in Archaeology in 2014, and is particularly interested in ethnographic history and the material culture of folklore and ritual, both past and present. You can contact her on c.houlbrook@herts.ac.uk

Dr. Sonja Hukantaival (PhD, University of Turku, Finland) specialises in the archaeology of folk religion. Her thesis, published in 2016, discusses concealed objects in buildings in Finland (<http://www.doria.fi/handle/10024/125606>). In addition to archaeological and ethnological finds, the study includes folklore about practices of ritual concealment. She is presently planning a project about the materiality of Finnish folk magic. Email: sonja.hukantaival@utu.fi

Jason Semmens read Egyptology at the University of Liverpool and gained his M.A. in 'The History and Literature of Witchcraft' at the University of Exeter. He also has an M.A. in Museum Studies from the University of Leicester, and is currently the Director of The Museum of Military Medicine, near Aldershot, Hampshire. He has published in peer-reviewed academic and local history journals, and lectures widely. Email: cornubiensis@aol.com

Linda Wilson is a retired solicitor with a lifelong interest in caves and caving. The study of French cave art gradually morphed into an interest in anything painted, engraved and written on cave walls, which has now extended to encompass ritual protection marks and old graffiti. She divides her time between Bristol and the Dordogne, and has been having fun finding the same type of marks over there. Email: lindawilson@coly.org.uk

James Wright is a doctoral researcher at the University of Nottingham. As a buildings archaeologist, he has conducted many studies of historic graffiti and the ritual protection of buildings at sites including Knole, the Tower of London, Warwick St Mary's and Tattershall Castle. Email: jpwarchaeology@hotmail.co.uk

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Hidden Charms 2

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