



Continuity of Worldviews in Anglo-Saxon England

The Twilight Age
Volume One

Bob Trubshaw

Considerable new scholarship in recent decades has shed much light on Anglo-Saxon England. In this pioneering study Bob Trubshaw approaches the history and archaeology of the era from the perspective of the underlying worldviews – the ideas that are ‘taken for granted’ in a society rather than consciously chosen.

By looking at the linguistic and iconographical evidence for these worldviews he shows that there is a surprising continuity from the pre-Christian era until about the tenth century. This viewpoint provides a new way of thinking about both early Christianity in Britain and the religion which it – to some extent – superseded.

About The Twilight Age series

Not that many decades ago English history between the fifth the eleventh centuries was deemed the 'Dark Ages', largely because of the lack of evidence.

Much has changed, and scholarship has shed considerable light on the later centuries. However, by then, many parts of Britain were evolving into Anglo-Scandinavian culture.

Evidence for the Anglo-Germanic fifth and sixth centuries is still scarce and difficult to interpret, so the epithet 'Dark Ages' is still apt. The years in between occupy a comparative 'twilight zone', fascinating because of numerous social changes, not least the various cultural transitions which ultimately led to Christianity being the dominant religion.

The period spanning the seventh and eighth centuries and, sometimes, the decades either side can be thought of as the 'Twilight Age'. This series of publications combines available evidence from archaeologists, historians and place-name scholars. This evidence is combined with a broader mix of paradigms than those usually adopted by early medievalists, including topography, cosmology, iconography and ethnography – especially current approaches to comparative religion.

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Heart of Albion

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Preface

For more than twenty years my main aim as a writer has been to popularise current academic thinking. Initially such writing was about archaeology but over the decades I have ventured into folklore, mythology, cultural studies and – most recently – early Chinese and ancient Greek philosophies. Above all, I have become increasingly interested in the ways of thinking which, in any society, underlie more conscious decisions about beliefs and ideologies.

Somewhere in the middle of this, and drawing also on history, linguistics and place-name studies, has been a long-standing interest in academics' ever-evolving understanding of Anglo-Saxon society. Previously I have rarely attempted to summarise the broader aspects of academic thinking. Instead I picked up on specific insights and wove such insights together to head off in directions where the academic authors of the ideas might, quite understandably, fear to tread. Just such 'adventures' form the basis of the later chapters of this study. But the opening chapters attempt a much broader overview. And, because few historians or archaeologists approach their subject matter from the perspective of underlying patterns of thinking then I also begin with a brief preamble that attempts to explain what I mean by 'worldviews'.

My aim is to write for a popular readership. However I am well aware that any such attempts require making assumptions about readers' prior knowledge. While any sort of generalisation is profoundly risky, I have become increasingly aware that people outside the relevant university departments – even those who have a genuine interest in Anglo-Saxon England – have rarely kept up with the substantial shifts in how academic historians and archaeologists now view the era once termed the 'Dark Ages' but which, as a result of their combined efforts, now seems – at least in parts – comparatively well-illuminated. In part this lack of awareness is because modern day academe offers no 'Brownie points' for making recent research available to a wider public – and many of the denizens of the academy, for understandable reasons, feel that any attempt to offer an overview is too intimidating. While a few television programmes – not least those of Michael Wood – have shared academic awareness with the public, the simple fact is that a sixty-minute documentary can convey fewer ideas than even one chapter of a book.

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So the first three chapters of this study look at just a few of these changes in understanding of the Anglo-Saxon era. The literature I draw upon is vast and I make no claims to have explored all the papers published in an ever-increasing number of peer-reviewed journals. However I have attempted to read the more major contributions published as books (although not all are specifically cited). An attempt to summarise all the key aspects of those books would result in a massive tome. So these opening chapters are anything but a comprehensive summary. Instead they draw attention to a 'sample' of the issues. This is not a random sample but, rather, an attempt to selectively set the stage for the subsequent chapters.

Despite the vast academic literature about the conversion to Christianity in Europe generally and Britain more specifically, the relevant sources are tantalisingly brief and written from the perspective of evangelical proselytising so reveal little about what the churchmen are converting people *from*. And, as will be explored later, even when we think these sources are giving us some clues, that information may simply be generic rather than a reflection of what was actually happening. Nevertheless by adopting a number of perspectives largely ignored by historians we can identify more about what people in the early Christian era did or thought – and, more especially, simply assumed.

I hope that by providing these overly-selective – although still rather distended – introductory chapters then my subsequent discussions will make a little more sense to those whose knowledge of early medieval England was largely formed from the small number of books about the period available in the 1960s to 1980s. However if you want to skip through the first three chapters and go straight to the 'meat and gravy' in Chapter Four onwards then just go ahead.

Bob Trubshaw

Avebury

September 2013

Preface to the 2016 edition

This study was written and initially published as a stand-alone work. Over the next two years the key ideas became the basis of many of the articles published on a website called Anglo-Saxon Twilight; (www.indigogroup.co.uk/twilight) and several other PDF 'booklets'. At the beginning of 2016 I decided to make a revamped version into the first of an ongoing series of PDF booklets with the overall title of The Twilight Age; the prelims to this work include a 'mission statement' about the series.

Making this work the first volume in The Twilight Age series reflects the chronological sequence in which these studies were researched. More importantly, all of the subsequent studies develop, in various ways, the insights into continuity of worldviews explored here. I hope the later works in the series make adequate sense even if this study has not been read, but many of the remarks will gain additional depth and significance.

The three chapters of the first edition which discussed carvings have been deleted. These now form the basis of Volume Three of The Twilight Age series, *Continuity of Anglo-Saxon Iconography*. Chapter Five is entirely new to this edition. Many other changes have been made, reflecting how my ideas have been developed while researching and writing more recent works.

Bob Trubshaw
Avebury
January 2016

Front cover and next page: *'Madonna and Child' by Peter Eugene Ball.*
Photographed while on loan to Southwell Cathedral July 2008.



Chapter One

Understanding worldviews

If we want to understand the deeper aspects of Anglo-Saxon thinking – what I call for convenience ‘worldviews’ – then first we need to have a fairly clear idea about how such worldviews are expressed in what people think and do. We also need to have some clear ideas about how such worldviews change. Overtly this study attempts to better understand the changes and continuities in Anglo-Saxon thinking during the transition from ‘paganism’ to early Christianity. However, for reasons that will become clearer, we need to resist seeing this simply as a change in religion. We must confront assumptions about religion and, more especially, assumptions about change.

So, before I start to look at Anglo-Saxon outlooks, a closer look at what I mean by ‘worldviews’ is needed. The term is less about an individual’s religious choices and inclinations than the ideas shared by a group of people which subliminally underpin more consciously-held beliefs. Mostly ‘worldviews’ are the assumptions about ‘the way things are’ that people living in that society are not consciously aware could be anything different – although to someone outside the society the ‘weirdness’ of those assumptions may be highly conspicuous.

We are not consciously aware of our worldviews so the ways in which they change are usually incremental. Even when contact with other cultures introduces novel ideas which are profoundly different, there are recognisable processes of absorption. Although, as I will demonstrate, there are plenty of secular counterparts, such processes of blending ideas are most commonly studied as changes in religion beliefs and customs.

Religions are seemingly conservative. Part of the mythos of the major creeds is that they date back a millennia or more. Most creeds have a canonical literature which ostensibly ‘fossilises’ the worldview. In practice, continual evolution is the order of the day. Exceptionally there are seismic shifts – the Reformation in Western Europe is perhaps the most obvious example. But a quick skim through the history of just one prominent post-Reformation denomination – the Church of

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England – reveals how the preaching-dominated clergy of the eighteenth century gave way rapidly to a liturgically-revitalised ‘Anglo-Catholicism’ as the Oxford Movement generated radical change in almost every parish in little more than thirty years during the mid-nineteenth century. This in turn yielded to the entirely different approach of the Scripture Movement as that century drew towards its end. The increasing secularism of the twentieth century was counter-balanced by factions within the Church of England (largely inspired by other Nonconformist denominations, themselves influenced by Afro-Caribbean immigrants to Britain in the 1960s and 70s) becoming more proselytising, evangelical, and ‘happy clappy’ – often, although not necessarily, associated with a belief that biblical texts should be interpreted as literal truths. At the same time, the ‘smells and bells’ fraternity of the Church of England sustained quite different ideals of liturgical practice rooted in the seventeenth century Book of Common Prayer – which itself was quite closely based on one set of pre-Reformation practices (the Rite of Sarum). And all that in just one denomination of one religion in one country.

And yet, for all the changes in liturgy (what people *do*), the underlying beliefs (what people *think*) have a greater inertia. Staying with the Church of England, at the time of writing the senior clergy are deeply divided over such issues as women bishops and same-sex marriages. We are asked to understand that these are underlying issues of faith and doctrine, not – as first impressions might suggest – a predilection for misogyny and homophobia.

In practice what people *do* and what people *think* are only two zones of a much wider spectrum. What people *do* spans both the formal liturgy – the Book of Common Prayer, for example – and the much greater diversity of informal practices. These are often specific to an individual church and verge on being deemed ‘folk traditions’. Mark Lewis has compiled a rather wonderful book about popular customs of the English church, called *Days and Rites*, which provides all the detail about that aspect of contemporary Christianity.

What people *think* spans what they consciously chose to think and believe – whether to be Anglicans rather than Catholics or Baptists or Pentecostals, say, or even whether to be to Christian at all rather than a Zen Buddhist, a Tibetan Buddhist, a Krishna devotee, a Wiccan or whatever. Yet worldviews also incorporate all manner of rarely-recognised ideas which underpin these more consciously-held beliefs.

Myths are like spectacles

Yes, we are simply not fully aware of what we think and believe! If you find that somewhat difficult to comprehend then let me explain. These deep-seated beliefs and assumptions structure how we think about everything in the world. They could be referred to as the 'deep structures' of a culture. More commonly they are referred to as 'myths' because, at least in traditional societies, it is by retelling myths that these fundamental ideas are remembered, reinforced and renewed. Changes are possible but almost certainly they are incremental and evolutionary rather than revolutionary.

There are plenty of examples of ideas in modern society which are transmitted mythically, except that we don't think of them as myths. A complex, but recognisable, worldview is transmitted by Hollywood films. So recognisable, that parodies of the life styles of 'squeaky clean' families where white Protestants are more privileged than other ethnicities or faiths are commonplace. Most aspects of politics can be approached as examples of 'myths in action'. Perhaps more surprisingly, the same can be said for much of modern science, despite raucous refutations to the contrary from the denizens of a worldview which deems itself to have access to 'the truth' – even though that truth may change its appearance greatly from one generation to the next.

Nearly ten years ago I wrote an overview of myths in the modern world, *The Myths of Reality*, under the pseudonym Simon Danser. In the introductory remarks I explain this 'hidden' sense of myth using a metaphor I encountered in the writing of Christopher Flood:

Myths may be thought of as akin to the lenses of spectacles. When we are wearing spectacles we do not see the lenses. We see *with them*. In the same way myths impart a worldview that is taken for granted. Only when we take off a pair of spectacles do we see the lenses. Only when we step back and think about myths can we begin to see how they shape what we think of as reality. The underlying 'assumptions' and structures presented (and, more typically, challenged and redefined) in myths provide the 'deep structures' underpinning the thinking of a society, or culture, or subculture.

(Danser 2003: 9)

In *The Myths of Reality* I discuss in some detail how myths are transmitted in contemporary society – almost always in a somewhat fragmentary form which merely alludes to a ‘bigger picture’ – and provide numerous examples.

What is a worldview?

However in this study, rather than refer to this underpinning as ‘deep structures’ or ‘myths’ I will use the somewhat vaguer term ‘worldview’, an English word which is the literal translation of the German *Weltanschauung*, (*welt* ‘world’, *anschauung* ‘perception’). Intriguingly the Old English word *weorold* – the precursor to the Modern English word ‘world’ – has something of the same sense of ‘worldview’ in that it refers not only to the physical world but also to ‘way of life’ and ‘human life over a long period of time’. *Weorold* has the same sense as when ‘world’ is used to encompass both perceived reality and our culturally constructed social reality.

Inevitably there is some ambiguity about what might make up a ‘worldview’ so here is my version. Academics would simply refer to the whole of this list as a ‘cosmology’ – the structure of the ‘cosmos’, which denotes something greater than ‘world’ and certainly much more than ‘the world of mankind’. Confusingly astrophysicists adopted the word ‘cosmology’ when they meant ‘cosmogony’ – the origins of the cosmos. I will use these ‘c-’ words as little as possible but always in the sense used by academic mythographers and ethnographers

Ask mythographers and ethnographers what they mean by ‘cosmology’ and you may get somewhat different answers. But they will broadly agree that a culture’s cosmology spans such ideas as how we imagine space and time, how we think the human realm is distinct – if at all – from the realms of the gods and other Otherworldly entities; how men, women and children should interact; how to show respect to the dead; what sort of foods are suitable to eat, how they should be cooked, and who they should be eaten with; how the culture interacts with other cultures; and so forth – even the ideas about how everything came into existence and how it all will end.

At first glance many of these seem to be ideas expressed through religious beliefs. But religion is, from this perspective, only one way in which such cosmologies are expressed and acted out. Almost the same cosmology can support a range of seemingly diverse religions. Hinduism and Buddhism, along with Sikhism and a number of other faiths, all share broadly the same cosmology. Likewise Jews, Christians and Moslems all share an underlying cosmology. Of course, to a follower of any of these faiths there are profound differences between, say



The Annunciation: the Archangel Gabriel and a seemingly non-consensual Mary. For added iconographical interest the Tree of Jesse is shown between them on this late twelfth century tympanum from the church of San Juan at Portomarín in north-western Spain.

The Feast of the the Annunciation is also known as 'Lady Day' and is the start of the liturgical year, with Christmas following at the winter solstice nine months later. Allowing for calendar reforms, Lady Day remains the start of the financial year for Britain and many other countries. Before these reforms the feast coincided with the spring equinox.

Although almost ignored now, the birth of St John the Baptist falls at the summer solstice, with his conception once celebrated around the time of the autumn equinox. This neat 'quarter day' calendar evolved into one where the feast of St Michael replaced the conception of St John.

Hinduism and Buddhism or Christianity and Islam. But no matter how radical the specific differences seem, far more is shared at the deeper levels which we usually fail to consciously recognise.

What sort of cosmological ideas go deeper than religious beliefs? Well, we rarely think about how we construct notions of space and time. Indeed, to even suggest that these ideas are ‘constructed’ seems perverse. And yet the idea that the ‘future is in front of us’ or that time is a one-time-only linear progression rather than cyclical are both examples of Western cosmologies. There are plenty of non-Western societies which think of the future as something unknown and largely unknowable, something they can never see clearly or directly – so it is thought of as being *behind them*. And, apart from the West, nearly all other societies think of time as cyclical, albeit the cycles may be of many millennia. But a moment’s thought reveals that even we in the West still live our lives according to a cyclical model of time – I am typing these paragraphs shortly before Easter, although you might be reading them at Midsummer or Midwinter. Both the Christian calendar and the secular agrarian calendar operate on an annual cycle, itself dictated by the sun. Within the solar cycle the lunar cycle is marked by ‘months’ – a word which betrays its origins, even though the Roman calendar long since broke functional connections with the phases of the moon.

The entire life of Christ is ritually re-enacted during the course of a year. The key event, Easter, is celebrated according to the lunar cycle, as this commemorates events which took place at the Jewish feast of Passover, which – as with most Jewish feast days – follows the lunar cycle. Many of the feasts which go with the Christian liturgical year ‘adopt’ key times in the farming year, although as the Church blended in with key times from both agrarian and pastoral societies this agrarian cycle is not as clearly visible as might be expected. So while Western people *think* that time starts way back when and proceeds linearly into the indefinite future, they *live* in a world where remnants of complex annual cycles – solar, lunar, agrarian and ideological – structure their lives.

The myths of knowing

If you want to follow this back even further then a worldview or cosmology also encompasses how we think we know – what philosophers call ‘epistemology’. Worldviews also encompass the ‘consequences’ of knowing. In the West admitting to knowing something – ‘expressing an idea’ – may have practical consequences. These may be prosaic (‘Darling, I think the sofa should be moved a little further away from the wall...’) or profound (‘At Zero Dark Thirty the Black Hawks will reach the compound and the SEALs will disembark and commence the main phase of the operation...’). But mostly we in the West can have an idea

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Left: *Sir Francis Bacon*. Right: *Michel Foucault*.

'for its own sake', an abstract idea if you like. Much less so in, say, China. There an idea is much more a 'call to action'. Hence the reason publishing something critical of Chinese political leaders is perceived to be activism in a way that Westerners find hard to appreciate. Expressing criticisms of politicians is part of life here – but we know our grumbles are unlikely to have any effect. Indeed one of the insidious assumptions of anglophone democracies since the 1980s is that 'opposition is futile' – while debates are deemed necessary they are not allowed to have practical consequences. Online petitions abound but few achieve their desired outcomes. We would benefit from the Chinese worldview where complaining is a call for action, not a waft of hot air blown away in the breezes of pseudo-democracy.

Worldviews also determine who has the right to define what is known. As people as varied as Sir Francis Bacon, Samuel Johnson, Thomas Jefferson and Michel Foucault have observed, knowledge is power. Less famously Foucault also observed that the mirror image of this is also true: those with power determine what is known and who can know it. Peer-reviewed academic journals are the most obvious epistemological gatekeepers, but in reality all editors and publishers act in a similar manner.

Knowledge will always be contested. Politicians, by the nature of their trade, need to assert that they know what is right for us at any given time – but, conspicuously, argue among themselves and with other 'stakeholders' in industry and the media about what changes are needed, if any. Their track record means many people are profoundly sceptical of politicians' abilities to understand anything sufficiently well. But that cynicism is so widespread as to be part of the

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Western worldview. Modern politicians encourage the electorate to feel powerless – the insidious ‘there is no alternative’ trope of Margaret Thatcher’s era that has yet to be superseded.

Less conspicuously academics debate among themselves the ‘truth’ of their own interpretations. Those with more post-modern worldviews are convinced that there is no truth and instead debate the best way of negotiating the abyss of outright relativism. But what is rarely discussed is the right of academics to have the clearest understanding. The Western worldview is far less cynical about universities being the places where knowledge is best transmitted and transmuted.

But pause for a moment and think of the days before the plethora of universities in Britain. Before even the ‘red bricks’ founded in the twentieth century. The small number of long-established universities are all, to some degree or another, the successors to pre-Reformation centres of learning. Not that long ago, to be elected a Fellow at Cambridge or Oxford required taking holy orders – Isaac Newton caused a furore by refusing. Indeed, it is only in recent times that entrants to Oxford and Cambridge stopped having to be practising Anglicans – these universities excluded both Nonconformists and Catholics, effectively denying them access to professions such as the law. In other words, access to real knowledge was only unlocked to those with the right key – membership of a specific religious denomination.

Collectively, contemporary academics are awarded the same infallible authority previously co-opted by the clergy. They are, in quite fundamental ways, the successors to the monastic cults of the Middle Ages. Both transmit the breadth of knowledge and understanding of their societies, and both have an uncritical presumption of their own inherent supremacy.

Does it matter? Someone will always be ‘top dog’. Indeed, it could be said that as a non-academic author I have an axe to grind. Actually, no, as my intentions are primarily to popularise aspects of current academic thinking. Even where I add my own interpretations I have little expectation that they will influence relevant academics. They are unlikely to become aware of my ideas because they will not be published by an academic imprint or reviewed in an academic journal. But even if they are accidentally encountered, say via Google, then they will be deemed ‘grey literature’, the term used for ideas which have not been subjected to peer review, and thereby made ‘safe’ (it is optimistically believed, against all the evidence) for incorporation in the canonical corpus. Independent scholars might, at best, bring ‘alterity’ but are usually treated in the same way medieval clergy treated heretics. Which, at least from the self-privileging worldview of academe, independent scholars undoubtedly are...

Knowing the Otherworld

Let us shift our attention to other aspects of worldviews, such as the distinction between humans and their souls, and between spirits and deities. Ethnographers have revealed many ways of making a distinction between souls, spirits and deities. Each is indisputably an example of a worldview. So, while post-Reformation Western thinking tends to place souls and spirits more-or-less together while regarding deities as something fairly distinct, this worldview would cause untold confusion among most traditional societies who see souls as something quite distinct from spirits and deities – while not necessarily being able to articulate a consistent distinction between spirits and deities.

Western secular society deems some or all of these to be ‘imaginary’ – although a surprisingly high proportion of Americans and Europeans believe (in some manner or another) in angels – while distinguishing angels from souls, spirits or deities. In addition to those who have a belief in angels we might add those who believe in the reality of the ‘fair folk’, or ghosts, or assorted phantom or mythical animals. Whether we believe such entities to be real – and whether they are real in this world or an Otherworld, such as heaven, hell or purgatory – is the basis for countless variations and debates. So too how such entities are related to each, and in what hierarchical order, is also down to doctrinal creeds or individual preference. Souls, spirits and deities are discussed in detail in Volume Two of The Twilight Age series.

Each one of these beliefs is a valid example of what a philosopher would call an ‘ontological view’. The word ‘ontology’ comes from the Greek for ‘that which is’. Wikipedia will enlighten you on the key issues and even offers links to a rather impressive number of ‘prominent ontologists’. In this study my emphasis will be on ‘comparative ontology’. As later chapters will reveal, Anglo-Saxon England offers few examples of *contrasting* ontologies but instead offers examples of *continuity* of ontologies, even where contrariety might be expected.

The ‘book ends’ of time

While religions themselves transmit worldviews and are underpinned by deeper worldviews, they do not have a monopoly on them. A common trait of human societies is to have an answer to the questions ‘How did everything begin?’ and ‘How will it all end?’ Most religions offer an answer – indeed the Bible opens with the creation of the world in the opening chapters of *Genesis*, and closes with the apocalyptic events of *Revelations*. An entirely different cosmogony and eschatology is preserved in the Scandinavian poem known as *Völuspá*. One of the



Late eleventh century depiction of Cain and Abel. Ivory panel from the cathedral of Salerno, Italy.

few things that *Revelations* and *Völuspá* have in common is that both are works of prophecy – the Biblical account is from a prophet known as St John the Divine (with the sense of 'divinatory' as well as 'related to deity'), while *Völuspá* is from an unnamed seeress.

Unlike most traditional cosmogonies, the biblical cosmos seemingly comes into being from nothing. *Völuspá* combines several common motifs – before there was anything there was only fire and ice, followed by the dismemberment of a primordial giant whose bones become mountains, his blood becomes rivers, his eyes become the sun and moon, his hair becomes trees, and so forth. As someone needs to do this dismemberment then he has a primordial twin. In the Scandinavian myth these twins are created from the ice by a primordial cow, an account which has curious parallels with the role of a primordial cow in Ancient Egyptian cosmogony.

The primordial twins are reduced to a 'cameo appearance' in *Genesis* as they become the sons of the primordial couple (who do not dismember each other – although a vestige of the idea is present in the statement that Eve was created from a rib of Adam) so the significance of their son Cain slaying his sibling Abel ceases to have cosmogonic importance.

Fun as it is to spot the reworking of the same fundamental mythic ideas in different cultures, we rarely spot the same fundamental myths in our own society. But rather than list numerous examples from the world's major religions, instead

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let us stop and look at the lenses through which modern secular society 'book ends' the present day.

Actually, let's stop first in the 1950s. Back then astrophysicists held unswerving beliefs that the universe was, fundamentally at least, in a 'steady state' and had been so for all time. We can spot the origins of this myth in Plato's Ideas, invented over two millennia previously, fully reactivated in the Enlightenment and still underpinning much of modern science. Scientists in the fifties had yet to question that the universe was inherently rational and ordered – indeed many today still cling to this counter-factual myth promoted by Zeno and other ancient Greek philosophers.

In the fifties the expectations of a 'messy ending' were there too – a real fear of a Third World War which would unleash a 'nuclear winter' that few people, if any, would survive. Both these 'book ends' of time now seem rather dated – although both still have some proponents. In has come a 'Big Bang' origin (out of either an original 'nothing' or a recycled previous universe) and a great many people in the West fear that humanity will be subsumed by the excesses of consumption – which are, in large part, caused by an 'excess' of people. Apocalyptic effects of climate change are regarded as unequivocal, even if the how's and why's are imagined by a endless variety of prophets.

The origin of these 'damned into eternity' tropes are easy to recognise. In many Protestant churches every Sunday sermons were preached about the congregation being miserable sinners who need to repent or face the wrath of God in the afterlife. So pervasive has such ideology been over the last few hundred years that secularised modern society never questions such self-deprecating worldviews. Climate change, and all the desertification that goes with, is the just desserts for a 'sinfully' over-consuming capitalist society. Even the idea that the universe might be a recycled former universe fits in with the mood of the times.

If you think I'm stretching things a little too far then read a book published by two academic archaeologists in 1992 called *Easter Island, Earth Island: A message from our past for the future of our planet* (Bahn and Flenley 1992). Actually just jump to the chase and read a wonderful critique of this and other apocalyptic tropes in archaeology by Kathryn Denning (Denning 1999). As Denning beautifully describes, academics are by no means exempt from providing examples of pervasive worldviews colouring the interpretation of their field of study. Adam Stout has also looked at the way the 1930s excavations of the Neolithic and Iron Age earthworks at Maiden Castle in Dorset were interpreted in a manner entirely consistent with the sentiments of the approaching Second World War (Stout 2008).

The eschatological seers employed by the mass media are now channelling notions of a mutation of the influenza virus which would cause more deaths than the Spanish Flu epidemic of nearly a hundred years ago. [Which indeed came to pass in 2020.] Other white-coated prophets of doom foresee superbugs resistant to all known antibiotics which will make common respiratory illnesses fatal, currently routine abdominal operations exceptionally risky, and transform a mere cut on the finger into a life-threatening incident. All of which may be real risks – but bugs and bacteria predate human evolution by quite a few aeons and we've made it this far...

Comparing and contrasting worldviews of change

One aspect of worldviews pertinent to this study is how we think of change. Do you think of everything as continually changing? Or do you think of the cosmos as inherently stable? The former is the worldview of Chinese culture and early Greek philosophers such as Heraclitus (my extended essay *The Process of Reality* discusses this in more detail (Trubshaw 2012b)). The stable worldview seeming comes into being with Plato and his concepts of timeless Ideals and Essences. The Enlightenment thinkers brought Platonism back to the foreground. And for many people, including a great many scientists, this idea of a fundamentally stable reality still uncritically underpins their worldviews. This is not to say that societies never change, just that they do so within unchanging 'bounds'.

These uncritical views about the fundamental nature of everything also extend to thinking that the universe is inherently rational. This is also a product of early Greek thinking – here Zeno gets most of the credit, although he was following slightly earlier precedents. Most societies would, with some justification, consider that this suggestion flies in the face of all the evidence. Their worldview is that the cosmos is inherently irrational, except for the controlling 'forces' of the deities. This is indeed largely the Hebraic worldview which underpins the Old Testament. The curious blend of the Jewish Yahweh-ordered cosmos and the Greek inherently-ordered cosmos which come together in the New Testament leads to an ambiguous Christian worldview about the ordering principle of the cosmos.

Marxists famously saw change as a dialectical process of 'thesis', 'antithesis' and 'synthesis'. Those who study the history of religions would note that the smooth synthesis of ideas is much rarer than the combining of somewhat contradictory worldviews, which they term 'syncretism'. Syncretism has been described as what results when two worldviews crash into each other. A good example is the attempt to bring together Jewish and Greek ideas about the nature of the cosmos mentioned in the previous paragraph, although there are plenty more examples in the New Testament.

But is even such a nuanced version of dialectical processes more than just a distorting mirror? We cannot help but compare and contrast ideas. Indeed, making distinctions is fundamental to human cognition. Making a distinction is primary to perception, as Gestalt psychologists have demonstrated. It is also key to most conceptual thinking. Even relativistic terms such as ‘up’ and ‘down’ or ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ are simplified into an opposed pair. Similarly, in recent centuries Western democracies have tried hard to polarise political opinions into a ‘two-party’ system. We think in terms of Christianity being a split from Judaism, down-playing the input of other faiths. And, most relevant to this study, we think of a simple dualism between pre-Christian ‘paganism’ and post-conversion beliefs.

While making a distinction is the first step towards any recognition, and binary pairings are the first step, this simply leads into the deep pitfalls of structuralist thinking. Whether binary, tripartite or whatever level of complexity is envisaged, these are only academics’ models of reality, not reality itself. Dialectical processes add some ‘action’ to these models. But in the end we should not confuse a model of a car – no matter how many motors and moving parts it has – with a real car.

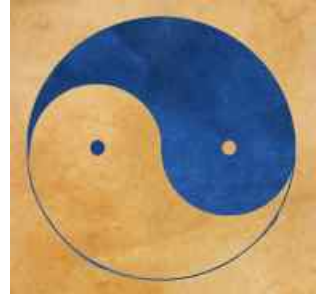
Paganism is a Christian concept

As this study will go on to show, any notions of a simple dualism between ‘paganism’ and early Christianity are illusory. Note that I am using the word ‘paganism’ in scare-quotes – that too is a concept which unduly over-simplifies a much more fragmentary reality. As I will discuss in more detail below, the word *paganismus* was invented by early church leaders to refer to the religion of villagers. Taken literally – the Latin *pagus* (villagers) and the Greek *-ism* (system of belief) – it means the ‘system of belief of the villagers’. However, as we will see, all the evidence is that there was no formal ‘system of belief’ so in a very real sense the concept of ‘paganism’ is a purely Christian invention, a convenient label to stand alongside Judaism and Christianity (both of which terms then embraced, and continue to embrace, a wide variety of different ways of being Jewish or Christian). Over a millennium later Jesuit missionaries in India invented the word ‘Hinduism’ for exactly the same reasons: to give a label to the disparate practices of the people of the Indus. Only later, with the advent of Indian nationalism in the later nineteenth century, did Indians begin to use the term ‘Hindusim’ to refer to their own customary practices.

Once invented the word ‘paganism’ took on a life of its own. Most writers explicitly or implicitly use it with the derogatory sense of the ‘religion of the country bumpkins’, in contrast to Christianity which was, for many centuries, essentially an urban cult. However Ken Dowden has suggested that, initially at least, *paganismus* was less derogatory and had the sense of the ‘religion of the

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Within Chinese culture, which is profoundly monoist, this symbol denotes the quintessential unity of creation which transcends arbitrary distinctions. Western culture, which is essentially dualist, recognises the yin and yang but rarely the unity.



villages’ rather than ‘villager’s’. In other words it was the ‘religion of the place’, a more accurate description of the diversity of local practices. As such it is remarkably close to the sense of ‘the religion of the Indus (people)’– Hinduism.

Once Christianity began to make inroads in rural areas it adapted. The historical sources – all written by clerics – suggest that Christianity ‘accommodated’ local pre-Christian practices. Much has been made of relevant sections of Bede’s account of the conversion of the English, and there are counterparts for other regions of Europe. But, as scholars have been steadily revealing since the early 1990s, a more nuanced understanding of the evidence would suggest that far from ‘accommodating paganism’, Christianity was effectively ‘paganised’ – at least in what the congregations did rather than what the clergy instructed them to believe. I will flesh out this bare-bones remark later in this study.

How did people at the time of conversion see things? A difficult question to answer, but – despite all assumptions in recent centuries – plausible options do not include dualistic opposition. Thomas O’Loughlin, in an elegant study of St Patrick, considers that many early Christians saw paganism as a flawed precursor, and made perfect by the Gospel (O’Loughlin 1999: 33–4). In other words, paganism was ‘redeemed’ by *adding* the Christian creed, not by being dismissed as an ‘excluded other’.

So, if there is no inherent dualism between pre- and post-conversion attitudes, then there can be no simplistic dialectical process either, no matter whether regarded as a synthesis or a syncretism. So in this study be prepared to see continuity of worldviews where simple dualisms might be expected, and be prepared to see changes within one half of such supposed oppositions, in response to those continuities. No, I know I’m not making much sense. But I hope the discussions in the rest of this study offer some examples of these ‘changed ideas about change’ manifested.

Chapter Two

The Dark Ages in the spotlight

So many words and, so far, a near-absence of Anglo-Saxons. Rather than pursue other examples of modern day worldviews and the ways we look ‘through them’ rather than ‘at them’ I will now focus on examples from Anglo-Saxon England. But first we need to renew our acquaintance with the people who lived in Anglo-Saxon England.

Only a few decades ago the whole era between the early fifth century – when the Roman administration and army packed its bags and went home – until the Norman Conquest in 1066 seemed difficult to fathom. Not for nothing was it known as the ‘Dark Ages’. A few books in the 1950s and 60s tried to make sense of this era. In the absence of any alternatives they became very popular and remain influential outside academe.

More recent scholarship suggests that in the parts of the British Isles which had been under Roman administration about three-quarters of the population ‘disappeared’ in the decades after the Roman withdrawal. Some no doubt found a new life on the Continent. But all the evidence is that in most parts of what we now think of as England there was a dramatic collapse of society. While the direct evidence is lacking – and the absence of evidence is itself one of the clues – the most reasonable scenario is of a population who were either themselves starving or suffering the depredations of other people desperate to steal food. Those that didn’t die were at high risk of being enslaved and shipped abroad.

On the margins of the former Roman empire – notably the Welsh Marches – a few local ‘war lords’ managed to sustain a semblance of order. They looked back to the days of the Roman Empire fondly and attempted, so much as they could, to sustain that lifestyle. Like all ‘Golden Ages’ the Roman era was probably better in selective memories – legends and such like – than it had been in reality. Archaeologists have discovered evidence of this post-Roman lifestyle – dubbed *romanitas* (Latin for ‘Roman-ness’) – at the Roman town of Wroxter and elsewhere. And, if archaeologists ever discover evidence for someone akin to King

Arthur, then in all probability those remains will share the same traits of *romanitas*.

While the period immediately after the Romans went is still, by and large, something of a puzzle, from the sixth century onwards archaeologists and historians have been shining an increasingly bright spotlight on what was once deemed the Dark Ages. We now have an increasingly clear view of where people were living and what they doing. There's only one problem. Most of these new insights contradict, to a greater or lesser extent, what was written in the 1950s and 60s. So, outside the relevant academic departments, most of what people think they know about Anglo-Saxons is – to a greater or lesser extent – wrong.

Most of what we know about Anglo-Saxon England comes, predictably enough, from archaeologists and historians. But a surprising amount of 'social history' has been discerned by circumspect study of place-names. Archaeologists have begun to shed more light than might be expected on both the material culture of the period and also on beliefs, as the next chapter will summarise. Historians can tell us in reasonable detail how literate people thought. But the only people who were literate at the time were, with a few exceptions, ordained clergy. While historians attempt to make some inferences about what people thought who were 'less Christian' – the laity and the unconverted – clearly such inferences are open to debate. One of the most productive sources for making such inferences turns out to be the survival of descriptive place-names.

Imaginary paganism

To highlight just how much ideas have changed, let's just take the briefest of looks at one of the more influential authors from a couple of generations ago. In 1958 Brian Branston brought together everything that could reasonably be said about Anglo-Saxon paganism in a book called *The Lost Gods of England*. In the absence of any real alternative it shaped popular opinion – mine included – for the next three or more decades. However what could be reasonably said in the 1950s turns out to be almost entirely flawed. Simple and straightforward as Branston's account is, the reality was much less simple and straightforward. By the end of this study you will have a good many ideas why.

One of the biggest problems with Branston's approach is that he envisages we can understand English paganism by extrapolating the Scandinavian sagas. As Stephen Pollington has described in his book *The Elder Gods*, there is a complex relationship between the English deities Woden and Thor and their Scandinavian counterparts Óðinn and Þórr. Simplest to say that one pair is not the 'ancestor' of

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Anglo-Saxon pagans as conceived by Brian Branston. Well, almost...

the other pair but rather that all four are the result of complex cultural interchange during the ninth to eleventh centuries – and part of that ‘interchange’ is the influence of early Christianity on pre-Christian religion.

When, Penda, king of the Mercians died in 655 he was the last of the regional kings to be pagan. By the time the Vikings started settling, just over two centuries later, English people had been thinking of themselves as Christian for well over a hundred years. Quite what ‘thinking of themselves as Christian’ means will be explored later but for the moment note that these Viking settlers quickly lost their pagan ways and assimilated into Christian society. If we presume that there was a big shift in outlook between being pagan and being Christian then such a swift and ‘effortless’ conversion seems rather curious. But if, as this study will show, there was no such big shift in outlook then this assimilation is far less problematical.

Before the English were Christian they were of course ‘pagan’. Quite what this means will be explored later also. Clearly they did not call themselves ‘pagans’ – the word ‘pagan’ enters the language as a derogatory term used by Christians to refer to other peoples’ beliefs (and is still often used that way). As already suggested – and I will discuss this in greater detail later – at the very least we should not think of a homogenous ‘paganism’ but, rather, of a local diversity of ‘paganisms’ with some common aspects of practice and belief.

Branston, perhaps understandably for the time when he was writing, fails to recognise that pre-Christian religions were not ‘top down’ so never could be as homogenous as Christianity (which, in practice, is not – and never has been –

homogenous despite a hierarchical system of authority). More crucially, Branston fails to recognise that British paganism was not 'imported' from Scandinavia. Home-grown Romano-British practices had blended with the various north German traditions brought across the North Sea by *foederati* serving in the Roman army and subsequently the Angles, Saxons, Jutes and Frisians. Yes, there were broad similarities. But there were also significant differences. And it is these north European worldviews which we must seek out, even if most of the historical sources are Scandinavian.

A seminal work of scholarship was published in 1994 under the title *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*. The author, James Russell, set out to show that early Christianity in northern Europe had a number of substantial differences to the Christianity of Rome and the Mediterranean. The reason, as he carefully argued, was that local traditions – pre-Christian practices – deeply influenced how the Christian missionaries adapted their faith to the north European converts. In total these influences and adaptations were so extensive and profound that they amounted to the 'Germanization' of Christianity. Had Russell wished to be more provocative he could have called his book *The Paganization of Early Medieval Christianity*.

Russell's discussions are, as would be expected from an academic, quite nuanced and, as a result, difficult to accurately summarise. Firstly, he identified Germanic culture having a two-fold influence on the new faith. Secondly, he does not regard north European paganism as blending smoothly with Mediterranean Christianity. On the contrary, there are some very fundamental differences. For example, Christianity requires conformity to doctrinal belief whereas there is no evidence that paganism did. This would lead to the later medieval 'obsession with salvation and fear of hell'. Thirdly, there was a lengthy 'transitional period'. He agrees with a previous scholar, Lynn White, that not until the precursors to parish churches began to be commonplace in the tenth century 'did the new religion begin to modify the minds and emotions of most men.'

Indeed in some senses Russell's arguments are not original. A continuity between pre-Christian and Christian practices had been identified by a number of previous authors (for examples several contributors to Pearce 1982). Russell himself draws upon some of this prior work. What his research achieves is identifying fairly clearly the extent to which Christianity adapted to – rather than merely 'absorbed' – existing local practices. Because these were *local* then historical sources are rare and difficult to pin down. And such local practices contrast with what might be expected from a more hierarchical 'top down' Christianity. However, as I will explain shortly, such expectations do not fit the evidence.

Most of Russell's arguments are based on evidence from northern Europe, simply because there is more evidence to use – although even so it is decidedly patchy. But the broad issues are reflected in Anglo-Saxon England too. In some senses the whole of this study could be regarded as a footnote to Russell's work – although I would aver that my interest is one level deeper, the worldviews which underpin expressions of religious faith. But I will readily accept that there is no fundamental distinction between Russell's discussions and my own, other than that I draw upon additional evidence which he had no reason to consider.

In the two decades since Russell's book appeared there have been no attempts by fellow scholars to undermine his overall approach – which is not to say that some of the specific examples have not been picked over in the pedantic manner associated with academe. His work is still frequently cited by historians. And, in Chapter Three, I will look at how archaeologists have begun to interpret material culture along the lines of the blending of intangible cultures proposed by Russell.

An African analogy

In 2013 Stephen Tomkins published a biography of David Livingstone. As the lives of nineteenth century colonial explorers do not usually feature in books about Anglo-Saxon England allow me to quote a lightly edited version of a summary of his book which Tomkins made for the BBC News website.

According to the title of one biography, David Livingstone was 'Africa's Greatest Missionary'. This is an interesting claim, considering that estimates of the number of people he converted in the course of his 30-year career vary between one and none.

The variation is because Livingstone himself wrote off his one convert as a backslider within months of his baptism. The irony is that this one backslider has a much better claim than Livingstone to be Africa's greatest missionary. This man on whom Livingstone gave up, became a preacher, a leader and a pioneer of adapting Christianity to African life - to the great annoyance of European missionaries.

His name was Sechele, and he was the *kgosi* or chief of the Bakwena tribe, part of the Tswana people, in what is now Botswana. [...] Like many *kgosi*, Sechele was keen to have a missionary living in his town. Missionaries came with guns (and [gun]powder), making them an invaluable defence, and with medicine. Sechele amused Livingstone by asking for medicine to make him a better hunter. But the thing Sechele wanted above all from Livingstone was literacy. He learned the alphabet, upper and lower case, in two days, compiled his own spelling books,

Kgosi Sechele.



and set about reading the one book in the Tswana language, the Bible. He ate breakfast before sunrise in order to start school as quickly as possible, and then taught his wives to read.

As Sechele grew increasingly interested in Christianity, he found two huge barriers in his way. One was rain. Tswana tribes had rainmakers, whose job was to use magic to make the rain come. Livingstone, like all missionaries, vehemently opposed rainmaking, on both religious and scientific grounds. Sechele happened to be his tribe's rainmaker as well as *kgosi*, and Livingstone's stay coincided with the worst drought ever known, so Sechele's decision to stop making rain was predictably unpopular.

The greater problem was polygamy. Sechele had five wives, and Livingstone insisted that to become a Christian he needed get rid of the

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'superfluous' ones. This was a political as well a personal nightmare, threatening the political structure of the tribe and relations with other tribes.

But in 1848 Sechele divorced four of the women and was baptised. The following year, however, one of his exes became pregnant, and it turned out that Sechele had fallen. He repented, and told Livingstone: 'Do not give me up because of this. I shall never give up Jesus. You and I will stand before him together.'

Livingstone did give up on him, going north to embark upon his celebrated adventures... At this point, Sechele largely disappears from view. His reappearance was startling. The first British missionaries who arrived to work with the Zulu Ndebele tribe in what is now Zimbabwe in 1859 were staggered to find that they already had regular Christian prayers. Sechele had beaten them to it.

Sechele had decided to lead church services for his own people after Livingstone left. He taught reading, the Bible became popular, and slowly the Bakwena became Christian. Sechele travelled hundreds of miles as a missionary to other tribes, and having withstood the Boers, the Bakwena became a refuge, absorbing many tribes into their Christian society.

At his death in 1892, Sechele ruled 30,000 people, a hundred times the number Livingstone first found him with. In the estimation of Neil Parsons, of the University of Botswana, Sechele 'did more to propagate Christianity in nineteenth-century southern Africa than virtually any single European missionary.'

For European missionaries though, Sechele was a frustrating puzzle, 'a half Christian and a half heathen.' He returned to rainmaking, considering it a political necessity, and late in life returned to polygamy, marrying a young woman for what do not seem to have been entirely political reasons. Missionaries also strongly objected to his use of traditional charms and purification rites, and the list of his ancestors on the church wall. And yet, even the ones who most hated him admitted, 'he reads the Bible threadbare', and when confronted he ran scriptural rings around them....

The strange mixture was in fact African Christianity. Unlike other converts who were content to follow European Christianity, Sechele went back to the source and recreated it as an indigenous religion.

www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-21807368

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Apart from all the details specific to Africa, the fact that one local can convert far more people than concerted efforts of colonial missionaries is perhaps most pertinent. Change the name from Sechele to, say, Patrick or Cuthbert, and the analogy perhaps becomes more of a parallel. Nevertheless, analogies are always dangerous and there is no reliable reason to suppose that early missionary activity in England, Ireland or Wales was based around the activities of a Dark Age counterpart to Sechele.

However, Russell's description of how Christianity adapted to existing north European worldviews broadly fits this analogy. It certainly fits the evidence much better than the simplistic near-contemporary account – that of Bede, who merely offers a somewhat one-dimensional 'instant conversion'. His account, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* ('Ecclesiastical History of the English People'), is far closer to modern ideas of propaganda than to our expectations of historians – but as his is the only near-contemporary source then Bede's 'spin' has become the accepted view. A large part of Sira Dooley-Fairchild's PhD thesis is devoted to analysing the extent to which Bede misguided twentieth century archaeologists (Dooley-Fairchild 2012).

Dooley-Fairchild's conclusions include the following remark:

It is indicative of the religious backgrounds of the scholars of [the Christian Conversion... that the focus has been, almost without exception, on the mechanics of conversion rather than the reasons for it. In other words, the fact that the Conversion was (at least prior to 1950) almost exclusively studied by people from Christian backgrounds or cultural contexts led to a general lack of interest in why the Conversion took place. Both Catholic and Protestant scholars instead saw the question as reversed and focused on why the Conversion was such a slow process and what could keep people from converting. I argue that as individuals who were convinced, to a greater or lesser degree, of the literal truth of the Bible, the reasons why to convert were obvious to them. They shared a set of revealed truths with their subjects, and as a consequence, these scholars were deaf to the most important and revealing questions that could be asked of the material.

(Dooley-Fairchild 2012: 238).

On the next page she wrote: 'It is not enough to contextualize our past: we must also contextualize and situate ourselves in relation to that past.' Or, more catchily, 'To catch a thief, you must think like a thief', as G.K. Chesterton observed through his priest-detective alter ego Father Brown nearly a century ago. This work, and the other studies which make up The Twilight Age series, are very

much about identifying plausible Anglo-Saxon 'worldviews'. To do so successfully also requires bringing our own underlying worldviews and assumptions into sharp focus.

Local distinctiveness in Anglo-Saxon England

For simplicity's sake much of this study refers to Anglo-Saxon England as if it was some more-or-less homogenous entity. But England today is deeply divided into regions and more subtly divided into the differing identities of counties and cities. And while modern day distinctions have their origins in the Anglo-Saxon era, back then the cultural differences were far greater.

Bede tells of how the British people had been displaced by Angles, Saxons and Jutes – all with their homelands in different parts of northern Europe. Each of these immigrant societies was distinctive not simply because of where they came from and in which parts of Britain they settled, but in their dress, hairstyles, funeral customs and speech. Bede omits to mention the Frisians. And, more importantly, he does not elaborate on the marked regional distinctions among the indigenous British.

Anyone driving along the A5 from London towards Chester is following the route of a road the Romans knew as Watling Street but which must have been well-established in the Iron Age. It follows a ridge or watershed which separates the two major river systems in southern England – ignoring some trivial headwaters, the various rivers draining into the Trent and Humber all arise to the north-east and the rivers draining into the Severn, Solent and Thames all arise to the south-west.



Left: *Wilmington 'Long Man' turf-cut hill figure.*

Right: *American spray-painted gang territory 'tags'.*

And the difference is... ?

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Watling Street also forms the boundary between Leicestershire and Warwickshire. And as one of these counties is quintessentially part of the East Midlands and the other inseparable from the West Midlands then the road acts as a regional boundary. And the clear difference between these regions is largely a consequence of Watling Street being the frontier of the Danelaw in the ninth and tenth centuries. The modern day regional differences include a major difference between the dialects of the West and East Midlands – indeed, this was the steepest dialect divide to survive into recent times.

Throughout the Anglo-Saxon era East Anglia, Mercia, Northumbria and Wessex each had distinctive cultures and dialects which far exceed any modern day regional differences. And then, if you can, imagine early Anglo-Saxon England where up to seventy smaller kingdoms jostle for power. These kingdoms must have been as distinctive to their members by their dress and ‘slang’ as, say, any inner city gang members are to rival gangs today. Yet these kingdoms formed marriages with adjoining kingdoms, so any cultural differences were always going to be fluid and ever-changing.

In one sense Anglo-Saxon England was ‘homogenous’ in that every kingdom, no matter how small or large, promoted its own ‘local distinctiveness’ (to borrow a phrase invented by Common Ground in 1983). But that is to stretch the meaning of ‘homogenous’ too far. All references to Anglo-Saxon England should be regarded as denoting complex and ever-changing heterogenous cultures where dress, jewellery, hairstyles, language, legends and all other aspects of tangible and intangible culture were a mix of time-honoured traditions with ever-changing accommodation of ideas brought in by contact with neighbouring cultures.

And one of the paramount examples of ‘tangible and intangible culture’ is of course religion...

Paganism is like local cuisine

Ken Dowden in his thoughtful – and thought-provoking – study of European paganism published in 2000 came to the conclusion that Christian missionaries were unable to comprehend the variety and chaos of paganism. They did not respond to actual local activities but, rather, to stereotypes based on what pagans in south-west Germany had been doing around the fifth century.

These ideas evolved into *breviaria* – briefing notes, or ‘crib sheets’ if you like – intended as *aides-mémoire* for missionaries to help ensure they suppress pagan activities. Based on typical examples of *breviaria* Dowden identifies thirty ‘bullet points’ of which the first are:

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- feasting at the tombs of the dead
- singing laments to a corpse
- sacrificing pigs (either to mark the new year and/or at feasts to the dead)
- performing rituals in huts
- performing rituals in woods
- performing rituals at rocks
- offering sacrifices to springs
- creating fire from 'rubbed wood' ('need-fire')
- performing rituals on Thursdays (and perhaps Wednesdays too); this overlaps with performing ceremonies to Jove or Mercury
- dancing or sacrificing in churches
- sacrificing to saints
- wearing amulets
- enchantments
- auguries
- consulting diviners or casting lots.

Somewhere in Europe, at some time, each of these activities was no doubt a clear trait of paganism. But, as Dowden painstakingly established, local practices varied both within regions and across time. This is a proclamation made during the reign of the Merovingian king Carloman in 742:

We have decreed that in accordance with the canons each and every bishop shall take trouble in his parish, with the assistance of the Count who is the defender of the Church, that the people of God shall not perform pagan acts but shall cast aside and reject all the foul features of paganism, such as sacrifices for the dead, lot-casters or diviners, amulets [*phylacteria*] and auguries, incantations, sacrificial victims which foolish men sacrifice in the pagan ways next to churches in the name of the holy martyrs or confessors, provoking God and his saints to anger, or those sacrilegious fires which they call *nied fyr* ['need fire'] – in sum all those practices of the pagans, whatever they are, should be energetically prohibited by them.

Capitulary of Carloman *Monumenta Germaniae historica: Leges nationum Germanicarum* 1.17 (Dowden 2000: 16)

Even though this reads like an authoritative description of what the clergy despised, we need to be careful. Successive examples of such 'rants' from Continental Europe over the following centuries are rather formulaic, suggesting they owed more to the sermons of Caesarius of Arles (*circa* 469–542) than to actuality. While Caesarius's remarks presumably have some basis in the pre-

Christian feasts and pagan festivals

Over the last fifty or more years there have been various suggestions about how many – or how few – of the Christian feast days are continuations of pagan precursors. Ronald Hutton has researched this topic extensively. He notes that a '... familiar feature of ancient religion which was reproduced in medieval Christianity was that seasonal festivals were the most important forms of ritual observance.' (Hutton 2013: 337)

Hutton considers that by the later Middle Ages the Christian seasonal customs which had some sort of pre-conversion origin included:

- ❖ a dawn service on Christmas Day
- ❖ blessing candles at the beginning of February
- ❖ consecration of spring foliage on Palm Sunday
- ❖ a ritual drama of the Resurrection on Easter Sunday
- ❖ Rogation processions to bless the crops in May
- ❖ Whitsun parades to celebrate Pentecost, with a white dove released to symbolise the Holy Ghost
- ❖ prayers for the dead on All Hallows and All Souls.

Bear in mind that, while regular church attendance on a Sunday now seems the norm for Christians, this practice only starts around the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Prior to that people went to church for a succession of spectacular feast days which were timed to form an annual cycle.

Christian practices of sixth century Gaul, we should be careful about assuming that later remarks reflect local practice – just as easily they are derived from Caesarius's sermons, which were frequently copied by the scribes of European monasteries long after his death.

The concern with Wednesdays and Thursday is that these were the days associated with the worship of local deities who the clergy equated to the Classical deities Mercury and Jove – as indeed with 'Woden's Day' and 'Thor's (or Thunor's) Day' which give the English names for these days. The concern seems to be that pagans did indeed honour these deities on the respective days – with Thursday seeming to be the predominant choice in northern Europe. So the idea, promulgated widely by Christians, of Sunday being the day for church services being a simple shift from the Judaic tradition of keeping the Sabbath on

Saturdays is perhaps only part of the story. Seemingly there was an indigenous tradition among pagan peasants of keeping Thursdays as 'the day of rest'. As such, the shift from Thursdays (or, in some cases, Wednesdays) to Sundays is not so much an example of change but more an example of continuity of underlying worldview, in this case of a weekly 'sacred day'.

Towards the end of his book Dowden offers the helpful analogy that paganism was like local cuisine – both vary from place to place while respecting general overall approaches and regional preferences. This metaphor also works at another level – traditional cuisine is always seasonal and, so too, what pagans did was in a similar way part of an annual cycle. The liturgical year of the Church was deeply influenced by pagan precursors and is among the clearest evidence of continuity of practice during the conversion era.

We should not however regard every aspect of religious practice as merely local – there are of course many others aspects which are pan-regional too. And, after a food metaphor, perhaps an appropriate literal example is the way in which fasting was initially adopted by the Church. Forget for a moment that in later medieval times Christians fasted largely as a penance. The earliest references, mostly relating to Irish-trained bishops, make clear that fasting was regarded as a way of achieving ritual purity (and so, by extension, an excellent penance). But achieving ritual purity by fasting does not come from Christian practices of the time. Again, we are looking at a clear continuation of pre-Christian thinking.

The pagans of eleventh century England

These specific examples are outnumbered by academic literature revealing ever-increasing evidence that modern scholarship has left Branston's view of English paganism a long way behind. Which is not to dismiss the irrefutable evidence that Scandinavian paganism as depicted in the sagas was being brought to the British Isles. This started in the later part of the ninth century as was still in full flow as late as the early eleventh century, when the personal bodyguards of King Cnut were all pagan Vikings, although Cnut himself was Christian. Well, he identified himself as a Christian and commissioned the building of the New Minster to operate alongside the Old Minster – yet also commissioned a carving of Sigurd (rather than, say, St Michael) slaying a dragon for one of these minsters.

We even know what Cnut thought pagans got up to – or at what least his law-makers, who would have been trained clerics, thought:

Paganism is when one worships devil-idols, that is, one worships heathen gods, and sun or moon, fire or running water, springs, or stones

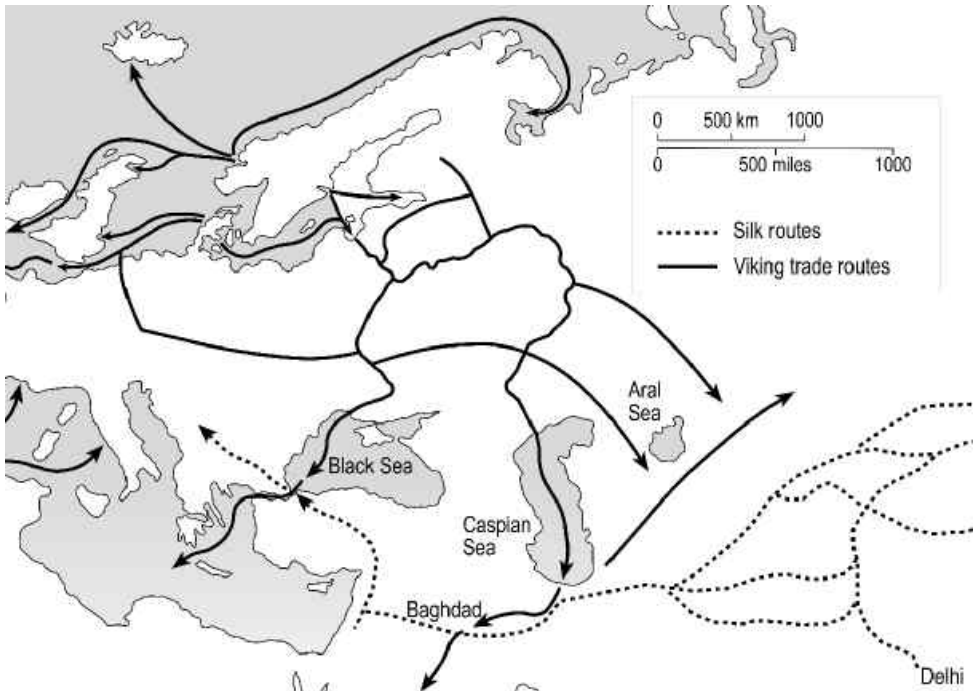
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or any kind of wood, or loves witchcraft or accomplishes any murderous deed in any wise, either in sacrifice or divination, or performs any thing out of such mistaken ideas.

(Canute *Laws*, II.5.1 based on Dowden 2000: 42)

Cnut's power-base in Winchester must have been fascinatingly multicultural, with connections to the furthest parts of the far-flung Viking trading empire. His own empire made him an exemplary Viking – he was prince of Denmark before taking the English throne, becoming king of Denmark later and subsequently king of Norway too. At the time neither Denmark nor Norway were fully converted to Christianity.

We are not accustomed to thinking of eleventh century England having a thriving pagan 'sub-culture'. But so much about that period of what is deemed to be 'early medieval England' is deeply influenced by 'late Iron Age Scandinavia'. Yes, the very same Cnut who, in the mind of English historians, is an early medieval king,



The extent of the Viking trading empire.

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is also, in the thinking of Scandinavian historians, head of a late Iron Age royal household. We should not of course get too distracted by the names which are given to different eras but in this case the names do reveal deep differences between different parts of Migration Era northern Europe (to throw in a third way of referring to the same times and places).

What is really missing from these assorted monikers is any recognition of just how multicultural the Vikings were. They appear in the annals of Britain as plunderers and extortionists, although go unmentioned in their predominate roles as peaceful traders. Their sphere of influence extended up the Danube and its tributaries – where they were known there as the Rus and in due course gave their name to Russia – and traded goods brought through Byzantium from the both the Mediterranean region and from much further east along Silk Roads.

Cnut made Winchester the most important hub of Viking activities in Britain, and one of their larger power centres anywhere in Europe. Winchester is largely written out of history because within a couple of generations the Norman Conquest had brought England within the sphere of influence of another posse of ‘Northmen’ or Vikings, albeit ones who had adopted Christianity and the French language. The Normans adopted London as their centre and Winchester steadily faded from prominence.

Cnut brokered power between three rich and varied cultures: the post-Roman Britain Isles, the never-Roman Scandinavian and eastern Europe, and the Mediterranean-based never-not-Roman empire which had swapped missionaries for mercenaries but retained its imperialist agenda. The majority of records available to Dark Age historians – including the Domesday Book of 1086 – are from the century-or-so straddling Cnut’s life. But while these records do shed light on late tenth century England, the evidence cannot always be confidently extrapolated back to before the intense period of cultural interactions in the first half of the eleventh century. And considerably more care is needed before using eleventh century documents as evidence for pre-ninth century practices and predilections.

Continuity of hoarding treasure

Sometimes the evidence is too blinking obvious to be considered. Pre-conversion Anglo-Saxons had a tendency to ‘hoard’ treasure. However, in line with precedents going back to the Iron Age, seem of these to be votive offerings rather than personal wealth buried for safe-keeping. A classic example is the Staffordshire Hoard, recovered in 2009 from a triangular area adjacent to Watling

Street (see Volume Five of *The Twilight Age* for a discussion of the location and shape).

The poem *Beowulf* shed considerable light on the re-burial of treasure and how such treasure was dedicated to the deities (Creed 1989; Tarzia 1989; 1999). However, as only Tarzia seems to have recognised, treasure continued to be hoarded long after the conversion – it was simply made into reliquaries, croziers, liturgical chalices and pattens, and so forth. The rhetoric changes to such wealth being 'for the glory of God' rather than 'votive offerings' but that is essentially because of the difference between emic and etic perspectives, and not because of fundamental differences in worldview.

If, as has been suggested by Brian Phelp (Phelp 2012), the Staffordshire Hoard is the 'war booty' from the sacking of Rochester Cathedral in 676 then the continuity of practice loops back on itself. But even without the 'Rochester connection' every item of ecclesiastical 'booty' in any medieval church is evidence for continuity of dedicating wealth to the gods. Sometimes the evidence is simply lost in terminology and cognicentric distinctions.

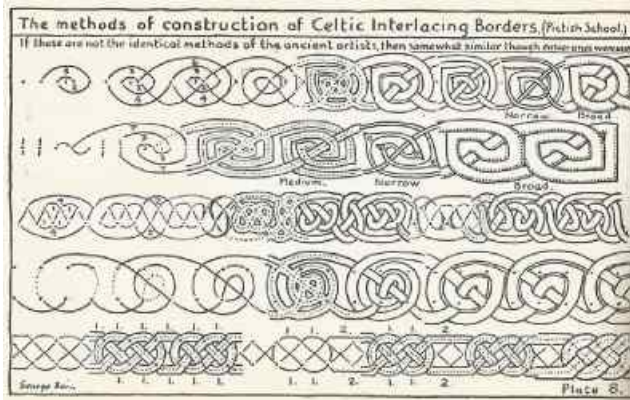
Imagined Christianity

Trying to understand the conversion of the English in more detail – and the prior conversion of other parts of the British Isles – has understandably intrigued historians for many centuries. The same year that Branston's *Lost Gods* appeared a more scholarly tome appeared called *Studies in the Early British Church*. The editor, Nora Chadwick, was then a fairly 'new kid on the block' although she went on to publish several more books popularising the people she collectively called 'Celts'. In 1961 her influential work *The Age of Saints in the Celtic Church* appeared.

Chadwick's thesis was that Ireland, Scotland and Wales (along with Cornwall and Brittany if you want to be completist) not only shared a language, Celtic, but also a cultural identity. And, she supposed, they shared an early Christian culture until the Roman Catholic hierarchy staged a take-over bid at the Synod of Whitby in 664. The notion of a 'Celtic Christianity' which linked the far north of the British Isles with the far south-west is seductive. Many practising Christians have been seduced by a version of this imaginative take on history which is still actively promulgated, most notably by a retreat centre on Iona. Ian Bradley, who initially embraced Chadwick's notions of a supposed Celtic Christianity, wrote:

Celtic Christianity is less an actual phenomenon defined in historical and geographical terms than an artificial construct created out of wishful

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From George Bain's book *Celtic Art: The Methods of Construction*.

These examples are based on Pictish crosses, so have a least some claim to be 'Celtic'.

thinking, romantic nostalgia and the projection of all kind of dreams about what should and might have been.

(Bradley 1999: vii)

Nevertheless 'all kind of dreams' about a supposed Celtic Christianity have become a part of modern Christian faith. The historical evidence tells a very different story. While there are indeed close cultural contacts between Scotland and Ireland – indeed, the eponymous Scotii originated in Ireland – there was no love to be lost between, say, the Irish and the Welsh. The whole idea of those parts of the British Isles which are not England having a shared identity goes back a mere three hundred years to the Act of Union of 1704 – when 'Celtic' came to mean 'British but not bloody English', as the historian Simon Jones put it in lectures promoting his 1999 book *The Atlantic Celts*.

Yes there is a common *origin* for the non-Germanic languages we know as Irish, Scottish, Pictish, Manx, Cornish, Breton and the dialects of north and south Wales. But these are not mutually intelligible. Indeed, there are substantial differences between the Gaelic of Ireland and Scotland (originally one language but evolving into two distinct languages when Irish Gaelic-speakers settled in the Dál Riata or Dalriada region of western Scotland) and the Celtic of Wales, Cornwall and Brittany.

In the early eighteenth century it was a reasonable mistake to think that a common origin for the languages implies a common origin for other aspects of culture. But as our understanding of the traditional cultures in the Celtic-speaking countries has improved we can see far more differences than similarities. Just as the languages have evolved into distinct variants so too the cultures became

essentially different, even if, as always, there are some overlaps with near neighbours.

The use of the term 'Celtic' to describe a non-existent shared culture is also misleading as it implies – erroneously – that the style of prehistoric Iron Age art known to scholars as La Tène and more popularly since the 1960s as 'Celtic Art' was part of this British culture. As a result of several instructional books by George Bain, what is often referred to as 'Celtic art' – interlace patterns and such like – is often based on Anglo-Scandinavian carvings, so has no connections with Celtic culture except that some of the carvings are found in supposedly Celtic countries when Scandinavians settled there in the ninth and tenth centuries.

Jones undertakes a thorough debunking of the myth of shared Celtic identity, while acknowledging that this invented myth is very much alive and well in places such as Ireland and Scotland. However the debunking of the notion of a shared 'Celtic Christianity' had begun long before his book appeared. Back in 1982 a collection of papers appeared under the title *The Early Church in Western Britain and Ireland*. In this eminent historians such as Charles Thomas noted that the evidence did not fit the theory – the earliest Christianity in Wales and Cornwall was quite distinct from what was happening in Ireland at that time, although there was contact.

As just a single example, Welsh and Cornish saints were associated with specific places – and their names are fossilised in settlement names to this day, especially in Cornwall. In contrast Irish saints were forever wandering to convert yet another king and his subjects, or setting off on pilgrimages to remote islands. Not for nothing are they described in Latin texts as *peregrines* which has the narrower sense of 'to travel abroad, be alien', but was used figuratively with the sense 'to wander, roam, travel about'.

Ten years later another collection of academic papers (Edwards and Lane 1992) added more detail. Together these papers – and substantial a number of others dispersed through the relevant academic literature – reveal that in each of these supposedly-Celtic countries there was considerable change even before the Roman church provided a major influence. To again take one example from a great many, the belief that the Synod of Whitby was a pivotal moment between this supposed deeply-rooted 'Celtic Union' and the upstarts from Rome should be seen as an over-simplification of a much more complex and protracted process of merger. For example, the Irish ecclesiastical leaders had already adopted the Roman date for Easter *before* 664 while some Welsh churches retained the old calendar until 768, over a hundred years after the Synod of Whitby. What happened at Whitby at one synod was just one part of a much more extended



The footpath which runs from the main visitors' car park at Avebury to the High Street (shown here from the summit of the adjacent prehistoric henge bank) seems to follow one corner of the seventh or eighth century burh earthworks.

process which was already under way, but would not be completed for many generations.

For those seeking an up-to-date overview of what can sensibly be said of Britain during the early phases of conversion to Christianity then Barbara Yorke's book published in 2006 covers all the relevant sources and topics. While it is academically sound sadly her style of writing is rather dry. This is in part because Yorke is strong on individuals and events – the nuts and bolts – and more reticent about exploring the 'whys' and 'hows'. Of course, without reliable 'nuts and bolts' there can only be fanciful narratives.

One way and other, the illusion of a more-or-less homogenous 'Celtic Christianity' spanning vast geographical territories and equally expansive periods of time which was created by Chadwick's writing could not be further from the reality.

To pick on a few more examples. In the sixth century south Wales was sending priests to Cornwall. The place-names of Wales and Cornwall still include an exceptional number of names of local saints or references to the church or churchyard compared to other parts of Britain. And yet, while these early contacts can still be discerned, there are plenty of differences which reflect the different ways Christianity evolved in Cornwall and Wales in subsequent centuries. For example, after the sixth century south Wales was increasingly influenced by Irish Christianity. This is not surprising as Ireland had been the first

country outside the former Roman empire to convert, and the emphasis on missionary zeal quickly extended outside its own shores, at a time when Christianity in England was seemingly quite vestigial. By the late ninth century and into the tenth century it is Wales' turn to send out ministers on a mission – this time into neighbouring Wessex. But by then Wessex had been converted by Irish clerics...

These examples of Christianity constantly-evolving in local regions are multiplied in the relevant literature. We get the impression that these 'regions' were in many respects acting almost autonomously. Yorke described early Anglo-Saxon religious houses as 'ad hoc' (Yorke 2013). Other scholars adopted the phrase 'micro-Christendoms' to describe them.

Abbots *versus* bishops

When historians ask such questions as 'How big are these regions?' or 'Were they bishoprics?' they get rather woolly answers. Some of the woolliness is simply because the evidence is too fragmentary. But one key reason is that Christianity in the British Isles before the tenth century was being fought over by two powerful hierarchies – the abbots and the bishops. The abbots, along with a smaller number of abbesses, controlled the monasteries and nunneries.

The founders of early monastic communities devised the rules for the monks. This resulted in a ever-proliferating diversity of rules – with the benefit that monasticism was extraordinarily adaptable. In their early manifestations monasteries were physically indistinguishable from the fortified farms of their secular kinsfolk. This is reflected by so many of these early monasteries leading to place-names which are a personal name followed by '-bury', a corruption of the Old English *burh*, denoting a fortified earthwork. Within a few miles of where I'm sitting writing this are Alderbury, Amesbury, Heytesbury, Malmesbury, Ramsbury and Tisbury which are all early religious sites with names which originate as personal names followed by *burh*. Add to them such places as Avebury, Westbury, Yatesbury and so forth then we can readily imagine that era of Anglo-Saxon Wiltshire as dotted with large fortified farms, with little to distinguish those that were primarily whether religious from those that were not.

Quite independently from the abbots, the bishops were firmly embedded in a much less adaptable hierarchy. They extended their authority over cathedral churches and the subservient minsters which each provided pastoral care to typically a few dozen 'parishes' (although strictly parishes are still in the future). Curiously, the Old English word *biscop* appears in pre-Christian contexts (even

though it is a borrowing from the Latin *episcopus*), with the broad sense of ‘overseer or supervisor’.

The frequently-conflicting interests of abbots and bishops were further confused as ‘grass roots’ Christianity – presumably funded by wealthy landowners – established manorial churches during the tenth century. This led to the demise of minsters. However the complexities of tenth and eleventh century Christianity are incidental to this study. What is important is understanding the spheres of influence of abbots and bishops. These days they are ‘men of faith’. Back then they were the sons of the nobility – and to hang on to the job required brothers, uncles and other relatives who were prepared to fight and, at times, murder any opposition. Not that abbots and bishops themselves were pacifists – most could give a good account of themselves on the battlefield. Clearly what was at stake was the wealth of the estates they, to all intents and purposes, owned. They were major players in the Establishment. Indeed bishops still form part of the membership of the House of Lords; abbots of course went through a bit of a bad patch while Henry VIII was on the throne.

Before the Dissolution abbots held substantial areas of land, as did bishops. This was also true in pre-Conquest England. And their ‘pastoral influence’ extended over an even greater area. How great? There’s simply no one answer for abbots. Some were well-known and revered over a large region. Others were presumably well-known but instead of being revered were reviled for what was perceived as near-despotic behaviour. Some lived for a long time and had a chance to establish their reputation – for good or for ill – while others met their Maker sooner.

Most of them were canonised soon after their death – unlike more recent times when making someone into a saint is the culmination of a lengthy process which ultimately requires papal approval, in medieval times this was determined largely by the efforts (and interests) of an abbot’s successor.

Bishops and kings

With bishops we have a clearer idea of their extent of their authority – then as now it was their bishopric or diocese. The number of dioceses has changed at various times and only some of the current ones reflect their former boundaries. One early medieval diocese for which there are good records is Worcester. The historian Della Hooke has looked at these records and a considerable amount of other evidence and concluded that the diocese still covers almost the same area of land – the historic county of Worcestershire and some of adjoining Gloucestershire – as the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of the Hwicce tribe.

This makes perfect sense as the chronicles of the Christian conversion make it clear that this was top down – the relevant cleric baptised a king and his whole kingdom henceforth was deemed to be Christian. Yes, it does suggest that closer to the ‘grass roots’ the conversion might not have been so well understood. Be that as it may, the newly-converted king would need a newly-appointed bishop to look after the newly-changed spiritual needs of his kingdom. Who better to appoint than the cleric who had just converted and baptised him? Almost by definition newly-created bishops would start off with dioceses the size of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

One slight problem. Anglo-Saxon kings were continually being compelled to form allegiances with other kings to avoid – not always successfully – being taken over by yet other kings. So kingdoms were an ever-shifting entity. Before the era of active conversion kingdoms were the size of Rutland – indeed Rutland is the only surviving land-unit in Britain which preserves such a kingdom. We even know the name of the king – Rota, hence ‘Rota’s land’ which contracts to Rutland (forget all the spurious suggestions about raddling sheep). If you really want to follow up on this then I have argued elsewhere that to the west of Rutland is another land unit of almost the same area, centred on Melton Mowbray and extending to the line of the Fosse Way to the west, and to two prominent ridges of hills to the north and south (Trubshaw 2012a: 47–50). Its name, Framland, is itself a clue, suggesting that Franni (the ‘m’ is presumably a scribal error) and Rota were contemporaries.

To be pedantic Rutland seems to start out as a Bronze Age land unit. This begs a number of questions about whether the earliest Anglo-Saxon kingdoms reflect Roman administrative territories known as *regios* – which do sometimes seem to ‘resurface’ in later Anglo-Saxon times as groups of parishes which are royal estates. And that in turn raises the possibility that at least some *regios* are successors to Iron Age or even Bronze Age land units and evolve into early Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. There is little evidence yet considerable scope for speculation! I raise this topic not to seek – or even suggest – any sort of answers but simply because at the end of this section I will make some different generalised remarks about these early Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

Whatever their origins, most of these very early Anglo-Saxon kingdoms soon merged. We should think less of ‘kingdoms’ at this time than of ‘kindreds’ – shifting loyalties between local leaders which lasted only until the death of the leader, without the sense of continuity to a ‘rightful heir’ that we now associate with kingship. That notion of a lineage of kings only comes in with conversion – indeed, the expectation of greater security for the king and his family and retinue may well have influenced the reason for him converting, as much as any change



Early fourth century fresco from the Catacombs of St Marcellinus and Peter depicting a banquet, but probably intended to be understood as a Eucharist celebration.

in spiritual attitudes. Even in the eighth and ninth centuries when this notion of lineage is well-established, the surviving documents which list various rulers' supposed genealogies go back to deities such as Woden. This is, presumably, less a case of thinking of themselves as a descendant of the god but more a continuation of a belief that the god was the mythical founder-father of the tribe.

Micro-Christendoms

By the time of the conversion kingdoms more typically are the size of later counties or a little larger. As time moved on they got bigger and bigger until England, with the exception of the south-west, was under the influence of four major players – East Anglia, Mercia, Northumbria and Wessex. Dioceses were subject to some changes as a result, although most of the significant changes comes about later as a direct response to Viking raiding and intimidation, culminating with the loss of some of the traditional dioceses by the time the Danelaw was formed in 886.

Throughout this era we seem to be dealing with a system whereby each bishop answered primarily to the relevant king – and was probably related to him. Despite the church's hierarchy extending to archbishops and the papacy, in Anglo-Saxon England each bishop seems to have been pretty much a law unto himself. As with abbots, some were more benign and spiritual than others.

This near-autonomy extended to liturgical practices. I have previously noted that the Protestant Book of Common Prayer was largely modelled on the pre-Reformation rites of Sarum (strictly the 'Use of Sarum'), devised by Salisbury Cathedral and its precursor at Sarum. However this was only one of a number of distinct liturgies – the Book of Common Prayer could, in principle, have been compiled from the Use of Hereford, or of York, Aberdeen or wherever – even the

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Use of Bangor has partially survived. By the Reformation each of these sets of rites had evolved over many centuries.

If we find this idea of a less than homogenous pre-Reformation Christianity a little surprising then cast your mind back to the first centuries of Christianity. Historical evidence, backed up by archaeological evidence from the catacombs, reveals that in Rome during the first three centuries of Christianity – while it was still condemned by the authorities – there were *at least* twenty quite distinct ways of being Christian. Some of these were closer to what we know think of a ‘mystery cults’ and others were strongly influenced by religious practices from places further east. At the core was the ritual meal emulating the Last Supper – although seemingly far more akin to Bacchanalian feasts than Eucharist rites of later Christianity. This rich mixture of ‘local diversity’ was all within one city, where followers of one group were likely to be aware of the practices of some of the other groups. Little wonder that when dispersed over greater geographical expanses there was even greater diversity, despite all attempts to impose ‘top down’ uniformity.

I would like to give the final word on this diversity to Jeffrey Jerome Cohen who, in the opening chapter of his book about giants, describes this local heterogeneity quite profoundly:

Yet to speak of Latin, northern, and Celtic culture is to pretend that these were monolithic and discrete, when each was composed of often competing ideologies, dialects, mythologies – like [the idea of] ‘Anglo-Saxon England’ itself. These various languages and discourses combined into fragmentary epistemes, as unstable and amalgamative as the many little kingdoms that formed and were absorbed into larger ones. The history of Anglo-Saxon England is a narrative of resistant hybridity, of small groups ingested into larger bodies without full assimilation, without cultural homogeneity: thus the realms of Hwicce, Sussex, Kent, Lindsey, Surrey, Essex, East Anglia, Northumbria, Mercia and Wessex were sutured over time into progressively larger kingdoms, but although they were eventually unified in political hegemony, these areas retained enough force of heterogeneity to remain dialect regions that persist to the present day.

(Cohen 1999: 4)

There is no paganism. There is only what we do here.

Cohen's word picture sets the context for the phrase 'micro-Christendoms' where each diocese sustained, in various ways, local practices. Now what was going on the pre-diocese kingdoms *before* the conversion? Were there 'micro-pagandoms'? There are no written sources to tell us but it is not difficult to make some deductions.

While the sources for north European and south Scandinavian pre-Christian beliefs reveal a certain amount of consistency, especially at the level of 'worldviews' which interest me, they also reveal considerable local diversity. Some of that diversity is because what information we have straddles rather substantial periods of time. But modern scholarship assumes that everything varied not only over time but also over distance.

Exactly the same can be said for the local practices in the Indian subcontinent which Western scholars placed under the collective heading of 'Hinduism'. As already noted, only with the development of Indian nationalism in the nineteenth century did Indian people themselves adopt the word 'Hinduism'; indeed the idea of a 'national religion' came about as part of the independence movement's rhetoric (and this sectarianism was to lead to the disastrous partitioning of Pakistan right at the end of the colonial era). Local practices reveal shared beliefs in Mahadevi (the Mother Goddess) but these are expressed through locally distinctive practices. (This is discussed further in *The Twilight Age Volume Two*; see Chandola 2007 for a more detailed and first-hand account.)

From the perspective of traditional Western theology, Hinduism is barely a religion. From this perspective only Judaism, Christianity and Islam are 'fully' religions. What this tells us is *not* that the non-Western world doesn't have 'proper religions' but, rather, what Western theologians traditionally regard as proper religion is modelled rather too narrowly on the Abrahamic faiths (that is Judaism, Christianity and Islam, who all regard the prophet Abraham as key to the founding of their faiths). In these 'big three' religions there is a hierarchical structure, a canonical text and a clearly-formulated 'creed'. But take away some or all of these key factors and religion starts to look a little more like it does in India and a lot more how it appears in, say, China.

Above all non-Western religions are not overly-fussed about exactly what followers believe. Specific sects and 'schools' may well have a more focused set of beliefs, but they recognise that other people following broadly the same practices have other beliefs, or much more fluid beliefs. Without attempting to

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A modern pagan ritual at Avebury, Wiltshire, early May 2009.

fully summarise how the current generation of academics studying comparative religion attempt to define 'religion', such things as 'creeds' are not that important. Only since the Reformation has the Western notion of religion become focused on what people *believe* more than what people *do*.

Any thoughts that early bishops expected to be concerned with what the laity believed or did could not be further from reality. There were no 'rules books' and the correspondence back to the Pope from bishops sent on papal missions reveal long lists of questions about how the converts should be instructed to lead their lives. The implication is that the pagan precursors to the bishops provided plenty of such advice! The old cults may be deemed wrong but there was no one-to-one replacement. Not until the thirteenth century is there significant instruction for the laity, and that comes in once the practice of lifelong confession (rather than only when death seems imminent) develops in the twelfth century.

Little wonder then that in the absence of any alternative, what Christians 'did' until well into the medieval period derived more from what 'they had always done' – even if the belief system within which they maintained those traditions had shifted. When we look at so-called 'folk customs' and 'old wives' charms' recorded in rural Britain during the nineteenth century we are perhaps looking at the distant successors to this tradition. The people are indisputably part of a Christian belief system but what they actually do does not come from biblical or even ecclesiastical precedents.

Doing and believing in modern paganism

Interestingly modern paganism – in all its 'denominations' from Wicca, through Druidry, Northern Traditions, hedge witches and much else – is an excellent

example of a religion which has little in the way of canonical texts (except sometimes within specific groups) while bringing together people with a diverse range of specific beliefs. While different modern pagan groups do different things – that is inevitable – there are often broad similarities in when and how rituals and celebrations are performed. Indeed, above all else, modern paganism is about ‘doing’. Apart from a small minority, ‘being a pagan’ is about going to as many as possible of the rituals for the eight annual festivals, having some of the right sort of material culture (if only a distinctive pendant or tattoo) and wearing clothes that are different to usual (although some pagans ‘dress differently’ to social norms all the time).

Wiccans and Druids all regard the solstices, equinoxes and ‘quarter days’ in between as the main times for rituals – although some may have ‘extra’ rites for the new and full moons when these do not fall close to the eight main festivals. In these rituals participants form a circle, join hands, call the quarters, bless and share bread and mead or wine, then close the quarters. Some of the words of 1950s and 60s Wiccan rites – ‘Hail and welcome’, ‘So mote it be’, ‘Hail and farewell’ – have also become part of Druidry (although sometimes changed to a different formula which still betrays its origins, such as ‘Know you are honoured here’ instead of ‘Hail and welcome’). Chanting, drumming and other ways of ‘raising energy’ are typical, although the energy of the Druid’s triple awen chants is raised for inspiration and creativity but not usually focused in the way that Wiccans may send a ‘cone of power’ for healing or other reasons.

For the purposes of this study I need to emphasise that while the overall ‘structure’ of the rituals is fairly consistent, each group develops its own versions of these rites, which continue to evolve year-on-year. Not only do each of the eight festivals have a somewhat different emphasis within the overall ritual, so too each year the rite will be somewhat different from its precursor twelve months previously. There is an interesting counterbalance between what is ‘expected’ and what makes each occasion distinctive for that group and for that particular year.

One major difference between different denominations of modern paganism is that groups with a Wiccan background usually venerate a goddess and maybe her consort. In contrast Druid rituals rarely honour a deity but instead honour nature (and, since the end of the twentieth century, the ancestors of place, of blood and of tribe). In my experience participants in Druid rituals embrace a wide variety of personal beliefs in deities – or lack of – but these rarely come to the foreground.

Indeed looking back to the Druid orders of the mid-twentieth century, they were essentially a rather odd version of Christianity, and the more influential members of the groups were often from Anglican or Nonconformist backgrounds. However



Beating of the Bounds – a procession through Leyton Marshes, London, May 2009. Photograph by Mark Lewis. From Days and Rites (Lewis 2013).

Christians – unless well and truly lapsed – are regarded with considerable disdain within Wiccan groups as part of the Wiccan ‘mythos’ is a deep polarisation between Christianity and a supposed pan-European medieval ‘Old Religion’. The source of these ideas are two books by Margaret Murray published in 1921 and 1933. While offering an entirely imaginary account of medieval religion, Murray influenced a large number of widely-read writers, including D.H. Lawrence, Robert Graves, and T.S. Eliot. I dwell on this point simply because what pagans – Druids, Wiccans and others – *do* is broadly consistent, whereas what members of such groups *believe* is, on the one hand, left open, and on the other is based on a specific myth with a clear canonical text (even if not necessarily seen that way from the inside).

‘Practising Christians’

A few moments thought reveals that Christianity too is as much about what congregations do as what they believe. Yes the beliefs are more formulated but such expressions as identifying as ‘a practising Christian’ make a clear distinction from people whose faith might be regarded as in some way less devout. Some denominations of Christianity ‘do’ more than others, with Catholicism being a lot more about ‘doing’ than, say, the bleaker end of the Protestant tradition.

Curiously while I am writing these paragraphs a steady stream of smartly-dressed people are making their way to the parish church next door. It is shortly before ten a.m. on a Sunday. But, as it is not just any Sunday in the year, but Easter Sunday the smart attire is in muted browns, greys and blacks. The underlying

tradition – of wearing one's 'Sunday best' clothes to attend services – is modified by a second tradition of wearing muted colours for Holy Week services. The church furnishings on the altar and elsewhere will be equally muted or even absent.

Mark Lewis's book *Days and Rites: Popular customs of the Church* provides a detailed look at just how diverse local practices are among modern day English Christians. From Walks of Witness during Holy Week through harvest festivals and Christingle services, practising Christians bring a lot of 'doing' to their believing. Interestingly, two of these traditions have only become established in Britain during the last fifty years and the oldest – harvest festival services – only goes back to the 1840s. However celebrations and blessings specific to individual parish churches are often older, with their roots in the eighteenth century or earlier.

What is paganism? What was paganism?

If modern Christianity encompasses a broad spectrum of beliefs and practices then modern paganism is even more difficult to summarise (although academics such as Graham Harvey have effectively done so). From close-up the differences between groups and individuals make it difficult to see any overall 'togetherness'.

In many respects – including some of the fluidity about the nature of deities and such like – modern paganism is much more like Hinduism than any other major faith. This is not entirely coincidental. While most of what we now think of as modern paganism is a result of activities from the 1950s onwards, the pioneers themselves were developing their ideas in the first half of the twentieth century. At that time modern occultism – perhaps best-known then through the books of Dion Fortune – was matched by a widespread interest in Classical pagan deities, not least the god Pan (re-read one of the key experiences of Ratty and Mole in *Wind in the Willows* for just one example) and a broad awareness of the ideas of the Theosophy Society. This was founded by Madame Blavatsky (1831–91) who popularised Theravada Buddhism. But when a former vicar's wife who had lived in India, Annie Besant (1847–1933), became president of the Society in 1907 she brought to the fore her interest in Hinduism.

Besant was an enthusiastic lecturer on behalf of the Society and her ideas were usually well-received by audiences. As a result Besant's Hindu-coloured version of Theosophy became influential in the post-First World War era, and also ensured that Blavatsky's Buddhism reached a wide audience. Anyone attempting to write a 'family tree' of Western occultism and paganism needs to spend considerable effort looking at the influence of the Theosophy Society, together

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Left to right:
Madame Blavatsky;
Annie Besant;
Dion Fortune.

with the original Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and its assorted successors. This is not the place to attempt this, but suffice to say that from this the melting pot of Western esotericism and Eastern 'wisdom' flowed many of ideas which are now at the foundations of post-Second World War paganisms.

While an 'over all' view of modern paganisms tends to see differences rather than similarities, an 'under all' view is quite different. The implicit ideas underlying specific expressions of faith or practice – the worldviews – reveal much more coherence. I will discuss some other examples later but, first, just one 'for instance'. As noted, modern paganism shares with Hinduism some of the fluidity about the nature and number of deities. It also shares a concern with 'doing' over specific beliefs. Yet there is a key difference between modern pagans and Hindus. It is also the same difference that separates modern pagans from all 'historic' pagans. However it is a difference that separates modern pagans from only some Christians, and then only in the last five hundred or so years.

Modern pagans are all protestants

Modern paganism could only come about in a post-Reformation worldview in which the individual believes he or she has direct access to deity. Before the Reformation every Western religion held that ordinary people could only contact the deity – or, in the case of ancient Greece or Rome, the deities – through the appointed priesthood. Individuals required intercessionary saints to act on their behalf, a worldview inherited from pre-conversion practices. But modern pagans, unlike Catholics or devotees of Zeus or Jupiter, have a worldview in which they assume they have a hot line to the top.

Back to ancient pagans

Frankly, if there is a degree of difficulty in trying to find coherence among the various forms of modern paganisms then there is much greater difficulty trying to lump together the whole diversity of pre-Christian practices across wide geographical areas. Even if we restrict our interest to those practices which immediately precede contact with Christian missionaries and make a broad distinction between Mediterranean paganisms and north European paganisms there is still a lot of 'it was mostly like this but sometimes like that' qualifications. And that's merely about what we think we know about these paganisms, which is only an infinitesimally trivial amount of what must actually have been happening.

If we think of pre-Christian religions as essential local practices with some shared worldviews then we risk gross distortions by using catch-all terms like 'paganism' to describe them all. The words 'pagan' and 'paganism' used in this catch-all way effectively go back no further than eighteenth century Neoclassicism. Yes there was a Latin word, *pagus*, 'the dwellers in the countryside' who did not follow predominately urban-based mystery cults such as Christianity and its more thriving competitors, such as Mythraism. But whether those rural dwellers thought of themselves as pagan is a more moot point. (See also The Twilight Age Volume Two for further discussion of *pagus*.)

Despite much muddled thinking to the contrary, traditional beliefs cannot be deemed merely as 'witchcraft' – although it would be naïve to think that 'spells' – for good or for ill – were not part of such traditional worldviews. I am inclined to agree with Stuart Clark's suggestion that Christianity 'invented' witchcraft – on the basis that originally it was heresy to believe in witchcraft and then, with the



The modern bridge at the site of the eponymous ford at Manningford, Wiltshire. The watercourse is the Wiltshire Avon, which flows past Stonehenge and into the Solent.

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Inquisition, it became heresy not to! Carlo Ginzburg has succinctly argued that the Inquisition changed popular practice, at least in Italy. However, while all such research helps explain modern worldviews about witchcraft, all such developments are a long time after the Anglo-Saxons.

In Anglo-Saxon England social identity was expressed in the word *-ingas*, which means the 'people of', as in various place-names. I am writing this in the centre of a territory associated with the Cannings – the people of Cana – revealed by the modern village names Bishops Cannings and All Cannings. Cana was the founder of the lineage, the original tribal leader acting as a minor king. To the south are several villages named after Manningford – the ford of the people of Mana (the similarity of Cana and Mana suggests they were related). Nearly every English county provides examples of *-ingas* in settlement names, such as Dorking, Barking and Malling. Almost every one refers to a 'founder', a tribal leader. (See *The Twilight Age Volume Five* for more extended discussions of Anglo-Saxon founding fathers.)

And, just as the head of household in Scandinavia or among Jewish communities is responsible for leading religious rituals – although can hire in specialist help for the bigger events – so too Cana and Mana and their great many contemporaries would have been leading or facilitating the relevant rites. A close examination of the Old English literature reveals that such leaders – whether referred to as a *hlaford*, *peoden* or *cyning* – were the ones who most often sought intercession with the deities. Whether the indigenous British still maintained their own rites, and the extent to which there was any influence between them are wide-open questions for which there seems to be no way of answering.

However there is little, if any, reason to doubt that what we lump together as Anglo-Saxon 'paganism' was just as diverse as the various local practices we lump together as, say, Hinduism. Each tribal leader would no doubt have 'ritual specialists' who had something of the status of the later bishops. We even know the name of one of them – Coifi, who served Edwin in Northumbria. But most probably those 'pagan priests' followed quite closely what the king wanted them to do. Quite plausibly large parts of pre-conversion England was a patchwork of 'micro-pagandoms' the size of Rutland, or somewhat bigger in less fertile areas.

Such early Anglo-Saxon local 'pagandoms' are almost certainly the successors to much older local 'pagandoms' of a similar size. Although whether they have more-or-less the same boundaries as their older precursors is a much more open question. The evidence for Rutland is exceptional and may indeed be the exception. In complete contrast, the Canningas tribe seemingly occupied a region of Wiltshire which went from *centre to centre* of former Roman *regios*;

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The underlying reasons for the variations between 'pagandoms' is wide open to speculation. It may simply be a natural process of maintaining local or family/clan traditions. However, possibly – although not inevitably – the differences might reflect deeper ethnic identities, whether a contrast between indigenous continuations of Romano-British traditions or variations between Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Frisians and so forth. No matter what the origins of the differences might have been, presumably 'borrowings' – perhaps as a result of inter-marriage between such groups – just made everything more varied. Yet despite steady change in pre-literate societies there would be an underlying conviction that 'We've always done it like that here'.

For present purposes I do not want to even attempt to resolve all the issues associated with the notion of 'micro-pagandoms', or even propose that the neologism is helpful. What I have hopefully achieved is to dispel any prior beliefs of an organised religion which we could refer to simply as '*the* paganism of the Anglo-Saxons' and instead sow the seeds of the notion that modern use of the plural word 'paganisms' is a handy – and necessary – abbreviation for a great diversity of local practices. My evidence is both from Hinduism – another 'catch all' term for what are, before the independence movement, in essence local practices – and from the later medieval period in England where each diocese maintained its own traditions for the liturgical year.

However, just as the local practices of Hindus and medieval Christians are influenced by an underlying worldview, so too there is an identifiable north European worldview. But to simply refer to this as 'pagan' is to grossly oversimplify the situation. But before I return to this central issue, I want to draw attention to some different evidence.

Chapter Three

More dead than alive

Archaeological evidence for the Anglo-Saxon period is tricky. Houses and even high-status buildings such as royal 'palaces' and churches were built of wood with thatch or turf roofs. Pottery was at times non-existent and even when it was made any surviving shards provide only broad evidence for dates. Metal is used but rarely survives on domestic sites – and is even rare when major religious establishments have been excavated. Recycling of scrap metal must have been thorough!

Enough digs have been done to show that Anglo-Saxon life varied both regionally and over time. And there were clearly variations in social status – albeit the lives of the most lowly, such as slaves, are to all intents and purposes invisible to archaeologists. So we can piece together something about Anglo-Saxon lives but rarely feel with are seeing more than a fragmentary picture.

But, elusive as the evidence for living Anglo-Saxons is, every one of them died. While not everyone's remains have been discovered by archaeologists it is fair to say we know far more about dead Anglo-Saxons than living ones. Large cemeteries – sometimes all inhumations, sometimes all cremations and, more rarely, a combination of both rites – have been excavated. The skeletons tell us about the age and general health at the time of death. Grave-goods – or the absence of them – tell us something about their status. Or, pedantically, the status which their still-living relatives wished them to take into the afterlife.

While there must, inevitably, be some correlation between a person's grave goods and the objects they used or treasured while alive, we must assume that what was buried with them was selected by their relatives. Some items – such as jewellery – may be old enough to be heirlooms. Indeed they may show wear or even repairs which reveal them to be 'much loved'. Other items, such as a spear in the grave of males, denote social status and are presumably placed in the grave as part of deeply-rooted traditions. But the presence of pots – sometimes already damaged – suggests that there was an element of 'tokenism' to what was included.

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One of over two dozen Anglo-Saxon burials excavated in 2012 at Barrow Clump, Wiltshire.



There was a time, not so long ago, when archaeologists assumed that cremations were non-Christian, as were inhumations with grave goods, whereas the absence of grave goods denoted post-conversion burials. A predominately east-west burial, with the head at the west, was also taken as a clue to the person being Christian. But the excavation of cemeteries which predate conversion suggest that all such 'rules of thumb' must be amputated. Similarly a smaller number of excavations of early Christian sites show that the east-west 'rule' is secondary to orientation with a focal building – presumably a small church – which may or may not be exactly east-west as these buildings often align a little north of due east.

While there are enough local variations in England which make comparisons with Ireland risky, there is documentary evidence that in late seventh and early eighth century Ireland cemeteries were family or clan based, rather than faith based. The shorter of two similar accounts of St Patrick travelling around translates as

[St Patrick] came to Findmag in the territory of the Maine and found there the sign of the cross of Christ and two new graves, and from his chariot the holy man said 'Who is it that is buried here?' and a voice answered from the grave 'I am a pagan'. The holy man replied: 'Why has the holy cross been placed beside you?' and again he answered 'because the mother of the man who is buried beside me asked that the sign of the cross be placed beside her son's grave. But a stupid and foolish man placed it beside me' and Patrick leaped from his chariot... pulled the cross from the grave and placed it over the head of the baptised man...

(Bieler 1979: 155–7)

So, in Ireland at least, mixed faith cemeteries were normal.

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A Google Maps aerial view annotated with the known and presumed positions of the pre-Domesday manors in Wymeswold, Leicestershire. (From Trubshaw 2012.)

Then we lose sight of dead Anglo-Saxons. Instead of cemeteries near or on the boundaries of settlement areas something radically different starts. The dead are buried right in the midst of the living. That, of course, is only possible once people start living in nucleated villages rather than dispersed farmsteads. A whole new era of English history opens up by about the tenth century. And, despite all the changes over the last two hundred years, it is an era which still shapes how we live. Most of the roads in England came into existence to link together Anglo-Saxon villages. Most of those villages have a parish church and associated graveyard. The street plan may offer evidence for the relative status of the original manorial lordship (see Trubshaw 2012 Appendix 2 for an example).

However, because we still live where later Anglo-Saxons lived and for centuries have reused the graveyards they inaugurated, archaeologists rarely get more than a 'key hole' view of the lives or even deaths of these people who shaped much of England. And they shaped not only the landscape of villages and roads, they shaped our national religion. Furthermore, these people also set into place the language, the political administration and legal system of the country, albeit all subsequently evolved more-or-less steadily over the centuries.

Digging up beliefs

Archaeologists can dig up all sorts of evidence about the past. States of preservation can vary considerably but, overall, much can be gleaned about the material culture. But one realm of evidence never survives – evidence for intangible culture, such as beliefs. Or at least that is the way things used to be. But in recent decades archaeologists investigating the earliest phases of human evolution have begun to speculate about how changes in the way early humans thought affected the evidence available to archaeologists. This is termed 'cognitive archaeology' and has proven to offer fruitful – if invariably contested – insights.

So useful has cognitive archaeology been to paleoarchaeologists that those dealing with more recent periods have said 'We'll have some of that too.' So little surprise that some of the leading names in Anglo-Saxon archaeology have taken just such a cognitive approach, qualified by the recognition that '... we know that even the best archaeology provides no open access to the mind.' (Carver *et al* 2010: ix) These are the prefatory words of Martin Carver, Alex Sanmark and Sarah Semple to a book called *Signals of Belief in Early England: Anglo-Saxon paganism revisited*. It is a collection of papers from three conferences over the preceding five years.

These papers look at a number of archaeological topics – sites of 'temples' and water-based 'shrines', evidence for high-status domestic houses or halls, animals depicted in art, and animal remains left after butchery and cooking. And, inevitably, burial practices. So far, fairly predictable. But their approach is more novel. As the preface states, they assume that 'what people believed, whether pure reason or intellectual mish-mash, was expressed in their material culture' (Carver *et al* 2010: ix) so can be recognised by archaeologists. However they are careful to emphasise that they are not recording or studying the beliefs directly but only the 'signals of belief' – hence the book's title.

These papers confirm that such signals can be clearly recognised. Furthermore they reveal that beliefs varied from place to place as well as over time. And, this is where things get a little radical compared to preceding interpretations, Carver and his colleagues no longer assume that there was an 'underlying consistency' with local variations. Instead:

Since every community is likely to have its own take on cosmology, there will be many hundreds of communities to study before an underlying system – if there was one – is to emerge.

Our premise is therefore that paganism was not a religion with supraregional rules and institutions but a loose term for a variety of local intellectual world views... More controversially, we extend the same courtesy to Christianity. Although insisting on its universality, Christianisation too hides a multiplicity of locally negotiated positions, that probably did not amount to a religion (in the orthodox sense) until the 8th century or later. Neither paganism nor Christianity are treated here as independent agents, out to confront and better each other.

(Carver *et al* 2010: ix)

There is much in the second paragraph which should now be familiar after reading the previous two chapters. Indeed if seeing Christianity as local world

views is 'controversial' to Carver's fellow archaeologists then it suggests they have not been paying sufficient attention to Dark Age historians over the previous twenty years. What is clear is that these archaeologists have adopted a view of conversion-era England which is from a similar perspective as James Russell's 'Germanization' of Christianity in northern Europe – with the open-mindedness to look for evidence of 'signals of belief' rather than a simplistic distinction between paganism and Christianity.

In place of simplistic notions, the papers challenge the way the word paganism has been used as a broad cultural and chronological label. They draw upon previous studies which sought to understand pre-Christian beliefs through animals in art, mortuary symbolism, unusual grave types, evidence for shrines, and even the archaeology of settlements to reveal what seems to be much more idiomatic 'pick and mix' attitudes to matters of religion. As Ronald Hutton recognises in a splendid afterword to the book, the contributors have done a fine job in redefining the questions which can be asked of the archaeological evidence – but they have barely begun to answer in detail many of these new lines of enquiry.

The ideas which form the later chapters of this study came about as a direct result of reading *Signals of Belief* and realising that the ideas initially developed by James Russell from essentially historical sources also work well when used to interpret the archaeological evidence. My own interests cover iconography – principally the imagery used on carvings – and, as explained, extend beyond religion into the realms of cosmology and worldviews. Neither carvings nor deeper aspects of cosmology form the focus of the papers in *Signals of Belief* – although that, I consider, is a reflection of the relevant scholar's research interests rather than any fundamental reason for their being excluded.

Since the first edition of this study was published in 2013 I have continued to explore iconography and cosmology, and also used the same 'worldviews' to look at the topography and toponyms of Anglo-Saxon England. The result was initially a website called Anglo-Saxon Twilight (www.indigogroup.co.uk/twilight) and subsequently The Twilight Age series of PDF publications. Little, if anything, of what I have published fits under the rubric of 'cognitive archaeology', yet that paradigm forms one strand of the distinctly interdisciplinary methodologies which I attempt to combine.

Chapter Four

How language reveals – and limits – our worldviews

In the first edition of this work Chapter Four was devoted to a discussion of how *weohs* and *stapols* evolved in Christian crosses. Those ideas have grown considerably and now form Volume Three of The Twilight Age series. In essence, although the evidence is iconographical rather than documentary or archaeological, my suggestions seemingly fit well with Carver *et al's* attempts to use surviving material culture as the basis for understanding the thinking of the people of made and used those artefacts.

What happens if instead of looking at the archaeological evidence from this perspective we look at the historical record from a similar perspective? Well firstly we have difficulty – the evidence comes to us from the writing of senior clerics and legal scribes. They offer neither a neutral nor complete view of a society where, based on the archaeology, there was considerable local diversity of culture and successive ‘waves of change’.

However these documentary sources do offer a somewhat less biased and more complete perspective on the way languages were used at the time – whether English, Irish, Welsh or Latin. Existing words simply acquire new meanings. For example, in Old Irish the word *érlam* is used to refer to a patron saint. But previously it meant ‘god of the tribe’ or ‘tutelary deity’. Similarly the Old Irish word *cretair* denotes a Christian relic – but previously referred to an amulet. In a similar manner the Old Norse word *gipta*, which has the sense of ‘luck’, shifts smoothly from pagan to Christian contexts. More subtle examples of such ‘recycling’ of words will follow later.

Academics who make up departments of ‘cognitive linguistics’ have clearly established over the last few decades how we can begin to understand many of the underlying assumptions of a society by analysing the structure of language and intrinsic metaphors (see Turner 1996 and Fauconnier and Turner 2002 for

readable introductions, or see the various works of George Lakoff if you prefer to jump in at the deep end).

Approaching such linguists from, as it were, the other end of the path, are the mythographers who attempt to understand the cosmologies of traditional societies. They use not only the overt content of the stories and legends which make up a corpus of myths but, to an even greater extent, similar linguistic analysis to reveal the ‘deep structures’ of a culture.

What is most fascinating about the ‘deep structures of language’ is that they pass, as it were, underneath the radar of conscious thinking. We are so used to what commonly-used words signify that we rarely stop to think about those meanings. And few people have the vantage point to see that the meanings inherent in the words of one language group do not match words in a different language group. The exception would be people who are bilingual in an Asian language, such as Chinese, and variants of Indo-European languages, such as English. For example, even ‘verbs’ and ‘nouns’ merge into one another in Chinese, and tenses – the sense of future and past in a statement – also translate poorly into Western languages. And that’s before we even begin to translate words such as ‘religion’ or ‘heaven’, which had no counterparts in Chinese (until phrases like ‘ideological doctrine’ were invented to translate the Western term ‘religion’ – what we might want to call ‘religion’ in China is referred to in Chinese by terms which translate more-or-less as ‘customary practices’).

Leaving all such generalised thinking about cognitive linguistics to one side, I will focus my attention on a small number of examples in Old English and Latin. These suggestions are, to my knowledge, original. I did not set out purposefully to find these examples, they just ‘revealed themselves’ as I was reading various books about Anglo-Saxon England and Migration Era Scandinavia soon after I had read *Signals of Belief*, with the specific suggestions of *continuity* of religious activity across what has hitherto been regard as a sharp divide between pre-Christian and post-conversion outlooks.

There is considerable overlap with Volume Two of *The Twilight Age*. In general the scope of that work is wider while these remarks deal with a smaller number of examples are more detail.

From *óðr* to *potentia*

Firstly I would like to look more closely at the Old Norse word *óðr* (pronounced ‘oo-ther’). *Óðr* is perhaps what is ‘in’ the god *Óðinn* – he is ‘*óðr inn*’, literally ‘full of *óðr*’. Indeed there is a minor deity – seemingly distinct from *Óðinn* – who is known simply as *Óðr* (Tolley 2009: 453–4). However most of the references to

óðr in the sagas – and there are plenty of them – are to a something rather than a someone. The frequency of *óðr* in the original texts is hidden because translators use a variety of modern words, such as ‘spirit’, ‘breath’, ‘prophecy’ and ‘inspired utterance’.

All the ways in which *óðr* is used in the sagas are consistent with the notion of a sense of power manifesting *through* someone or, more rarely, something. Clive Tolley, after an exhaustive discussion, considers that the primary sense of *óðr* is ‘spirit affording intellectual inspiration’ (Tolley 2009: 180).

There is an Old English word, *ond* which seems to be derived from the Old Norse *ond* and *andi* which are both variants of a word meaning ‘breath’. In Old English *ond* is used to translate Christian notions of ‘spirit’, but pre-Christian contexts the word denotes ‘life-force’ (Tolley 2009: 179–80; Pollington *et al* 2010: 425–6). If there is a counterpart to *óðr* in Old English then it is perhaps *ond*, but the pre-Christian examples are too few to offer any nuanced understanding of the word. What is even more confusing is that *ond* appears very frequently in Old English – this is the homophone which gives the Modern English ‘and’! Therefore to play safe in the following discussion I will use the Old Norse word *óðr* rather than its possible Old English counterpart *ond*.

Was the ‘spiritual power’ of *óðr* thought to manifest through *weohs* and *stapols*? And before you dismiss this as wishful thinking, consider that after the conversion the power of Christ – his *potentia* or ‘potency’ – was considered to manifest through the bones and other relics of saints. Indeed it was this same *potentia* that was ‘channelled’ by the clergy during the Mass and to bless or heal people or even animals. Indeed a brief moment’s thought about early medieval Christianity, not only in England, will lead to the recognition that the only difference between a high-ranking priest and a saint is that the latter is dead. A longer thought about the ontology of the time would hold that the saint was *not* dead. Instead he was now living in the Otherworld rubbing shoulders with the real ‘powers that be’ – so ideally placed to respond to intercessory prayers for benefactory changes. Local canonisation was so commonplace that almost any bishop or abbot could expect the honorific ‘saint’ within a few years of his demise. What was revered about these local saints was the *potentia* or ‘potency’ of their shrines and relics.

Just how much difference in worldview is there between a priest or saint transmitting the ‘potency’ of Christ and *weohs* and such like ‘transmitting’ the *óðr* associated with Óðinn? If *weohs* were regarded as having *óðr* then presumably ‘earth fast stones’ and certain trees and wells prohibited in tenth and eleventh century edicts also possessed the same ability.

The deep difference between *óðr* and *potentia*

At the deepest levels there was a profound difference between the Christian worldview and that of most traditional religions. Christianity regards God and all those who live in Heaven as being somewhere else to this world – even though the ‘somewhere’ is never specified. The technical term is ‘transcendent’. The antonym is ‘immanent’, which has the sense of ‘indwelling or inherent in this realm’.

Judaism is an entirely transcendent worldview – Moses may have gone to the top of Mount Sinia to be nearer to Yahweh, but he still did not meet him. In contrast Classical Greeks thought of their deities as living on the top of Mount Olympus – and some of them had a bad rap for making mortal girls pregnant, which is seemingly rather easy for immanent deities but a tad trickier for transcendent ones – when God wanted to bear a child by Mary he enlisted the help of an archangel.

However, we must however be careful not to refer to Christianity as a purely transcendent belief system. One of the most radical aspects of Christianity, from the perspective of contemporary Jews, was that Jesus was believed to be ‘the Word made flesh’ – in other words, an immanent deity. There is even part of the Gospels where Joseph is told that Mary’s yet-to-be-born will be called ‘Immanuel’. Furthermore there will, at some time, be a ‘second coming’. And saints too – from the top-level ones, such as the Virgin Mary, to the most obscure local ones – have all made the transition from immanent mortal life to a transcendent afterlife. Christian doctrine holds that everyone will spend their afterlife in either Heaven or Hell – both of which are transcendent.

Modern secular society still reflects this Christian transcendentalism in terms such as ‘otherworldly’ and ‘supernatural’. In contrast, most traditional worldviews – including that of the Anglo-Saxons – do not think in terms of an otherworld or a supernatural realm – everything is an aspect of this world, although not all entities are as visible or tangible as, say, humans.

So, while a transcendent worldview can conceive of something coming from the realm of the gods, this is not conceivable in a worldview where everything is immanent. *Óðr* and such like are aspects of an immanent worldview, whereas *potentia* originates in a transcendent ontology.

Leeks and royal inaugurations

The word ‘leech’ was once a common reference to a doctor, usually in an ironic or overtly derogatory way. The assumption is that this usage relates to the once-prevalent use of leeches by the medical profession. But this assumption is wrong.

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Lia Fáil, Tara. The apparent emanation of leac from the top of the stone is, in reality, a result of rain on the lens...



The Old English words 'leechcraft' (*læcecræft*) and 'leechdom' (*læcedom*) are based on the word *leac* (also transcribed as *leace* or just *lac*). And that is cognate with the modern word 'leek', but not with 'leech'.

In Old English *læcedom* meant 'medicament, medicine; healing', and – by analogy – 'salvation'. *Læcecræft* is, fairly obviously, the skills associated with *læcedom*. Both leechdom and leechcraft remained in use well into the nineteenth century as somewhat derogatory terms for the realm of doctors or medicine, and are occasionally used as deliberate anachronisms, along with more specific terms such as 'wortcunning'.

But while the supposed healing attributes of leeches are widely known, what is it about leeks which gives their name to the realm of medicine? Is there some secret ingredient to be distilled and sold as a herbal remedy? Well, a tentative 'yes' to the secret ingredient but an emphatic 'no' regarding the herbalist commercialisation.

In Old English literature the word *læce* also appears in combination with *stan-* – the 'leek stone' if you like. And *læcestans* get mentioned in the literature because they are the places where kings were inaugurated (strictly we cannot speak of the

'coronation' of kings back then as crowns were still some way off in the future). Examples of *læcestans* are the Stone of Scone (or Stone of Destiny) used for the inauguration of Scottish kings until it was hijacked by Edward I and taken to Westminster Abbey to be used for the investiture of English monarchs ever since.

Curiously, most *læcestans* are shaped, as with the Stone of Scone, rather like flagstones but this reflects their eventual evolution into rock-cut stone chairs, and thence into free-standing thrones. The original sense of *læcestan* is revealed quite explicitly by the other well-known Stone of Destiny – though one known by an Irish not Old English name, Lia Fáil. This has the shape which Aldhelm referred to as *ermula cruda* (see *The Twilight Age Volume Three*) – it is phallic. It is the Stone of Potency. And this is the sense of *læc* in *læcestan*. We are in the same realms as the Latin word *potentia* previously discussed. And kings needed to be 'potent', both to sire further kings and to win battles.

And in pre-Christian times kings would deploy this power. It was known as the king's *hæl* – a word which seems to have the same sense as the Scandinavian word *hamingja*, 'the luck of the gods' which came from the king's special relationship with the gods (and thus having more than a passing similarity with the Japanese idea of *kami* manifesting through powerful leaders).

The link between *læc* and leeks is not so spurious as might be first thought. Wild leeks, with a more bulbous root than modern cultivars, are among the most phallic of north European plants. And their strong or 'potent' smell adds to this allusion. If you ever wondered why the Welsh regard the daffodil as their national emblem it is because the name in Welsh is *Cenhinen Bedr* or '(St) Peter's leek'. The sense is of 'Peter's potency', an entirely appropriate sentiment for any national emblem. And the tenuous associations between good kingship and leeks are maintained right at the end of the sixteenth century, as any of those who – like me – studied Shakespeare's *Henry V* at school will recall. Shakespeare has the king tell the Welsh warrior Fluellen that he is wearing a leek because 'I am Welsh, good countryman.'

Those who take the trouble to turn over their coins will see the leek as one of the emblems used on the pound coin as a way of recognising that Wales is one part of the United Kingdom. But, understandably, few would look at such coins and think of the 'potency' which this plant once denoted. However in Anglo-Saxon times the broad sense of *læc* did encompass the potency and all the senses for which nowadays we might use the word 'phallic'. In case you are wondering, the comparable feminine plant was flax (Pollington 2000: 485).

From fate to God

Given the inherent continuity in underlying worldviews, it makes perfect sense for *potentia* to be thought of in terms of a different type of *óðr*. A parallel would be the way the Old English word *metod*, with the literal meaning of ‘measurer’ but denoting ‘fate’, becomes a by-name for the Christian God. This is not because the pagan sense of fate had a close link to a specific deity. Pre-Christian notions of fate were essentially humanistic, although linked with the female *normir*, who were in some ways more ancient and more powerful than the deities (Stone 1989: 21–2). It was the *normir*’s role in determining an individual’s destiny which was ‘taken over’ by God. Only subsequently did the concept of God develop in ways which made *metod*, a word synonymous with ‘fate’ less suited as a by-name for the deity.

As Stephen Pollington has discussed, the tale of Creation which forms part of *Caedmon’s Hymn* – the first poem in Old English which can be reliably attributed to a poet – seems to be composed from formulaic half-lines which have been selected to convey a Christian message. Yet the half-lines seemingly are archaic, so did such expressions as *eci dryhten* (‘everlasting lord’) and *frea almectig* (‘lord all-mighty’) – used by Caedmon to refer to the Christian God – previously refer to pagan deities? The situation is unclear for *dryhten* as this word is commonly used to refer to a warlord but seemingly not in religious contexts (Pollington 2011: 242–3). *Frea* is the name of a male pagan deity in Scandinavia. However in Old English poetry the sense seems to be of ‘lord’ or ‘dear one’ rather than the recycled name of god. But there must have been some ambiguity because in later Old English texts *dryhten* becomes the common way of referring to Christ as ‘our Lord’ while the word *frea* drops out of use.

At the time of conversion Anglo-Saxon society was held together by a complex notion of kith and kin, and of personal service to a *dryht* or lord. Kin are blood relatives while kith are the people you live among. And, in a patrilocal society where women left their own kin when they married then all communities would be a mix of kin (mostly adult men but including all the children and some widows) and kith – the spouses of these men. By using the word *dryhten* early clergy wove their religion deeply into this social cosmology in ways that we can now barely comprehend.

Old English poems reveal that the Old Testament god was thought of as the ‘maker’ or ‘shaper’ – more so than the ‘creator’. This would be consistent with north European cosmogonic myths which think of the primordial cow shaping ice and fire, in contrast to Middle Eastern cosmogonies where the world is created

from nothing. The distinction is subtle and seemingly missed by Anglo-Saxon poets – evidence that underlying assumptions and worldviews influence the way we understand new ideas.

The Modern English word ‘god’ is one of three Old English words which might have been used to translate Biblical references. The Old English words *os*, *rægen* and *god* were all candidates. Intriguingly *god* does not originally mean ‘god’ but simply ‘that which is invoked’. But, in contrast to *os* and *rægen* which are used as collective names for male deities, *god* could be used in the singular so was the word adopted for the monotheistic Christian God (Pollington 2011: 82).

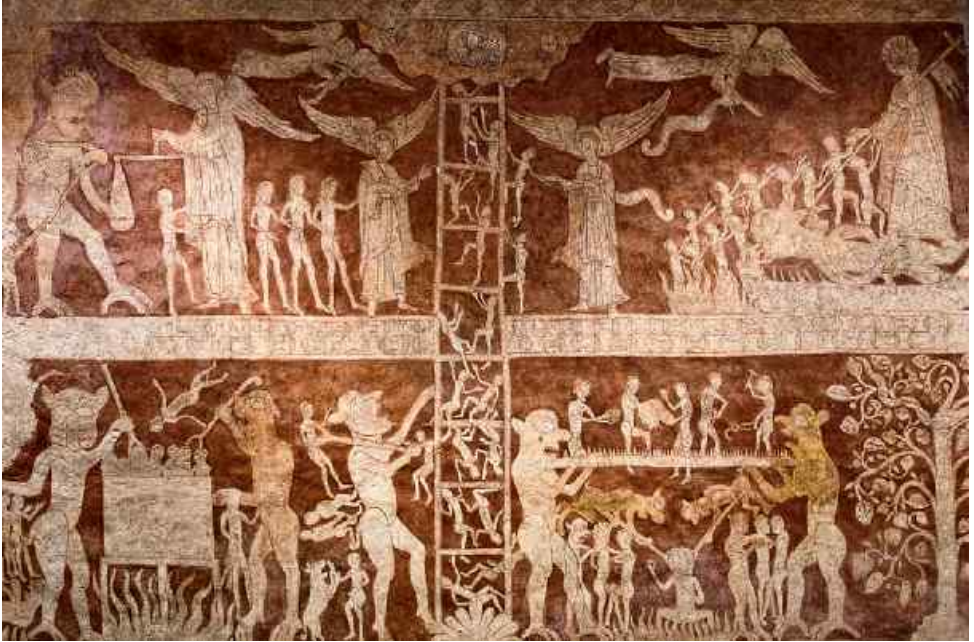
Monotheism was alien to Germanic worldviews. Pagan gods were thought of as collections of entities and an individual entity was rarely addressed or discussed (Pollington 2011: 84). The history of European conversion frequently gives brief insights into the persistence of such polytheism, even among kings who claim to have been converted. The apostate polygamy of Livingstone’s convert Sechele seems an apposite analogy...

The slow uptake of salvation

Similarly, the Christian ideologies about redemption and salvation are slow to penetrate into popular Christianity – despite surviving Old English homilies and sermons suggesting that the clergy were fully aware of the importance of this doctrine. Here my argument about slowly-changing deeper worldviews could be used in reverse – in that any form of soteriology was entirely alien to pre-Christian worldviews, so there was no precedent which provided a foundation on which to develop the rather abstract – and, at that time, entirely novel – ideas of salvation.

Saint Benedict of Nursia (*circa* 480–547) seems to have realised that the concept of salvation was not a strong selling point. Or, more probably, he read the Gospels more often than the later books of the New Testament. While something of a core creed of Christianity over the last millennium, the doctrine of salvation barely gets a mention in the three synoptic Gospels and only takes shape in the *Acts* and Pauline letters. In its place Benedict emphasised the important of ‘Jesus as stranger’ and the many xenophylic acts of Christ in the Gospels. This was to form the basis of the Benedictine rule over subsequent centuries, and has been ‘re-activated’ among some modern day Christians.

Only as ‘Doom paintings’ and their like take up dominant positions over chancel arches later in medieval times does a soteriology of salvation become part of the underlying worldview (and one which continues to underlie Western thinking, to the extent most modern people find it hard to understand religions, such as Daoism, which do not offer salvation or enlightenment).



The 'Doom' painting, of around 1170, in Chaldon church, Surrey.

Inevitably, attempting to establish why something doesn't happen (or happens slowly) is more difficult than interpreting what *does* happen so I'll simply leave this as a passing comment rather than a possible explanation for the slow uptake of such core Christian concepts as salvation.

Chapter Five

Heroes, martyrs and saints

Sometime around AD 400 a Gaulish priest known to posterity as Vigilantius considered the emergent cult of the relics of Christian saints to be little more than 'a virtually pagan rite introduced into churches on the pretext of religion' with the result that Christians everywhere 'kiss and adore some kind of dust, wrapped in a little container of precious cloth.'

Vigilantius is not simply objecting to these rituals themselves, he also condemns the underlying theology. He simply does not believe that the dead – even if saintly – can pray for the living. So, if the saints cannot act as intercessionaries to Christ, then why light candles at their shrines and keep overnight vigils?

So we get a clear enough idea of the rites and even what relics comprised of – the dust from the saints' tombs and associated cloth. Digging up and relocating saints' bones is still in the future.

The actual words used by Vigilantius have long been lost. We can only piece them together from the rather unrestrained and sarcastic rebuttal by St Jerome in a work known as *Contra Vigilantium*. As ever, history is written by the victors – and Jerome's support for the cult of saints won out and dominated Christianity for at least the next millennium.

To be fair to Jerome, he too feels a bit iffy about the candles and vigils as he recognises that this is indeed what pagans do at the shrines to their deities. But the candles concern him less than the 'notorious practices' associated with overnight vigils – and here he seems to be referring to what Christian converts get up to rather than just their pagan precursors – and emphasises the need to engage in such rites devoutly. Vigilantius also opposed the celibacy of the clergy – quite a novel idea at the time – and Jerome offers some coarse abuse in defence of celibacy. In this respect Jerome is again the voice of the future direction of Latin Christianity, which increasingly embraced sexual abstinence by the clergy (re-inventing monasticism along the way) and rituals associated with miraculous relics (the focus of ubiquitous pilgrimage).

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Part of one of the many Roman catacombs.

What did pagans living alongside early Christians make of the new-fangled cult of saintly martyrs? Here the writings of Julian the Apostate – so called because the empire briefly reverted to paganism when he became Roman emperor in 361 – are informative. Bear in mind that, while still a ‘covert cult’ persecuted by the emperors, early Christians had become accustomed to worshipping in the catacombs, where many of the Roman martyrs had been entombed. Julian regards such intimacy with the dead as distasteful. ‘You have filled everywhere with tombs and sepulchres... why do you haunt the sepulchres?’

Even more informative are the remarks of Eunapius, a contemporary of Julian:

Collecting together the bones and skulls of those who had been condemned for many crimes, whom the city courts had punished, they proclaimed them gods, haunted their graves, and supposed they were better by defiling themselves at their tombs. They called them martyrs

and messengers of a sort and ambassadors for what they requested of the gods...

The pagan's distinction between temple and tomb was being blurred – irrevocably, as it would turn out. From a non-believer's perspective the early Christians worshipped the bones of the martyrs as if they were pagan gods. After the execution of one of the earlier martyrs, Polycarp, in 167 there was a deliberate attempt to prevent Christians obtaining his remains 'lest abandoning the crucified one they begin to worship this man' as a contemporary legal record seemingly recorded. To quote the words of the modern scholar Robert Bartlett, 'From the pagan perspective, there was nothing unlikely in this strange sect, which already worshipped one executed criminal, from taking up others.' (Bartlett 2013: 610)

Opinions and practices in the eastern Mediterranean in the first centuries of Christianity do not necessarily reveal anything about northern Europe several centuries later. However, Roman authors such as Tacitus saw nothing fundamentally different about religion in Gaul, just remarking that the sacrifices were more barbaric than Roman rites (North 1997; Hutton 2013). And, as I have already noted, the main objections to the emergent cult of saints came from Vigilantius, who lived much of his life in Gaul.

Reformation reservations

Skip forward to the century or so leading up to the Reformation and there was a widespread feeling that the Roman church was sustaining pagan practices. The main evidence for this was probably Vigilantius-via-Jermone once again. We must accept that by the fifteenth century such remarks were polemical rhetoric rather than evidence-based. Be that as it may, it was a 'myth' that was maintained throughout the turbulent sixteenth century and later. The pioneer of empirical philosophy, David Hume (1711–1776) opined that

The heroes in paganism correspond exactly to the saints in popery...
The place of Hercules, Theseus, Hector, Romulus, is now supplied by
Dominic, Francis, Anthony, and Benedict.

Hume's opinion may reflect the Enlightenment but can hardly be considered unbiased. But this opinion persisted. It resurfaced in a scholarly book on the origins of the cult of saints by Ernst Lucius, published posthumously in 1908. Lucius explicitly compares the healing miracles of Christian saints with cults of pagan healing gods, such as Asclepius. Around the same time the Jesuit scholar Hippolyte Delehaye (1859–1941) set about researching the saints, eventually amassing a considerable magnitude of research, and instigating international

scholarship which continues to the present time. Yet even Delehaye who, while not entirely unbiased, is far more moderate and informed than Hume, concludes that

When one has demonstrated among the Greeks a cult which, in all its details, recalls that of the saints, with its tombs, translations [reburial of the bones at a different place], inventions ['discoveries' of saints' remains], visions and dubious or forged relics, what further parallels one could demand, in order to establish that the cult of the saints is nothing but a pagan survival?

(Delahaye *Les légendes hagiographiques*, 1905; translated by V.M. Crawford 1907 p156)

While noting the resemblances between heroes and saints, Delahaye is keen to deny any dependence. And, in some respects, he is right. Archaeological evidence reveals that several early churches – mostly in the eastern Mediterranean but including the church of St Gereon in Cologne – are on the site of temples dedicated to Isis. But this, argues Robert Bartlett, is because the goddess was 'overthrown' rather than because of 'clandestine substitution' (Bartlett 2013: 613).

Personally I am not sure there is such a clear distinction. Religion, at least before the Reformation, is mostly about what people do (see Volume One of *The Twilight Age*). The best definition of Christianity is 'what people who call themselves Christian actually do'. Debate over beliefs and faith simply divides all major religions into ever-diminishing fragments.

Early Christians at a former temple to Isis – or, indeed, any other 'overthrown' pagan deity – may have been doing some things differently to the pagan worshippers. But the simple fact that they were still using the same place is significant. They probably did what they did at similar times of year, month and day (or intentionally avoided timings which were too closely linked with the 'old regime'). Much of what they did during rites would, unselfconsciously, be retained or adapted. People carry on doing what they always did unless there is a conscious reason not to. Historians many centuries later may deem the changes to be an 'overthrow' rather than some sort of 'substitution'. But to the people there at the time neither term would have crossed their minds – they simply did what they expected to do, with some awareness that there were now things which it was not right to do. We define what is normal by what is deemed *abnormal*, without making long inclusive lists of what comprises normality – that is simply taken for granted and rarely, if ever, consciously considered.

Venerate saints not icons

Church leaders were keen to stress that prayers should be said to saints themselves, rather than the statues and icons representing the saints. This was considered to be the key distinction between Christianity and paganism. But this is simply misrepresenting what pagans themselves thought. A document written by the archbishop of Thessalonica between 600 and 620 was cited at the Second Council of Nicosia in 787. The text is written as an argument between a pagan and a Christian, with the pagan stating that his worship of idols is not merely a veneration of the physical material – as Christians claimed – and indeed was no different to the way Christians regarded the statues of saints. For ‘we do not worship these, but the incorporeal forces revered by means of them.’

The debate continues with the proponent for the Christian perspective retorting that Christians only make images of men who actually lived – the saints – and of God as he incarnated in human form. ‘We do not invent anything as you do.’

The pagan pulls no punches. ‘What about the angels?’ They are incorporeal, usually invisible, but Christians still create images of them to venerate, ‘Just like the worship we accord to our gods through their statues.’ What follows is a lengthy rebuttal of interest only to geekier angelologists.

Quite why an archbishop of Thessalonica at the start of the seventh century felt the need to write this fictionalised debate is a wide-open question. He certainly gives the pagan some hard-hitting remarks for the cleric to counter. Presumably these ideas would have been regarded as plausible by his contemporaries, although the extent to which they reflect actual pagan thinking – and over what sort of geographical area – is unverifiable.

While we have no way of knowing whether this curiously reflected ‘snap shot’ of pagan opinion is accurate or universal, there is a massive reason to think that this is indeed the case. The evidence itself is massive: the pan-European cult of saints in Christianity. This simply would not have taken root so quickly and so universally if it didn’t have a widespread pagan precursor. And, from what else we know about pagan religion that isn’t overly-coloured by Christian polemic and prejudice, the images of the deities allowed ‘the incorporeal forces’ they represented to be ‘revered by means of them’.

A not entirely-unrelated distinction is between prayers *to* the dead and prayers *for* the dead. Not to waste time with the exceptions, prayers were said *to* the saints – usually asking for intercession – whereas prayers were said *for* the ‘ordinary dead’ (more strictly, the prayers were for their souls).

The cult of saints simply has too much in common with the ways in which ancestors and 'founding fathers' were honoured in pre-Christian societies for there not to be considerable overlaps. Yes, the clergy may have preached doctrinal distinctions. But mostly people kept on doing – and unselfconsciously thinking – what they had done and thought for generations. They would undoubtedly think of themselves as Christians, and have no awareness that they were sustaining pre-conversion practices. Such distinctions and narratives are the outcome of scholarship situated in very distinct cultural contexts.

So, for a moment I will revert to Bartlett's attempt to regard Isis as 'overthrown' rather than the subject of 'clandestine substitution'. Would he also see the cult of saints as either the 'overthrowing' of pagan precursors or as 'clandestine substitution'? I suspect neither. Surely to goodness he would see it for what it actually was: continuity of practice. Which infers that the supposed 'overthrow' of Isis, and a great many parallels, should be seen similarly.

Ontological differences

From a secular standpoint, much of this may seem like semantic niceties. But, from both pagan and Christian viewpoints, the distinction is not merely semantics but fundamental ontological distinctions. Before Christianity the deities found throughout Europe were immanent – even the Olympian gods readily 'walked this earth' (see Volume Two of *The Twilight Age*). Pagan hero-gods, like saints, were fully immanent in that they had been born on this earth and lived here. The Old Testament Yahweh was quite different and entirely transcendent.

The 'bridge' between Semitic transcendent deities and Greco-Roman immanent ones was promulgated by the writers of the Gospels, which stress the key concept of Christ being God's son and intentionally 'manifested' on Earth. This is arguably why Christianity made far more converts in Europe than did Judaism – the 'implicit' beliefs were more familiar.

And there was seemingly nothing more familiar than a living person becoming a revered saint after their death. Seemingly is the key word. Seemingly there was no difference between the reverence shown to the pagan deities of Greece and Roman – or indeed anthropomorphic deities in many other places and cultures. As Robert Bartlett puts it:

There are real resemblances. The ancient gods, like the saints, had their shrines, too, to which one could go to seek assistance or advice with appropriate rituals, and their annual festivals; they might appear in dreams or visions, to give instructions; they could provide help in battle; and they had demands to make of worshippers as well as aid to offer.



Like the saints, the gods were numerous, and often provided special patronage for a city or state, or for a particular group...

(Bartlett 2013: 609)

Bartlett notes that saints are especially akin to pagan heroes, as distinct from the Olympian gods, 'since the heroes were human beings and had tombs here on earth.' From this perspective initial resistance to Christianity was understandable – the pagan heroes had done something heroic to justify their cult, whereas Christ and the martyr saints were criminals convicted of 'anti-establishment' activities. Were they alive today the CIA would undoubtedly deem them to be terrorists...

Back to that word 'seemingly'. On the face of it there is considerable continuity across the supposed pagan-Christian 'divide' of how people venerate and 'use' saints. Similarly the saints sustain an intercessory role which does not come from any Biblical precedent. Old Testament prophets and New Testament Apostles transmit ideas *from* God but not *to* him. Towards the eve of the

Reformation the Lollards and other iconoclasts would preach relentlessly about the cult of saints being little more than a 'pagan survival'. This rhetoric has coloured both sides of the debate ever since, even when that debate is essentially secular scholarship. But by the time of the Lollards the cult of saints had been well and truly dominated by the cult of one particular saint – the Virgin Mary.

There is every reason to think that statues of Mary with the baby Jesus are continuations of the eastern Mediterranean cult of Isis and Horus. That said, we cannot assume that the early Marian cult continued other aspects of Isis worship. And, over the subsequent centuries, the veneration of Mary took on a whole life of its own – mostly a 'grassroots' phenomenon which senior clergy generally attempted to hinder and block. By the time John Wycliffe (*circa* 1331–84) was preaching against idolatry, he was taking a specifically anti-Marian stance. The broader swipe at all images of saints came from subsequent generations of iconoclasts.

The views of fourteenth century iconoclasts shed no light on early Christianity, although they have served to muddy the waters. We need to turn to contemporary sources to discover what they thought of early iconography. The oldest such evidence is from the apocryphal *Acts of John*, written in the second or third century. One of the followers of John in Ephesus commissions a portrait of the saint and sets it up in his bedchamber, surrounded by garlands of flowers, oil lamps and altars. When John discovers this he berates him not to set up 'dead images of the dead'. As John is not yet dead this reveals that such 'icons' of saints were not uncommon at the time.

Between 726 and 843 the debates over icons of saints reached fever pitch. Successive patriarchs of the Byzantine – and they came thick and fast – blew alternately hot and cold over the issue, with a substantial literature from both camps still surviving. Much of the debate concerns images of Christ, but also reveal that images of Mary, other saints and even angels were in both churches and private houses (Bartlett 2013: 475). Even the most limited awareness of Orthodox Christianity will confirm that the iconophiles won the battles.

Chapter Six

Two unresolved questions

There are two questions which intrigue me greatly but which I have been unable to resolve for this study. This is largely because of a lack of sufficient evidence about non-Christian influences but also because any evidence has been considered by academics only from perspectives of piety.

Firstly, to what extent is the trinitarianism of the ostensibly monotheistic Church a syncretic response to the triple deities of north European paganism? On the one hand there were various sophisticated doctrinal issues thrashed out among senior clerics. On the other hand – but seemingly ignored – are the dynamics of why and how these ideas took root in the faith of the laity.

The evidence spans the custom of swearing oaths to three distinct pagan deities to the rite of Christian baptism in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost – with some of the surviving healing charms straddling the middle ground. In Volume Two of *The Twilight Age* I briefly discuss how the Holy Ghost – or *Sanctus Spiritus* seems to be a direct successor to pre-Christian ideas of an all-pervasive 'breath of life'.

Perhaps the answer is simply that three-fold systems had evolved independently within both paganism and Christianity so the transition was smooth and 'inevitable'. But, seductive as that assumption might be, it seems not to have been evaluated.

Secondly, to what extent are the Marian cults (at least before the major flowering from the twelfth century onwards) linked with domestic tutelary goddesses, such as the *lares* and *dea matronae* of south European and the *dísir* of northern Europe? After all, 'Our Lady of X' seems to be remarkably like an invocation of the local *dísir* or *genii loci*. And the reuse of the Old Irish word *érlam* to refer to local saints rather than tutelary deities is, in my opinion, unlikely to be a specifically Irish worldview. (Again, I explore this in somewhat more detail in Volume Two of this series.)



An Eastern Orthodox icon depicting the Dormition of the Theotokos. Theotokos means 'Mother of God' and the term marks a key doctrinal contrast between the Orthodox and Latin churches. In the latter Mary is Mother of Christ rather than Mother of God.

The problem is, as any modern ethnographer is all too aware, that female cults in pre-literate societies are veiled from the view of predominately male researchers. So early medieval clerics – who were certainly not there to get PhDs in comparative ethnology and seemingly using 'schematic' *breviaria* rather than doing 'field research' – would have been excluded from even knowing about such matters, still less able to provide a reliable record. And even the few women who were literate would have had no reason to write about these practices, still less for such writings to enter into monastic libraries or other comparatively 'safe havens' to be passed down to posterity.

Yet think of a Greek Orthodox icon of Mary. No creed of a virgin birth, no bodily assumption after death – and most revealingly of all – Mother of God rather than Mother of Christ. And then, as previously noted, there are the various popular practices associated with her devotion which seem to be at least as much pagan



Icon or idol? 'Madonna and Child' by Peter Eugene Ball. Photographed while on loan to Southwell Cathedral July 2008.

as Christian. Looking from a western European perspective at this version of Mary and we seem to be looking into the eyes of a direct successor of various Classical goddesses.

There is little doubt that in the Mediterranean the iconography of Mary evolved directly from depictions of Isis and Horus. Indeed there is some evidence that statues of Isis were, unwittingly it seems, 'recycled' as Christian icons. But continuity of form tells us little about continuity, if any, of meaning and significance. And Mediterranean practices tell us little about north European iconography, beyond the blindingly obvious recognition that key people from northern Europe visited Mediterranean churches and cathedrals so would have seen, and no doubt venerated, such icons.

In the western European church the doctrines relating to Mary underwent considerable changes from the twelfth century onwards. But if we focus our attention on the era before then, and look with the same dispassionate gaze as we can at Mary in the Orthodox

churches, then are we also looking at a successor to north European tutelary deities? And, whilst Mary undoubtedly became a universal successor to assorted intercessionary local saints, to what extent in the early centuries of Christianity is she 'another option', in exactly the same way *érlam* straddles pagan tutelary deities and Christian patronal saints? Even today 'Our Lady of X' often has attributes which distinguish her from 'Our Lady of Y', although Mary is nevertheless regarded as a universal saint not a local one.

The innumerable icons of Mary, whether painted or carved, owe at least some of their imagery to goddesses such as Isis and Demeter. The makers of these icons, and those who venerate them, are the successors to a tradition which has its roots in idols, *stapols* and *weohs* of the *lares* or *dísir* (see Volume Three of *The Twilight Age*). This tradition saw such idols as the 'immanent presence' of the spirit-deity, rather than merely a focus of devotion of a now-transcendent being. And it was this immanent ontology which was deemed 'idolatry' and became the focus of attention of the Lollards and subsequent Protestant zealots. Smells like a duck, quacks like a duck, but rarely referred to as a canard...

In contrast, modern pagans writers commonly assume there was continuity between some of the pagan goddesses and the medieval Marian cult. However most of them seemingly think of Mary in later medieval terms, or even in terms of how she is regarded within the more-or-less contemporary Catholic Church. Few seem to be aware of the significant differences between these later ideologies and how she might have been regarded in the early Christian era.

On the other hand academics writing about the Marian cults have, as yet, only done so from the perspective of piety. And such a perspective is least likely to reveal continuity with pre-Christian beliefs or practices. I very much hope someone with the necessary skills as an historian will look at the evidence for early Marian veneration without becoming snared up in the shackles of later and modern day doctrines.

Chapter Seven

Where next?

The wealth of information steadily flowing from archaeological, historical, linguistic and place-name experts in recent decades has shed an incredible amount of light on the supposed 'Dark Ages'. However this wealth is not neatly collected together in any one place, but dispersed through a vast literature of academic books and journals. Few people other than these experts can ever be familiar with more than a sample of the whole – and the experts too, understandably, may have little awareness of other disciplines. And, again for all the obvious reasons, academic disciplines rarely question the paradigms – or 'worldview' – which provides the underlying structures of their own endeavours. So it is doubly fascinating that at least some Anglo-Saxonists are beginning to look afresh at the nature of the distinction between pre-Christian and post-conversion beliefs.

As someone who is more accustomed to looking at the myths – or 'deep structures' – in modern Western culture than delving into the more arcane aspects of Anglo-Saxon society then the various suggestions I have put forward here can only be entirely provisional. So, if those more knowledgeable about the era can refute some of my assumptions I will, of course, be pleased to know.

Nevertheless I hope that these suggestions will inspire some further thoughts about the continuity of underlying worldviews which straddle the Christian conversion. I am not, I hasten to emphasise, suggesting that there was little or no change, but rather that the changes which inevitably took place over the course of several centuries were incremental – 'evolutionary not revolutionary' so to speak – and most certainly bridged the supposed gulf between the worldviews of pagans and converts.

If we accept the notion of 'micro-Christendoms' at a diocese level then we should expect those changes to be localised, with only limited opportunities for geographical spread. We should also expect the changes to be ongoing, albeit at a fairly slow pace – 'the changes will have changes' as it were.

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Thirteenth century illuminated manuscript depicting St Augustine of Hippo refuting a heretic.

Most historical accounts read like the triumphal progress towards the desired and privileged later outcomes. Of course, at the time the outcomes were far from certain and any number of alternative scenarios may have come to pass instead.

Like wars – which do not decide who is right but simply who is left – the history of Christianity is a long list of suppressed heresies. At any one time any number of heresies may have prevailed, right back to the first century when St Peter wrote:

... even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them.

(2 Peter 2:1)

Bede, writing about the period before 450, referred to bishops sent from Britain to Gaul to quell heresies. Wikipedia's page on Christian heresies (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Christian_heresies accessed Jan 2016) lists fourteen varieties of christological heresy and eleven distinct gnostic heresies. All those had been suppressed before the era of the Bogomils and Cathars, who are among about eleven more medieval 'dead ends'. Literally, for at least some of the followers. Before the Crusades even Islam was regarded as a heresy rather than a separate religion (Fletcher 1997: 230; 304–5). Indeed, Jews regard both Christianity and Islam as mistakes made by overvaluing individual prophets.

Largely unquestioned 'triumphalism', together with perspectives based on piety, remain prevalent in studies of the history of religion in Europe. Given such lack

of historiographical sophistication then it is perhaps inevitable that the relevant historians are cognicentric, seeing the world as if it always had been viewed through post-Reformation perspectives.

This is however not a perspective which will help to understand the early centuries of Christianity, still less perceive pre-conversion worldviews. The available evidence suggests that the 'folk ontologies' of north Europe were immanent rather than transcendent. That in turn suggests they may have been more monist and less dualist than later Christian worldviews. The clues to understanding require greater use of linguistic evidence – more looking at the words used, and their origins, rather than *how* they are used.

Once we turn our attention from what the clergy were encouraging the laity to believe and look principally at the most 'superficial' and visible aspects of Christianity – what worshippers *did* – and also focus attention on the least visible aspects – the worldviews which generally exist below conscious awareness – then there seems to be little in the way of a Christian *versus* pagan dichotomy and much more a steadily-evolving syncretism. And if we look not at north European or even Latin Christianity but instead at the continuing practices and worldviews of Orthodox Greeks then the continuity seems even more visible, with rural practices still seemingly straddling millennia.

My own interpretation of the available evidence is that the myth which sees Christianity as opposed to a suppressed pagan precursor is woefully dualistic – although, thanks in large part to the influence of writers as disparate as Bede and Margaret Murray, one which still dominates most popular thinking. Instead the evidence seems to suggest that underlying worldviews evolved in a much less dualistic manner over many centuries. By the tenth century Britain they have become more Christian than pagan, although only in twelfth or thirteenth centuries is the transition more-or-less complete.

Please email me (bobtrubs@indigogroup.co.uk) if you want to critique or contribute ideas about these questions or other topics raised in this study.

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My debt to published scholars is immense but to aid readability I have largely refrained from leaving bibliographical details, so the list of sources at the end could be regarded as an extension of these acknowledgements. I fully accept that few, if any, of these more learned and prudent minds will agree with everything I have written.

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