Continuity of Anglo-Saxon Iconography

The Twilight Age
Volume Three

Bob Trubshaw

Continuity of Anglo-Saxon Iconography is an attempt to understand what pre-conversion 'idols' – the *weohs* and *stapols* – might have looked like. More especially, this study aims to establish what the meaning and significance of these carvings might have been, based in large part on evidence from early Christian stone crosses.

In the process this study sheds light on the way these motifs would have been understood by people at the time – which is not necessarily how such imagery came to be regarded a few centuries later.

As none of the wooden *weohs* and *stapols* have survived there is, clearly, considerable speculation involved. However these suggestions fit within a plausible 'underlying' worldview established in the first two volumes of The Twilight Age. The fifth volume of this series looks in more detail at the locations of such carvings.

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.

For details of other titles in The Twilight Age series please visit www.hoap.co.uk

The Twilight Age series

Volume 1: *Continuity of Worldviews in Anglo-Saxon England*

Volume 2: *Souls, Spirits and Deities: Continuity from paganism in early Christianity*

Volume 3: *Continuity of Anglo-Saxon Iconography*

Volume 4: *Minsters and Valleys: A topographical comparison of seventh and eighth century land use in Leicestershire and Wiltshire*

Volume 5: *Rethinking Anglo-Saxon Shrines: A cosmological and topographical view of* hohs *and* hlaws

Volume 6: *How Anglo-Saxons Found Their Way*

Volume 7: *The Especially Sacred Grove: Six Hills and Vernemetum, Leicestershire*

Continuity of Anglo-Saxon Iconogaphy

The Twilight Age
Volume Three

Bob Trubshaw

Continuity of Anglo-Saxon Iconography

The Twilight Age Volume Three

Bob Trubshaw

© Copyright Bob Trubshaw 2016
reprinted with minor corrections December 2016; May 2020

Front cover photograph:
Anglo-Saxon cross shaft, Sproxton, Leicestershire.

The moral rights of the author and illustrators have been asserted.
All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced
in any form or by any means without prior written
permission from Heart of Albion Press, except for
brief passages quoted in reviews.

Published as a downloadable PDF file only by:

Heart of Albion

2 Cross Hill Close, Wymeswold
Loughborough, LE12 6UJ

albion@indigogroup.co.uk

Visit our Web site: www.hoap.co.uk

Contents

Preface

Inside the sanctuary 1

The meaning of *weohs* 3

Weohs as 'dynamic tools' 6

The appearance of weohs 8

Crude little Herms 9

Weohs as *leacstans* 10

Weohs and graves 11

The *weoh*-protected home and *weoh*-protected wold 13

Stapols – the *weohs* big brethren 14

Stapols and trees 19

Stapols and kinship 21

From *stapol* to *treow, beam* and *rood* 21

From wood to stone 22

Protection against preternatural dangers 23

From *weoh* to *rood* 24

Dracas or *wyrms?* 26

Tantric twinning 28

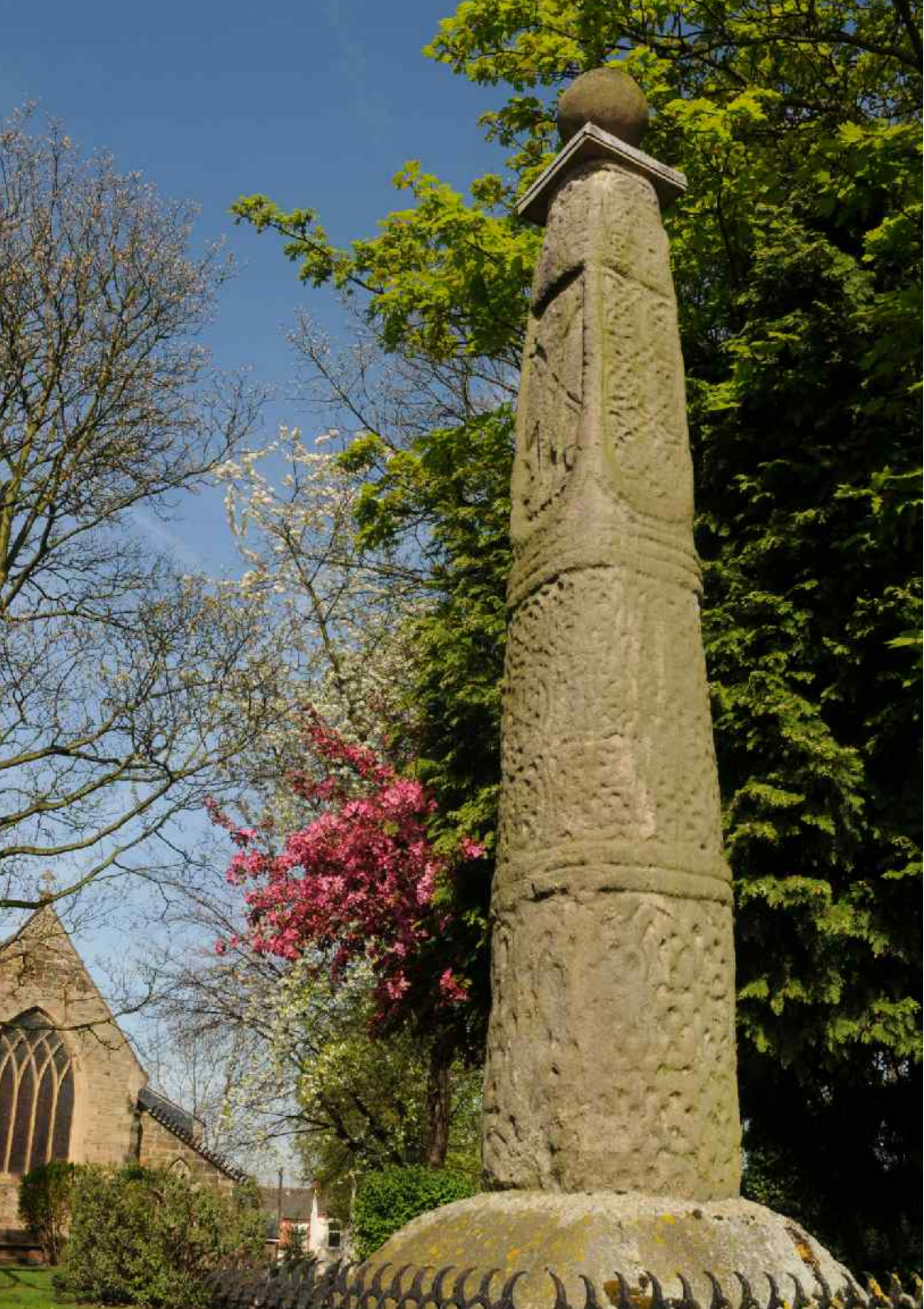
Italian entanglement 29

Frightening away the neighbours 32

The fairy woman with her *gee* 37

Monstrous sexuality 38
From Qa'aba to Quadrille 39
Weoh cwenes and the *quain* tree 41
What is the meaning of this Germanic barbarity? 45
From *braceates* to tympana 48
Older but as complex 58

Acknowledgements 59
Sources 60



Preface

The ideas in this study stand on the shoulders of the first two volumes of The Twilight Age series. Without reading them then much of what is set out here will seem unduly speculative. Indeed, even after reading the two previous works, you are quite entitled to think of this work as overly-speculative. I would agree. This is because in this study I take as 'accepted' the arguments, suggestions, interpretations and, in perhaps in other people's opinions, flagrant suppositions of the previous two books. This work is much more a 'kite flying' exercise than the other volumes in the series.

The focus of interest is carvings the Anglo-Saxons called *weohs* and *stapols*, including the 'presumption' that these were decorated with dragons. Except, as I will explain, the Anglo-Saxon carvings seem less like depictions of dragons and more in accord with *wyrms*.

This study is speculative in that it is offering evidence for objects which have not survived. We simply do not know what a *weoh* or *stapol* actually looked like, still less if these terms covered a variety of different-looking items. This, understandably, has led to a near-total absence of prior suggestions. Nevertheless, numerous researchers have recognised that the images on the oldest surviving stone crosses are not necessarily inspired by Biblical events.

In the absence of any evidence to the contrary, the assumption has to be that the images which are carved on these early crosses continue an otherwise-lost tradition of wood carving. In other words, they offer clues as to what appeared on *weohs* and *stapols*. This is entirely consistent with the other books in the series, which offer evidence of considerable continuity of underlying worldviews across several centuries of the 'conversion era'.

My methodology is a simple one: to look at different motifs from the perspective of a consistent underlying worldview. I am well aware that I cannot prove that my suggestions are correct. Broadly speaking I am stepping where the angels fear to tread, which is the realms where there is no evidence that my suggestions are either right or wrong. I would welcome feedback from anyone who can offer *evidence* that any of my suggestions are flawed.

Previous page: *The eleventh century cross shaft at Stapleford, Nottighamshire. The successor to the eponymous* stapol.

Almost all the ideas which make up this volume have been published previously in some shape or form. Both the works which now form the first two volumes of The Twilight Age series originally had discussions about *weohs* and *stapols,* although these have been deleted from current versions. I also included many of these ideas in an as-yet-unpublished study of all aspects of medieval carvings. My ideas were further developed for articles which appeared at the end of 2013 on the Anglo-Saxon Twilight website (www.indigogroup.co.uk/twilight).

This study is principally concerned with the iconography of early stone crosses and the supposed motifs on now-lost wooden *weohs* and *stapols*. However to gain any useful understanding I have approached the motifs from the worldviews explored in Volume One of The Twilight Age and the sense of *leac* or 'potency' discussed in Volume Two of the series. *Weohs* and *stapols* are also discussed in Volume Five, but the emphasis there is on their location rather than their putative appearance.

This study sets out to demonstrate that the available iconographical evidence – such as we have – fits well within the supposed 'worldview' established in the series. Not least it supports the idea of *continuity* during the centuries spanning the conversion era, rather than the distinct contrast supposed by scholarship until recent decades, and which still deeply influences popular understanding.

Bob Trubshaw

Avebury January 2016

Inside the sanctuary

Why do certain motifs appear on early Christian crosses, even though there are no Biblical precedents for these motifs? The easy answer is that they continue a pagan tradition. But is this too easy and glib?

But we should also ask why certain motifs that appear on early Christian crosses which *only later* have a clear Christian exegesis. Not the depictions of the Crucifixion or of the Apostles, as these clearly have Biblical inspiration. The best example is dragons. We are familiar with them as the monsters which St Michael and other dracocidal saints successfully slay. But what about the dragons without a visible adversary, or dragons which predate the cult of St Michael? When they were carved were they even thought of as dragons?

To answer these questions we need to put ourselves in the worldview – or 'mind set' or cosmology, as you prefer – of people living around the eighth century. The first two studies in The Twilight Age series have established some of the necessary background. This study aims to both focus that approach on specific aspects of Anglo-Saxon culture while, at the same time, providing more evidence to support the overall approach.

As discussed in the other volumes of this series, there is no evidence to support a view of the conversion era which sees a big rift between 'paganism' and early Christianity. Despite the lack of evidence this has nevertheless been the assumption of historians and archaeologists until recent decades. Instead, modern scholarship sees considerable overlap and continuity, with many local variations, each changing over a few generations.

There are two words in Old English which denote wooden carvings which depicted 'spirits of place' (*landwights*) and, perhaps, more major deities – *weoh* and *stapol*. The differences between them will be discussed later. There are several words in Old English which denoted Christian crosses, such as *beam*, *treow, crist mael* and *rood*. The word 'cross' was also used, as a loan word from Latin ('*crux*') but, initially, this seemed to denote only crosses carved in stone.

Apart from any iconographical aspects, which I will come to later, these *weohs, stapols, beams, treows,* and *roods* had something in common. They were all situated within sanctuaries, specifically marked-off areas. We know what they have been called for the last thousand years or so – churchyards. But churchyards continue an older practice.

The frith stool at Beverley Minster.

Before there were churchyards there were 'frith yards', spelt in Old English *frithgeards*. *Frith* is one of those multifaceted words which embraces a spectrum of meanings: peace; freedom from molestation; protection; safety and security. In the later Anglo-Saxon era some churches and cathedrals had 'frith stools' where a criminal could see temporary sanctuary from those he had wronged.

However the pre-conversion sense of *frithgeard* is something much more akin to a churchyard. Imagine a churchyard without a church and only a preaching cross near the centre. And this is exactly how most churchyards would have been before the tenth century – initially the cross would have been wooden but steadily they were replaced by stone crosses.

Frith stool, Sprotborough, South Yorkshire.

If we want to imagine what a pre-conversion *frithgeard* looked like then take away the village around the churchyard (villages only start to be nucleated shortly before the time parish churches start to be built). And replace the wooden cross with a different sort of carved wooden post. And that's about the only difference in the way they looked – although the locations were not necessarily where churchyards were created.

Just as chuchyards have well-defined and well-maintained boundary walls – we still like the dead to stay in their place – so too *frithgeards* were 'defined' by their enclosing boundaries, most probably hedges. So far as we know there was no counterpart to the elaborate lych gates which act as entrances to modern churchyards, although no doubt there were simple hurdle gates (indeed the modern English 'hurdle' is from the Old English *hyrdel* which has the sense of wickerwork used as a light-duty gate).

In *Guta Saga*, a thirteenth century account of Gotland before conversion, there is a reference to sanctuaries and 'staff precincts', the latter enclosing a *Pfahlgott* or 'pole-shaped idol' where communal sacrifices were performed (cited Dowden 2000: 277). This one reference seems to be nearest we have to a description, though it is not a contemporary one, nor to an Anglo-Saxon example.

Let us walk up to the post near the middle, and take closer look. How big is it? Is it a *weoh* or a *stapol*? *Weoh* is also written *wig* and both were pronounced something like 'wee'. The word meant both 'shrine' and 'idol', as I will discuss next. *Stapol* denoted a larger carved post and is related to the modern word 'steeple', sharing the sense of something high or lofty. I will return to *stapols* later but first let's look more closely at *weohs*.

The meaning of *weohs*

There were once many *weohs*. Some of them have come down to us as settlement names such as Weeford, Wyfordby, Weoley, Willey and Weedon. There are other *weoh dons* too which did not give them name to settlements, such as Waden Hill at Avebury. Collectively, these names tell us *weoh* once stood by fords, in clearings (*leah*) or on rounded hill-tops (*don*).

Linguists tell us confidently that *weoh* denotes both a shrine and an idol. This is hardly confusing – think of any number of roadside shrines in Catholic countries with a small statue of the Virgin Mary or a locally-venerated saint. The words 'shrine' and 'statue' are almost synonymous in this context. And, as John Wycliffe and other late-medieval Lollards zealously preached, venerating such statues should be thought of as idolatry. Indeed, Catholic wayside shrines could be thought of as a

Waden Hill is the green hill seemingly forming the skyline to the right. However, seen from here, Waden Hill matches the skyline of Overton Hill (the western escarpment of the Marlborough Downs) beyond – the trees in the far distance on the right of this photograph are actually on Overton Hill, not Waden Hill, although Overton Hill itself is not visible.

Although this photograph is included because of the Anglo-Saxon name weoh don*, clearly this locality had been important for many millennia previously. The late Neolithic man-made mound called Silbury Hill is prominent to the left, and Swallowhead spring (regarded as the source of the River Kennet) is located where the two groups of trees meet in front of Silbury Hill. The mid-Neolithic henge at, Avebury is beyond Waden Hill; the early Neolithic West Kennett chambered long barrow is a few hundred yards to the right of where this photograph was taken, on the crest of the hill.*

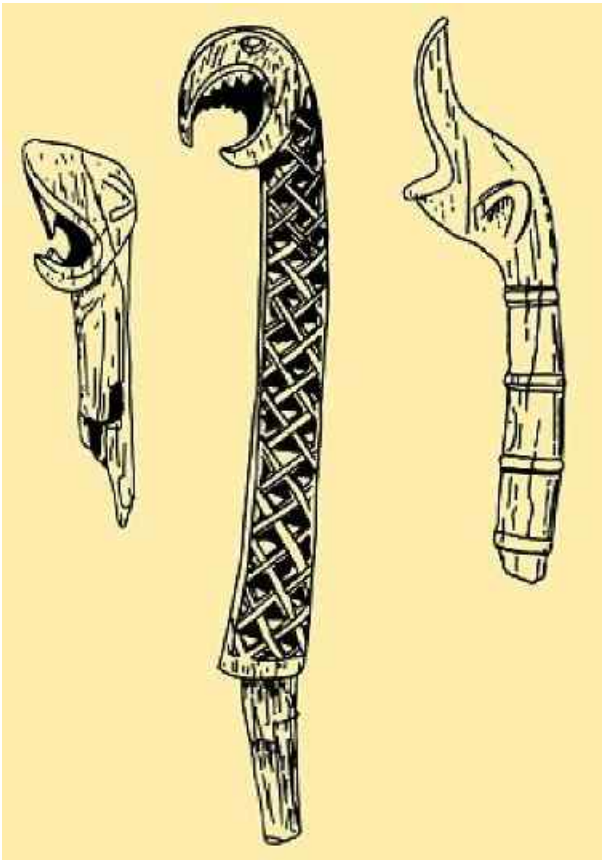
direct continuation of *weohs* – although their appearance may well have changed greatly over the centuries.

And if you think this is taking an analogy too far, in *Beowulf* there is a mention of *wigwearþung* which means 'worshipping of idols'. And when the pagan priest Coifi destroys his own temple, Bede specifically states that both the building and the *wigbed* – literally 'idol-table' but presumably a wooden altar – went up in the flames. We can only presume that the *wigbed* was carved and perhaps covered with elaborately decorated textiles. Bede omits to mention the *wig* which stood on the *wigbed* but this too was presumably wooden.

If we look to the cognate word in Greek, *(w)eikon,* this too describes an icon or 'powerful devotional image'. However in Classical Greek *eikon* shifts meaning to denote statues of people, while the word *agalma* is introduced for statues of deities. There is also a third word, *xonanon*, which denotes a portable icon. Words of course

shift meaning, and the later sense of *eikon* to denote a statue of a person does not diminish the shared origin with *weoh* . The ancient Greeks clearly felt the need to distinguish three different types of 'devotional image' depending on both what was depicted and how the image was used – whether portable or too big to be moved. So we should not be surprised that that Anglo-Saxons made a distinction between *weohs* and *stapols* – even though we cannot be sure what the distinction was!

Stephen Pollington considers that the underlying sense of *weoh* is of something 'holy', an object of devotion. And bear in mind that the Old English word *halig* (the origin of the modern English 'holy') only appears in Christian contexts – so, seemingly, nothing pre-Christian could be *halig*.



Monsters from the prows of Viking ships

Top: *Twelfth century corbels in the nave at Tickencote, Rutland.*

Bottom: *The remarkable Anglo-Saxon font in the church at Luppitt, Devon.*

Weohs as 'dynamic tools'

Miranda Aldhouse-Green notes that Iron Age cult statues were not passive objects for contemplation – as if they were art works in a gallery or museum – but 'dynamic tools used by the communities which produced and consumed them' (Aldhouse-Green 1997). I see no reason why Anglo-Saxon *weohs* and *stapols* were any different from their Iron Age precursors in this respect, even though the local meanings and significances of these 'dynamic tools' would have continually changed.

Top left: *A Catholic street shrine, Tabago Island. Photograph by Galen R. Frysinger.*

Top right: *Corn dolly.*

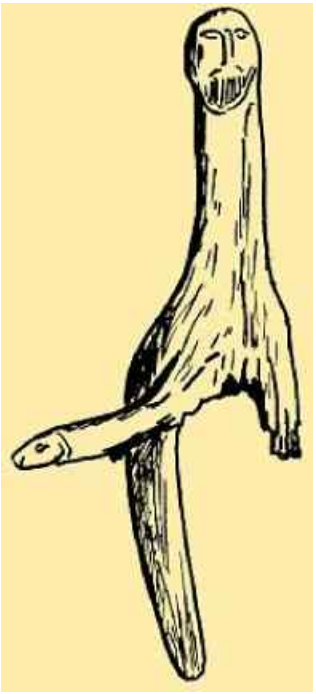
Bottom left: *The Padstow 'Obby 'Oss. 'Obby' is indisputably a contraction of 'hobby' (in its earlier sense of 'small' or 'mock') but is 'Os' a contraction of 'horse' or the survival of the Old English word* Os *– meaning 'god'? If so, is this Obby Oss an example of a* weoh *which, once each year, comes alive and dances in the streets of Padstow?*

Figurehead of Europa. A distant descendant of the Anglo-Saxon weoh*-carving tradition?*

The appearance of *weohs*

While there are no surviving examples of *weohs* from England, we do have a good idea of what such carvings might have been like in Denmark. They could have ranged from carvings as skilled as the prows of Viking long boats to the crude anthropomorphic (and ithyphallic) tree branches found in bogs (see illustrations on preceding and following pages).

If – as seems reasonable – the British *weohs* were even half-way as elaborate as Viking prows then we the people of carved them would seem to be part of a long tradition which straddles the best of the Anglo-Saxon stone carving. The vigorous carvings on the Anglo-Saxon font at Luppitt, Devon, seem to anticipate the more vigorous depictions on twelfth century corbels, such as those at Tickencote, Rutland. I am not suggesting that such corbels were still thought of as 'pagan deities', just that stylistically they shared an unbroken tradition and, presumably, also shared an unbroken belief in their evil-averting powers.



Left: *Classical* herm.

Centre and right: *Anthropomorphic wooden figures from Danish bogs*

Crude little Herms

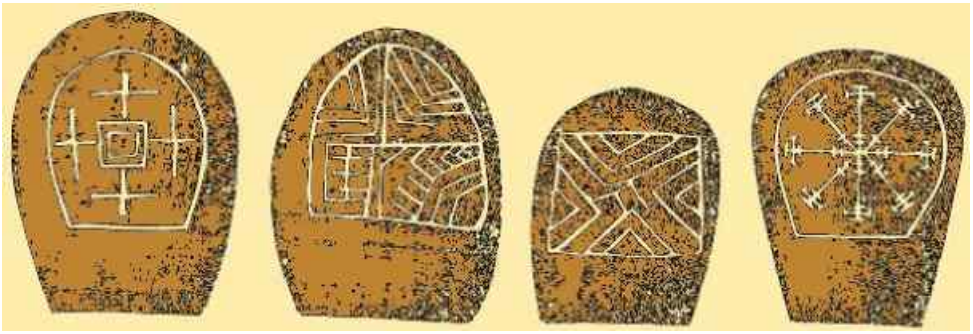
Can we be more specific about *weohs*? Were they necessarily carved wooden 'idols'? Could some have been more akin to 'corn dollies'? And bear in mind the word 'doll' is a contraction of 'idol'. Yet others may have been uncarved standing stones, as a letter written by Bishop Aldhelm in the 680s refers to an *ermula cruda.* This has the literal meaning of 'crude little Herm' and suggests a pillar which was phallic in nature. But, then as now, the word 'crude' had two senses. So was Aldhelm thinking of carvings resembling the Classical statues depicting the faces and genitals of deities such as Hermes or Priapus? Or was he simply have been referring to uncarved standing stones as 'crude pillars'? Aldhelm's remarks say nothing about whether the *ermula* were in wood or stone, so could refer to an idol akin to the Danish examples or an uncarved standing stone.

Weohs as *leacstans*

In Volume Two of The Twilight Age there is a discussion of the Old English word *leac* which has the sense of 'potency'. There were numerous *leacstans*, (which translates as 'stone of potency') associated with the inauguration of kings.

To what extent were *weohs* and *stapols* regarded as having *læc*? The honest answer is 'Who knows?' – although no doubt Aldhelm would have had a clear understanding of whether or not they fell within the scope of his *ermula cruda*. If Aldhelm's remark included wooden as well as stone *ermulas* then we need to bear in mind that wood, unlike stone, was regarded by Anglo-Saxons as a living material. So the idea of wooden *weohs* and *stapols* being 'potent' masculine symbols is at least plausible.

Some gateposts to fields in Ireland would seem to fit rather well with the term 'leac'. This ivy-clad example in Downpatrick, county Down, was spotted by Anthony Weir.



Anglo-Saxon grave markers from Thurnby, Leicestershire.

Aldhelm may have been using the term 'herm' to refer less to the appearance than to the function. In Greece and Roman Herms were set up as boundary markers, and then venerated as guardians. So Aldhelm may have been using the term *ermula cruda* to refer to fairly small, uncarved – though still possibly somewhat phallic – boundary stones. The implication is that they were still being venerated here in Britain. The cult of Toutatis – whose name means 'tribal protector' – in the second and third centuries is associated with tribal boundaries (Toutatis is discussed in Volume Five of The Twilight Age series.)

Back in 1993 Anthony Weir discussed how some rather phallic-shaped gateposts to fields in Ireland would seem to fit rather well with the term *ermula cruda* (Weir 1993). Weir, following the precedent of folklorists, sees an association with the fertility of the land. However perhaps we should also see them as 'boundary protectors', icons of the potency of the landowner.

Weohs and graves

From the place-name evidence it seems that some *weohs* were quite prominent, or at least distinctive landmarks. But these would have been only a small number of the *weohs*. So far as we can tell there would have been a *weoh* on many, perhaps all, graves and burial mounds – in much the same way modern graves usually have gravestones. Only the Anglo-Saxon grave markers would have no words. Instead, distinctive geometric or interlace patterns unique to each lineage which functioned in a manner akin to heraldry in the later medieval period and the notions of Scottish clan tartans invented in the nineteenth century.

So when we look at a *weoh don* – whether the village of Weedon or Waden Hill – we should imagine a large number of graves protected with either mounds or *weohs*

Waden Hill from Google Earth, showing crop marks of ploughed-out Bronze Age barrows, probably created around 2,200 BCE – and almost certainly reused for burials by the Anglo-Saxons. Quite probably the each mound had a weoh *on top in Anglo-Saxon times, giving the name '*weoh don*' to the hill. The 'dots' to the left of the image are some of the megaliths of the West Kennett Avenue, erected about 2,500 BCE – maybe they too were thought to be* weohs*, or even '*ermula cruda*'.*

Inset:

Waden Hill as it looks when standing in the bottom left corner of the Google Earth image and looking towards the top right. The parallel lines at the top of the Google Earth image are the field boundary which forms the horizon of this photograph. The megaliths are two of the surviving stones from the late Neolithic Avenue. These stones alternate between diamond-shaped and more phallic-shaped ones.

Reconstruction of how Waden Hill might look today if the the burial mounds had not been ploughed out.

or both. Based on the evidence of slightly later stone cross shafts, these *weohs* protecting burial mounds may have been carved with a guardian dragon or *wyrm*; I will come back to this topic later.

The word used to describe posts on mounds is *becun* which had the sense of 'marker', although evolves into the modern word 'beacon'. Whether or not *becuns* were thought of as a sub-set of *woehs* (along the lines of 'all sparrows are birds, but not all birds are sparrows') is a wide-open question.

The *weoh*-protected home and *weoh*-protected wold

The word 'mound' fits into this sense of protection too. The Old English word *mund* did indeed mean 'mound' – at least in the later Anglo-Saxon period. But it is an example of a word which shifts its meaning. Before it meant mound it meant 'protection'. And, of course, a mound does just that – it protects the grave.

With that in mind the phrase *weoh mund* or *wig mund* is almost doubly protective. We know that Wigmund (pronounced 'Wymond') becomes a personal name in the eighth century and returns to fashion around the twelfth century. Presumably by this time its literal meaning of *wig mund* or 'shrine protection' had long since been lost.

But when we come across place-names such as Wymondham (Leicestershire and Norfolk) and Wymeswold (also Leicestershire) are we really looking at Wigmund's

hamm or Wigmund's wald – his farmstead or 'home' or his large wooded area? Or are we looking at a later corruption of an earlier form which only much later became confused with people called Wigmund? That earlier form would make these places the *weoh mund ham* and the *weoh mund wald* – and early enough for this to be the '*weoh*-protected' *ham* ('homestead') or *wald* (woodland) rather than the later *'weoh*-mound*'* sense.

Wymondham in Leicestershire is on heathland which straddles the border with Rutland. Although no evidence now survives, there may well have once been Bronze Age burial mounds – and the area may even have been a *hearg* or major shrine site (see Volume Five of The Twilight Age). Wymondham in Norfolk (pronounced 'Windham' by the locals) is on a modern administrative boundary which suggests the river – still overlooked by the motte of a Norman castle – was once more liminal than it is now.

But does the name of the village of Wymeswold derive from *wig mund wald*? If it does (and I have discussed this in considerable detail elsewhere in Trubshaw 2012a) then the name *weoh mund wald* referred to a *wald*-sized *hearg* – the successor the Iron Age 'Especially Sacred Grove' or *ver nemeton* which gave its name to the Roman small town of Vernemetum. As there were presumably many protective *weohs* – some on mounds – at such a *hearg* then this would indeed have been the 'idol-protected wood'.

If this *hearg* was so big that it once extended over all the parishes which make up the Leicestershire Wolds (a big 'if' which is discussed in Trubshaw 2012) – then anyone approaching from the north or west would come past Wysall (early forms suggests this a corruption of *weoh* on the *hoh*) and the villages of Hoby, Hoton and Hose (the plural of *hoh*). In Volume Five of this series I discuss *hohs* in considerable detail but for the moment suffice to say that these *hohs* seem to have been distinctively-shaped boundary shrines. At least one such *hoh* had a *stapol* – Staploe, west of St Neots and now in Bedfordshire but formerly in Cambridgeshire. Yes, a boundary shrine still close to a modern administrative boundary. So, what was a *stapol*?

Stapols – the *weohs* big brethren

In essence, *stapols* were bigger versions of *weohs*. Several places in England are still known as Stapleford (and, until recent decades, still pronounced by the locals as 'stap-ul-fud' rather than 'stay-pull-ford'). There is also Dunstable – the *stapol* on the 'dune' or heath which predated the medieval priory and subsequent market town. There was once a hundredral assembly in Kent which met at a Thurstaple, the *stapol* dedicated to the god Thor or Thunor. In Essex there is both Thurstable (*Þunor's stapol*) and Barstaple (the bearded one's *stapol*). A *stapol* was also a significant part

of a royal hall, as in the poem *Beowulf* Hroþgar stood on one to inspect Grendel's arm. This might make *stapols* relatives of the *Öndvegissólur* or pair of 'high seat pillars' known from the various sagas which recount the pioneering settlement of Iceland.

The possible parallels between such high-seat pillars and Anglo-Saxon *stapols* are suggested by two brief remarks in Icelandic literature. One saga says such a pillar was carved with an image of the god Thor. A different saga says the high seat pillars had 'god-nails' or 'power-nails' (Old Icelandic *reginnaglar*) in them. But these two remarks are the nearest we have to descriptions of these pillars. Just possibly a doorway illustrated on the Bayeux tapestry is a descendant of this tradition.

We can reasonably assume the 'god-nails' were iron nails as this was regarded as the most magical of metals. There was probably one such 'spike' at the top of each pillar, representing the Pole Star – known as 'The Nail' to Scandinavian people at the time – and making each pillar into an *axis mundi* or close kin of the World Tree. In other Scandinavian sagas there is mention of Gulltopper (literally 'gold topper'), the

This section of the Bayeux tapestry depicts a monk and a lady doing something 'unmentionable' (the text above names them but nowadays would end with a euphemistic '…'). The two decorated pillars are presumably intended to depict the doorway to the lady's house. Almost certainly they are successors to the tradition of stapols *and, as such, the nearest we have to the depiction of an English* stapol. *Perhaps we might see them as Anglo-Saxon counterparts to the 'high pillars' of contemporary Iceland.*

golden spike at the top of Hallinskithi, the world tree, elsewhere named as Heimdalhr.

However as only one pillar is needed to symbolise the *axis mundi,* the paired pillars of the Icelandic sagas are seemingly an elaboration of a once-single pillar, such as the *stapol* which Hroþgar stood on in *Beowulf*.

At the royal site at Yeavering in Northumberland a large wooden post had been erected in the top of a burial mound near to the hall, seemingly a *stapol*. In the absence of other evidence this may have been the focal point of outdoor observances – although there may well have been 'shrine figures' within one or more of the buildings.

Permanent maypoles at Belton, Leicestershire (left) and Wellow, Nottinghamshire (right).

Stapols were substantial wooden posts. They may have been as big as some of the permanent maypoles still surviving in England, such as Barwick in Elmet, Yorkshire; Belton, Leicestershire; and Linby and Wellow, both in Nottinghamshire.

However unlike such maypoles, most or all *stapols* were carved – although how they might have been carved is open to debate. But because they were wooden none have survived. In the churchyard at Stapleford in Nottinghamshire there is a substantial fragment of an eleventh century stone cross (see frontispiece). Was this the successor to the eponymous *stapol*? The decoration is not explicitly Christian.

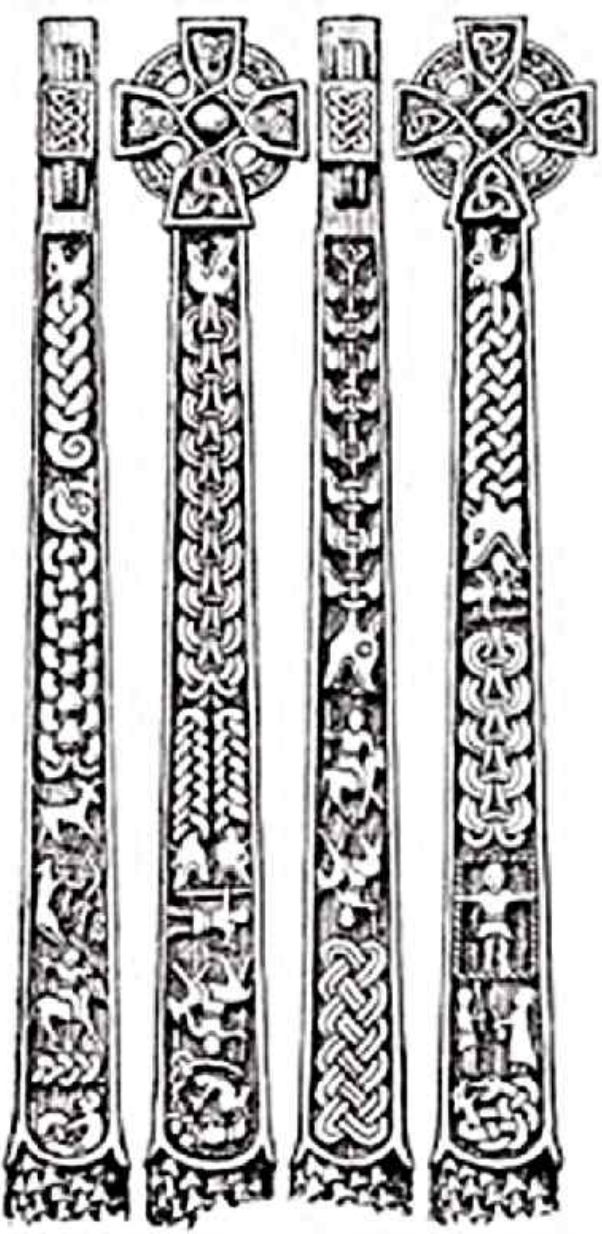
If there is indeed an overlap between wooden *stapols* and early stone crosses then what should we make of Anglo-Saxon crosses which combine Christian and pagan motifs, as with the examples from Breedon on the Hill (Leicestershire), Middleton (North Yorkshire) or Gosforth (Cumbria)? Are they as much late examples of *stapols* as early examples of crosses?

Such questions remain rhetorical largely because we have no real idea how *stapols* were carved. Were they like the fairly simple cross from Middleton, probably carved in the first half of the tenth century with a warrior on one side and a dragon on the other? Or were they more like its contemporary at Gosforth, all eleven feet of

Above left and centre: *Anglo-Saxon cross-shaft fragments now in the church at Breedon on the Hill, Leicestershire.*

Above right: *Middleton, East Yorkshire.*

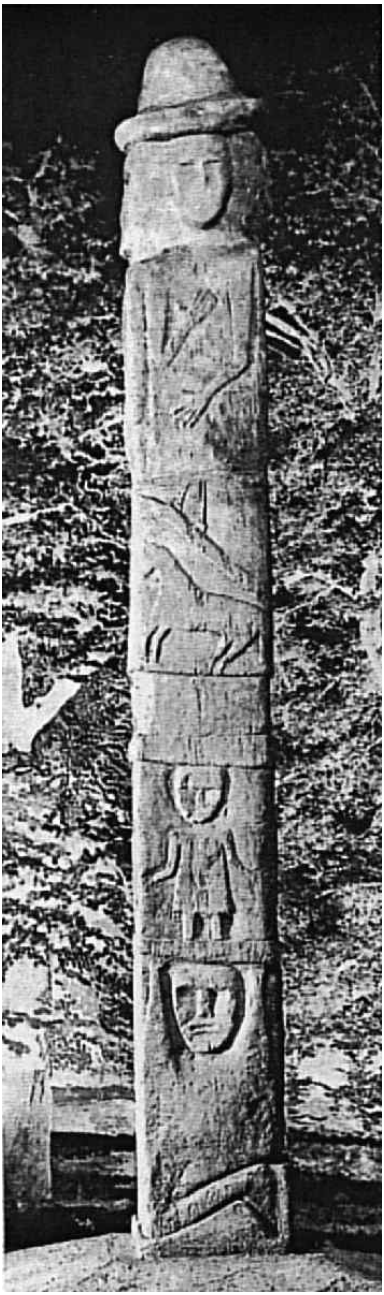
Right: *Gosforth, Cumbria.*



elaborate decorative panels, each telling its own story – whether of Ragnorak or the Crucifixion.

The nearest we have to a wooden *stapol* is a pillar recovered from the River Zbrucz in southern Poland (see next page) which is thought to be an idol erected by followers of the Slavic cult of Svantovit. But this is not from northern Europe, still less from the British Isles.

Were *stapols* in some way counterparts to the so-called 'totem poles'? made by the indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest coast of North America? And if so, could such carved *stapols* be the reason that places such as Shepshed, Swineshead, Gateshead and Manshead are so named? In other words, were these places were known as 'sheep's head, 'swine's head', goat's head' and 'man's head' because of a carved *stapol* which stood there?



A stapol*-like wooden pillar perhaps depicting Svantovit from the River Zbrucz, Poland.*

For those who need to know, Shepshed is in Leicestershire, Gateshead is on Tyneside, Swineshead is in Bedfordshire – and the early forms of Swinesherd in Worcestershire show this was originally a Swineshead too. Manshead is not a settlement but the name of a hundred in Bedfordshire – and in this case the putative *stapol* was at the meeting place. I am well aware that Manshead could easily refer to the grisly remains of a judicial execution – and presumably there would have been at least a few at hundred moot sites – and the animal place-names may also refer to once flesh-and-blood creatures. However, as the next chapter will discuss, in the twelfth century we begin to see corbels in churches decorated with vigorous human and animal heads and it is very easy to think that these would have been the more permanent counterparts to a well-established tradition of carving such heads in wood.

Stapols and trees

Speculation about how *stapols* were carved is likely to remain speculative. But there is less speculation when we beginning to consider how the meaning of *stapols* – carved no doubt from whole tree trunks – blurs with the mythical significance of trees.

Again place-names come to our aid – such as hundreds that take their name from 'gartree', which can be interpreted variously as the 'damaged or goitred tree', 'the spear-shaped tree' or 'the tree of the spears'. The association between spears and hundreds is

entirely appropriate as only freemen could attend a hundred and only freemen could carry a spear. Indeed the Anglo-Scandinavian name for a hundred is 'wapentake', the 'take (or count) of weapons'. We can still see the same notion persist in the canton of Appenzel in Switzerland where only men wearing a sword can vote at the annual town meeting (this custom of course long predates the rights of women to vote).

My suspicion is that it was less a case of the person leading the moot demanding 'All in favour raise their spears in the air… ' than leaving spears propped up against the eponymous tree so that, should the discussions become unduly heated, any arguments led merely to fisticuffs and not fatal injuries.

Bear in mind my previous remark that there are two Old English words pronounced the same, one of which meant 'tree' and other which meant 'truth' or 'oath'. This makes hundred moot sites named after compounds of *treow,* such as 'Gartree', doubly meaningful, as hundred moots would have been the occasions when oaths were made.

There is a further explanation of 'gartree' which has seemingly been ignored. That is the area of land in which the hundred moot took place is often, in modern parlance, triangular – defined on at least two sides by obliquely-crossing roads (for practical reasons moot sites are often near crossroads). But as the word 'triangular' has no direct parallel in Old English they could have referred to the shape of the field as 'spear-shaped' – a fitting location for the meeting of those entitled to bear spears.

And, having said all that, to use a tree as a landmark for a meeting place requires that the tree looks distinctive. A tree that had been struck by lightning or had been more intentionally damaged would serve very well as such a landmark. So the 'goitred tree' may be safest bet of all.

However landmark trees – and even in more recent centuries there have been any number of 'Gospel oaks' and such like – blur into more cosmological myths of world trees and such like. Just such a tree, Yggdrasil, features in a number of Scandinavian sagas and has its counterpart in the Irminsul at Eresburg (now Obermarsberg), Germany, destroyed by Charlemagne and the older so-called Jupiter columns known from the Rhine valley.

However, while undoubtedly *stapols* retained some of the significances of the trees from which they were carved, we need to be careful because the Old English *treow* denoted something different. So far as we can tell it referred to a Christian cross, but must have been in some way distinct from a *beam* or a *rood*. Once again, the lack of evidence makes it impossible to establish what the distinctions – or even overlaps – between these different terms might have been.

Stapols and kinship

Stapols and *weohs* seem to have been erected in a variety of places – as grave markers, in the centre of settlements, as territorial boundary markers and at fords and crossroads. Presumably the meaning and significance of any decoration varied almost as greatly – from proto-heraldic statements of kin or clan identity to seeking protection from the supernatural realm. Interestingly our word 'totem' is derived from the Ojibwe word *odoodem*, which means 'his kinship group' so my suggestion that *stapols* might be a counterpart to Native American totem poles extends beyond any physical similarity and also includes their putative significance.

A moment's thought reveals that kin or clan identity and supernatural protection are far from mutually exclusive, least of all in a pre-monotheistic society where protection is sought less from a universal deity and more from local and familial tutelary deities and ancestors (see Volume Two of The Twilight Age).

From *stapol* to *treow, beam* and *rood*

Before there were churches in churchyards there would have been crosses. Most would have been wooden, although only stone examples have survived. Indeed, the word 'cross' comes into English from the Latin *crux* and, as already noted, may originally have denoted *specifically* crosses carved from stone. The wooden ones would have been called in Old English a *treow, beam* or *rood*, although it is not clear what distinction there was between the three words. *Beam* often appears in the compound 'blood beam' so is at the least a cross and perhaps a crucifixion. *Treow* also has the sense of gibbet, as in the place-name Oswestry which is a contraction of *Oswaldes treow*. After the battle of Maserfelth in 642 Penda executed his rival Oswald (whose name has the literal meaning of 'power of god' or 'rule of god') and placed his body on a gibbet, henceforth known as 'Oswald's tree'. *Treow* becomes the modern word 'tree' but, interestingly, it has a homonym *treow* which meant 'truth' or 'oath' (Modern English 'true').

'Rood' has the primary sense of 'gallows' and is the Old English counterpart to the Latin word 'crucifixion'. The least-common Old English term was *Crist mael,* 'the Christ mark(er)'. *Mael* is the precursor to the Modern English word 'mole', a freckle-like mark.

If you are thinking that seeing the stone cross at Stapleford as the successor to a pre-conversion *stapol* is a bit radical then think of the Wiltshire village of Christian Malford. This derives its name from the ford with a *Crist mael*. Indeed Christian Malford church is not in the centre of the village but, instead, right by the banks of the River Avon at a place which topographically is ideally suited to fording (although

Christian Malford church seen from near the bank of the River Avon.

no doubt the river channel has been deepened and widened in recent centuries to minimise flooding). *Crist mael* ford seems to be a direct Christian counterpart to the various *stapol* fords, offering similar supernatural protection.

From wood to stone

Until the construction of stone-built minsters in the eighth and ninth centuries, stone working was absent from Anglo-Saxon culture. They would have been well aware of the ruins of Roman buildings – and may have re-roofed some of them – but these were *enta geweorc* – the 'work of giants' – as in the Old English poem known as *The Ruin* which opens with the lines:

> Wondrous is this stone wall, smashed by Fate;
> the city is broken to pieces, the work of giants has crumbled.

Google Earth view of Christian Malford with the church ringed in red and the river highlighted in blue.

Wood was a living material which was integral to everyday life – capable of being shaped and joined to form the homes, tools and utensils. Stone was inert and recalcitrant. The shift from wooden carvings – whether *weohs* and *stapols* or *beams* and *roods* to carved stone crosses was not simply a shift of medium. The 'message' also shifted somewhat too. The message is more Biblical, alluding the Old Testament passages which refer to the *bethel*, or 'Stone of God'.

Protection against preternatural dangers

Which raises a key question: 'What was the 'message' of pre-conversion carvings?' In all probability, the meaning and significance – 'the message' – of any of the motifs on the carvings would have depended on who was looking at them. At any one time there may have been different ways of 'reading' the motifs, and each of those 'readings' would, almost certainly, evolve over time. The technical terms are 'synchronic' and 'diachronic' divergence.

So, before we can answer questions about meaning and significance we need to ask some more crucial questions, such as '*Why* did these carvings have meaning and significance?' and 'Why go to the trouble of carving them?' In other words, before we consider the 'semantics' or 'hermeneutics' of these carvings, we need to consider their function.

Even the bluntest of analytical thinking will reveal that these carvings were venerated. A slightly sharper analysis would lead to the revelation than they were venerated because, among other reasons, they offered protection. Not just any old protection, but one which spanned the realms of both humans, 'spirits' and deities. Some might want to call it 'supernatural' protection. Those who have read Volume Two of The Twilight Age will be aware the term 'preternatural' ('beside nature') is more appropriate.

Preternatural dangers threaten in many situations. But peripheries and boundaries were especially hazardous. Therefore such boundaries always need defending against preternatural and supernatural dangers. In England there is a widely-known tradition that gargoyles were put up on the outside of churches to frighten away the Devil. Which seems plausible until a closer inspection of the *inside* of churches reveals that the same sort of 'scare-devil' motifs are prevalent . And the whole lore seems to be little more than a hundred-or-so years old (see Trubshaw 2002: 37–42).

And yet, and yet… We must be careful not to discard viable ideas when disposing of discredited assumptions. Carved 'spirit deities' whose role was apopotraic – evil averting – were found on the peripheries of early Buddhist monasteries. And demons

Onigawara *on a roof at Hojo, Japan. Photograph by Asano Noboru.*

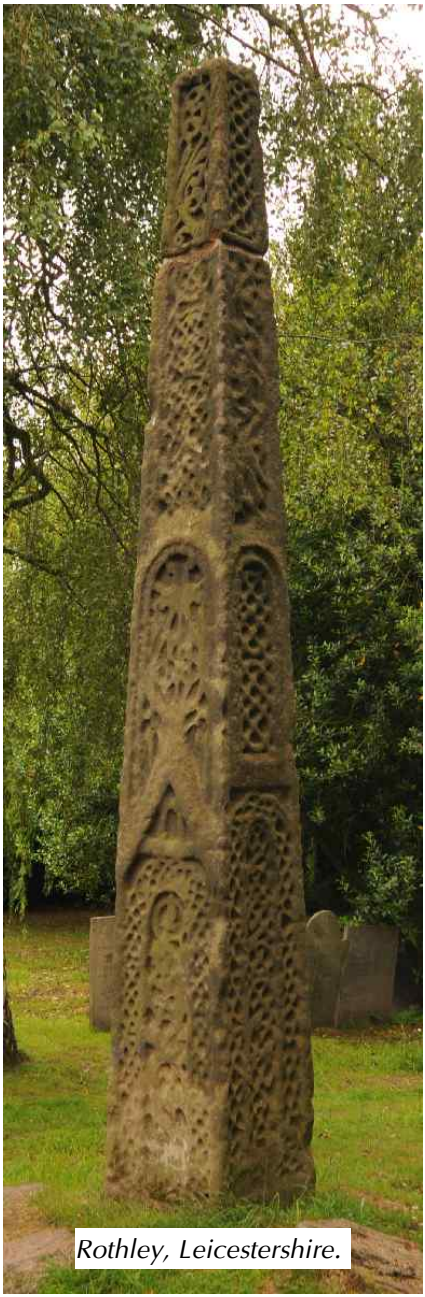
with similar propensities known as *onigawara* are found on the eaves of some traditional Japanese buildings, with close relations in both China and Korea.

The *weohs* which gave their names to *weoh fords* were almost certainly protective. Many more *weohs* would have once stood in the centre of Anglo-Saxon burial mounds. The *weohs* or *becuns* on these mounds were likewise protective. Quite probably at least some were decorated with dragons, as *Beowulf* and other Old English legends tell how the 'treasure' in such barrows was protected by a ferocious dragon.

From *weoh* to *rood*

Stretching my neck out a little further than might be prudent and making the assumption, firstly, that at least some of the *weohs* on burial mounds were plausibly decorated with dragons and, secondly, that *weohs* which stood on the periphery of property as protective boundary markers might too have had similar embellishment then what should we make of Anglo-Saxon crosses carved in the eighth to tenth centuries which also depict dragons?

And is my neck really so far out? After all the best example of such a dragon-decorated cross-shaft in Leicestershire is the one now in the churchyard at Sproxton



Rothley, Leicestershire.

Sproxton, Leicestershire.

– but which was discovered being used as a footbridge over a ditch and, quite plausibly, was originally a boundary marker for the minster in the adjoining parish of Buckminster. Could this be, in effect, a *weoh* with a Christian cross emphatically added?

So what should we make of the contemporary cross-shaft at Rothley – which also has a dragon-like creature – which has now lost its surmounting cross? Are we still looking at the stone counterpart to a *weoh*? Indeed, the non-biblical motifs on crosses seem to have only one plausible precursor – pagan *weohs*. Sadly no academic study seems to have considered this, yet talking to relevant Anglo-Saxonists reveals a shared assumption to the effect of 'Where else could the motifs have come from?'

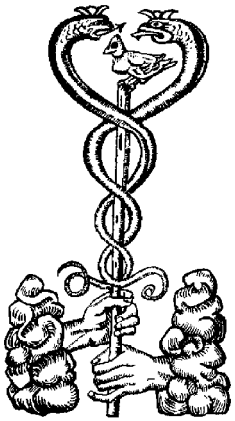
Dracas or *wyrmas?*

If the dragons on cross shafts are descendants of similar animals on *weohs* then they are creatures known to their makers, the *weohsmiðas*, as *wyrmas*. This is the origin of the modern word 'worm' but has a much broader sense of snakes, serpents, maggots and similar squirmy creatures.

Wyrm has often been translated into modern English as 'dragon', which gives the impression that the original authors envisaged creatures with legs, wings and the ability to spew fire and fly through the air. Indeed by the end of the twelfth century a substantial number of depictions of dragons had appeared in sculpture – usually at the receiving end of some serious maltreatment by saints such as Archangel Michael. But *wyrmas* were not originally thought of as manifesting in this manner. Indeed so far as we can tell *wyrmas* were more typically cold, leg-less, scaly creatures who preferred to live underground, often protecting the dead (Thompson 2004: Ch.5).

In Old English literature *draca* are usually distinct from *wyrmas*. The *dracas* have much greater magical abilities, and their flying abilities and fiery breath make them formidable foes capable of fiercely-fought combat. And there was more than one species. In *Beowulf* alone there are references to an earth dragon, a fire dragon, a flame dragon, a sea dragon, a flying ('air-lifter') dragon, and the rather enigmatic 'low dragon'. And of course it was a dragon which killed Beowulf during his final combat.

Some of the *wyrmas* may be the English cousins of the Scandinavian sea-snake known in Norse sagas as Miðgarðsormr, who protectively encircled the Earth – and which Thor famously tried to fish out the sea. Woden was more successful in defeating a *wyrm* as a charm describes how he chopped up its body with 'twigs of glory'.



Left: *Caduceus*

Middle: *The Orphic snake*

Right: *Late sixteenth century German thaler.*

In Volume Four of The Twilight Age I describe in considerable detail how early churches seem to be preferentially located in loops and S-bends in rivers. I then speculate that this might be because sunlight reflecting off the water might have been thought to have spiritual significance, perhaps being thought of as a manifestation of *leac*. Several of these early churches located in loops have legends about dragons or monstrous 'worms'. There seems a strong possibility that this is relevant to both our understanding of *wyrmas* and the 'loopy' locations chosen for early churches, although I make no claims to have fully understood such associations.

Although there is no clear evidence from the surviving Anglo-Saxon charms, in later traditions throughout Europe a snake represents the active spirit of both medicines and poisons. Even today two intertwined snakes are a universal symbol of the medical profession, a symbolism which can be traced back to the Greek cults of Asclepius. The same underlying beliefs can be found in Christian legends too, such as when the poison offered to St John the Evangelist in a laced chalice of wine slithered away in the form of a black snake moments before the apostle was about to drink it.

There are several valid associations which make snakes into the epitome of the 'spirit of change' and potency. Snakes, when encountered by humans, are especially active, ever-changing and more 'fluid' than other creatures, while some species do

indeed have especially poisonous venom. The attributes of some some species of snake become shared by all snake-like creatures, including *wyrmas*.

Trees and serpents go back long before the Garden of Eden as they can be found in Sumerian, Assyrian, Akkadian and Babylonian imagery. A snake wrapped around an egg-shaped stone was key to the Orphic mysteries. A snake on a cross was an early iconographical variant of the crucifixion, while numerous medieval carvings of the Virgin Mary depict her treading on a snake. Any number of mystical and occult movements in the last hundred years or so have woven snake symbolism into their creeds. There seems every possibility that in both Mediterranean and northern Europe there were pagan *weoh*-like 'icons' of one or more serpents around a wooden post.

This 'spirit' of snakes and *wyrmas* seems to be the same as the *leac* or 'potency', discussed in Volume Two of The Twilight Age, which both medicines and poisons were considered to contain. We still refer to distilled alcoholic drinks as 'spirits' for this reason, as the alcohol fumes are invisible to the distiller. So, if snakes and *wyrmas* in some way symbolised the 'spirit' of medicines or poisons, then could they also symbolise broader senses of *leac*? The short answer is, of course, we don't know. The longer, and more speculative answer, is more intriguing.

Were the interlaced serpents or *wyrmas* on Christian cross shafts – and the occasional dragon which appears there too – intended to be a manifestation of *leac*? More specifically, are fire-breathing dragons iconographical successors to *wyrmas* who breathed, not flames, but the breath of life? This would be in direct 'competition' with Trinitarian doctrines and the *Sanctus Spiritus* as the Holy Spirit, while being part of the same underlying worldview of an all-pervasive life-enhancing 'spirit'.

This suggestion of *wyrmas* representing a potent *leac* is close kin to Catholic wayside shrines which impart the *potentia* of the saint depicted. In same way the abundant wayside shrines in India manifest the *shakti* of the deity. From this perspective it would almost be 'odd man out' if north European *weohs* did not emanate supernatural energy, such as *leac*.

Tantric twinning

At the risk of making a cross-cultural comparison which may simply be circumstantial, look at the textile designs by the Japanese artist Serizawa, where some of the depictions of knots are referred to in the captions as 'tantric' (Earle 2009: 17, 18, 38). Although the book about Serizawa offers no further information, the reasonable assumption is that the interweaving of two ropes symbolises the ideas associated with tantric sects. Snakes do actually copulate in this twisted manner.

Above: *Snakes copulating.*

Right: *One of a number of stencilled wall-hangings by the Japanese artist Serizawa Keisuke (1895–1984) depicting 'Tantric twisted ropes'.*

Now think of the two snakes of an Asclepilian caduceus. And then the interlace decoration which so commonly decorates Anglo-Saxon jewellery and stone crosses (see the Gosforth cross on page 18, both examples on page 25 and the Eyam cross on the next page). Should we be looking at Anglo-Saxon crosses in a similarly 'tantric' manner?

Philip Sidebottom established that the interlace on Derbyshire crosses could be interpreted as 'proto-heraldry', suggesting that crosses were intended to be linked to a specific lineage. The interlace-like patterns used in recent times for knitted Arran jumpers are, traditionally, unique to a specific family (whatever the origins of this custom, it was maintained for pragmatic reasons as it enabled to remains of those drowned at sea to be identified, something shared with the different manner of decorating Fair Isle jumpers). And lineage and 'potency' are intimately linked – indeed any man who is seriously impotent will not continue his lineage… Not quite tantra as it has been misunderstood in the West but much closer to the broader and less sensationalist worldview which is associated with this term in the East.

Italian entanglement

While I fully realise that considerable care is needed in before making links between rural Italian folklore of the nineteenth century and Anglo-Saxon carvings a millennium older, the following sections from Charles Leyland's *Etruscan Roman Remains* are, to say the least, thought-provoking:

> This speaking of old Etruscan art made me think of serpents, and I asked if the peasants in le Romagne [in north-eastern Italy] had any beliefs regarding them.

Two views of the cross at Eyeam, Derbyshire.

'Yes. They sometimes paint a serpent on the wall to keep away the evil eye or witch evils, and to bring good luck. But the head must be down and interlaced, and the tail uppermost.'

'And do interlaced serpents mean good fortune?'

'Ah, that is a well-known thing, and not as to serpents alone, but all kinds of interweaving and braiding and interlacing cords, or whatever can attract the eyes of the witches. When a family is afraid of witchery they should undertake some kind of *lavori intrecciati* – braided work – for witches cannot enter a house where there is anything of the kind hung up, as for instance, patterns of two or three serpents twining together, *o altri ricami,* or other kinds of embroidery, but always of intertwining patterns. So in making shirts or drawers or any garments for men or women – *camice, muntande o vestiti* – one should always in sewing try to cross the cotton (thread) as shoemakers do when they stitch shoes, and make a cross-stitch, because shoes are most susceptible to witchcraft *(perche le scarpe sono quelle più facile a prendere le stregonerie).* And when the witches see such interlacings they can do nothing, because they cannot count either the threads nor the stitches *(ne il filo ne i punti).* And if we have on or about us anything of the kind they cannot enter because it bewilders or dazzles their sight *(le fa a bagliare la vista),* and they are incapable of mischief. And to do this well *(tenere il sistema)* you should take cotton, or silk, or linen thread, and make a braid of six, seven, or eight columns, as many as you will – the more the better – and always carry it in your pocket, and this will protect you from witches.

You can get such braids very beautifully made of silk of all colours in some shops; and they keep them for charms against the evil eye.'

[…] In my work on Gypsy Sorcery the following passage occurs (page 98):–

'There is a very curious belief or principle attached to the use of songs in conjuring witches or in averting their own sorcery. It is that the witch is obliged, willy-nilly, to listen to the end what is in metre – an idea founded on the attraction of melody, which is much stronger among savages and children than with civilised adults. Nearly allied to this is the belief that if the witch sees interlaced, or bewildering and confused patterns, she must follow them out, and by means of this her thoughts are diverted or scattered. Hence the serpentine inscriptions of the Celts and Norsemen, and their intertwining bands which were firmly believed to

> bring good luck, or avert evil influence. A traveller in Persia states that the patterns of the carpets of that country are made as bewildering as possible 'to avert the evil eye.' And it is with this purpose that, in Italian as in all other witchcraft, so many spells and charms depend on interwoven braided cords (vide the Spell of the Holy Stone).
>
> 'The basis for this belief is the fascination or interest which many persons, especially children, feel to trace out patterns, to thread the mazes of labyrinths, or to analyse and distangle knots and 'cats' cradles.' Did space permit, nor inclination fail, I could point out some curious proofs that the old belief in the power of long and curling hair to fascinate, was derived not only from its beauty, but also because of the magic of its curves and entanglements.'

While none of Leyland's information provides any reliable insights into north European beliefs or practices, the notions of entanglements and such like do have their parallels. While the details may be deceptive the underlying premises may well have been shared by the worldviews of Europeans living further north.

Frightening away the neighbours

Even without any comparisons with examples from outside the British Isles, we can say with reasonable confidence that Christian cross shafts with *wyrmas* and interlace patterns are a continuation of pre-Christian practices and beliefs about *leac* or similar concepts of a 'potent' life-force which evolves into the Holy Spirit and the *potentia* of Christ manifesting through saints' relics.

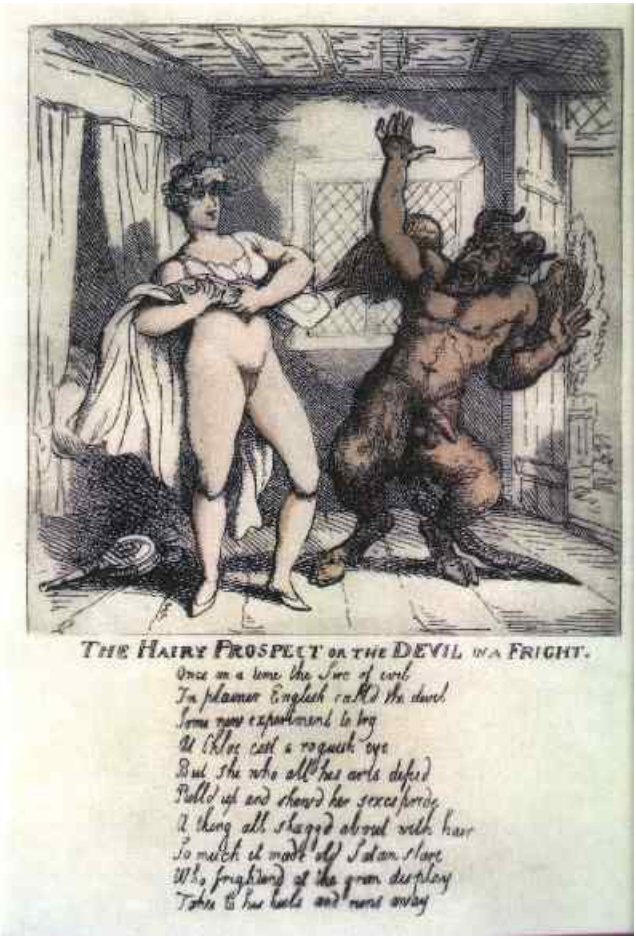
If any of this is reliable then the Catholic wayside shrines which I referred to as analogous to *weohs* are perhaps not simply analogous but, instead, the more recent manifestations of an unbroken tradition. This in turn has the implication that, as might reasonably be expected, not all the *weohs* had *wyrmas* on them but some – perhaps a great many – were images of the *dísir*, the local tutelary goddess or 'spirit of place', which seemingly morphs into the Marian cult of the later medieval era.

In this section I want to look specifically at *stapols* and *weohs* as both boundary markers and boundary protectors. The Sproxton cross, with interace and 'dragon' or *wyrma* is plausibly a former boundary marker. The various *stapol fords* and Christian Malford, the *crist mael ford,* offered 'otherworldly' protection in subtly different ways.

Volume Five of The Twilight Age is devoted to the topography of boundary shrines but here I want to look specifically at the iconography. Which is a tad tricky, as no *stapols* or *weohs* have survived. So my first step is to speculate as to what sort of imagery might appear on them. *Wyrmas* and interlace almost certainly, else why

Previous page: *'The Devil Defeated'. Eighteenth century engraving by Charles Eisen for* Fables *by Jean de La Fontaine.*

Right: *Thomas Rowlandson's version of the same topic 1785–99.*



would they appear on early crosses. Depictions of the deities and heroes are well attested, and lead directly into images of Christ and the Apostles. But, *wyrmas* seem to be most associated with protecting burials, perhaps also evoking some sense of the 'cycle of life'. Deities and the like are clearly both the focus of veneration and intercessionary requests. But neither are really the sort of images which would scare away a neighbouring tribe or a malignant *landwight*.

In the eighteenth century it was commonplace knowledge that the best way for a woman to frighten away the Devil was by lifting up her skirts. And bear in mind that knickers and such like were not worn until the very end of the nineteenth century…

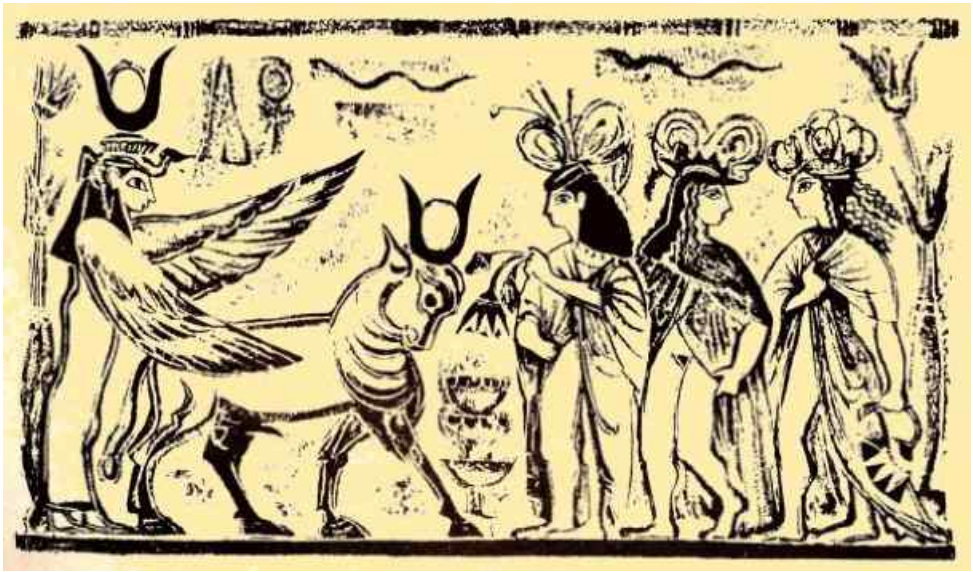
As confirmation we have Charles Eisen's fairly tasteful depiction, while Thomas Rowlandson offers a more ribald version.

Female genital display in religious rituals is considerably older. It is well-attested in the Greek mysteries. For example, when Demeter was mourning the death of her daughter, Persephone, an old woman called Baubo amused her by lifting her skirts. This may have been a 'coded' reference to the

Left: *A Roman statue of Baubo lifting her skirt.*

Below: *Reconstruction by Winifred Milius Lubell of Ancient Egyptian women venerating the bull-god Apis.*

Next page: *Probably the oldest surviving female exhibitionist carvings in England – the twelfth century 'sheela na gig' at Kilpeck, Herefordshire.*



central part of the mystery cult's ritual drama; certainly it remains part of an annual custom in some parts of rural Greece to this day (Håland 2012)).

Despite the antiquity of female genital display, there is a huge gap in place and time between Classical Baubo figurines and the earliest Romanesque female exhibitionists – the oldest known ones are in western France and northern Spain and were carved in the eleventh to early thirteenth centuries (Weir and Jerman 1986). A small number of British examples are also eleventh century but most are from the twelfth century, with later examples too.

The tradition of Romanesque figurative carving, whether female exhibitionists or other somewhat monstrous beings, was almost certainly not invented from scratch. The quality of the carving is just too skilful. We have to assume that there was also a long-standing tradition of similar images carved in wood, although none of these works have survived the ravages of time.

The fairy woman with her *gee*

The earliest known instance of the phrase 'sheela na gig' is about 1770. But it makes no sense in Irish or etymologically. Much ink has been spilt by non-Irish speakers as to what this phrase meant in Irish before it was corrupted. But the pseudonymous 'Galteeboy' seemed to put the matter to rest in an online posting in 2006. He argues that sheela na gig is a corruption of the words *shee lena gig***.** Rendering this as 'sheela na gig' is an easy enough mistake to make, doubly so for an eighteenth century English-speaker unfamiliar with Irish slang.

'Shee' is just a phonetic spelling of *Sídhe,* the widely-used Gaelic word for 'fairy woman' or sprite; earlier used for a fairy mound or a mound beneath which the *Sídhe* lived. But in the eighteenth century – when the corruption 'sheela na gig' is first attested – *Sídhe* meant 'fairy woman'. The word *lena*, then and now, means 'with her'. So, *folaíonn dífhostú fostaí d'fhoirceannadh a conartha fostaíochta* ***lena*** *fostóir* translates as 'dismissal includes the termination by an employee of her contract of employment ***with her*** employer'.

Gee or *gig* – pronounced with a hard 'g' as in 'go' – are two ways of spelling the same slang word. If you look again at the photograph of the Kilpeck carving and think of her as a *Sídhe* then the phrase 'The fairy woman with her… ' should be fairly easy to complete. The word is still current slang. Galteeboy also states that an unspecified online dictionary of Irish slang confirms this: 'Gee, Gee-box (n): female genitalia'. The Irish-born writer Tom Murphy, in his 1994 book *The Seduction of Morality*, provides confirmation that this use of 'gee' is still current:

> She withdrew her arm and then took her hand upwards to stroke the curve of her belly, then downwards again, through the hair, turned the fingers in

Wooden dilukai *from Belau (Palau). Linden Museum, Stuttgart.*

between her legs to find the it of the girl, the what, the quem, gee, the job, the word that offended her, the font, the nothing, the everything, the hole, to find it wet. Good.

(Quotation supplied by Anthony Weir, pers. comm. 22 August 2004)

Monstrous sexuality

As Malcolm Jones observed, there is something 'monstrous' about the sexuality of both male and female exhibitionist figures (Jones 2002: 74–5). They are more than merely 'naked' yet seem to have no overlap with modern concepts of pornography. Similarly, while there are Romanesque carvings of Adam and Eve – often rather charmingly coy – the directness of the exhibitionist carvings has nothing to do with *Genesis*. The exact message may be lost but we get the drift that This is Not a Good Thing.

The oldest references to female genital display are not strictly apotropaic but are part of religious veneration. Ancient Egyptian women are described as lifting up their skirts in worship of deities such as Apis and Hathor (Kilmer 1982; Broadhurst 2005).

Carved wooden female exhibitionist figures are to be found frequently in Micronesia, especially in in the Palauan archipelago. Called *dilukai* or *dilugai*, they are typically depicted with legs splayed, revealing a large, black, triangular pubic area while their hands rest upon their thighs.

These female figures protect the villagers' health and ward off all evil spirits as well. They are constructed by ritual specialists according to strict rules, which if broken

An Indian sacred yoni.

would result in the specialist's as well as the chief's death. It is no coincidence that signs representing the female genitalia are used as apotropaic devices on gates. The vulva is the primordial gate, the mysterious divide between non-life and life.

From Qa'aba to Quadrille

Similar figures, more typically in stone, are venerated at Indian shrines and are part of wider worship of more abstract *yoni* carvings and natural simulacra (often combined, understandably, with *lingam* stones). And this veneration is not specific to Hinduism – the most holy-of-holies for Moslems, the most venerated part of the the Qa'aba at Mecca, is the depiction in solid silver of the vulva of goddess Q're (or Al'Lat, which simply means 'goddess') whose shrine at Mecca long predated the Prophet Mohammed. Indeed, the priests of Mecca are still known as *Beni Shaybah* or 'Sons of the Old Woman' – Shaybah being, of course, the famous Queen Sheeba of Solomon's times (Trubshaw 1993, based on Camphausen 1989). '*Yoni*-worship' is the ultimate aspiration of every Moslem who sets off on the *hajj*.

Clearly genital display was, and is, a fairly universal act. However to understand such gestures on medieval carvings we need to restrict our interest to Continental examples. The gesture was certainly still alive and well in early modern Europe as Erasmus (1466–1536), in his *Apothegms*, elaborates on Plutarch's description of a battle between the Cyperi and Astyages where the Cyperi women insult their cowardly men folk in this manner. Rabelais (*circa* 1494–1553) includes the gesture in Chapter 47 of *Quart Livre*, published in 1551. Various 'folk tales' in circulation during the eighteenth century include an account of the Devil being driven away by

Other depictions of Baubo.

female genital display. The engravings by Charles Eisen and Thomas Rowlandson, already illustrated, are part of this lore. A hundred years later, in 1885, Émile Zola's novel *Germinal* appeared. As Germaine Greer notes:

> When Maheude wanted to show her utter contempt for the oppressors of the poor in Zola's *Germinal*, she turned her back, parted her legs, stooped and threw her skirts over her head, displaying her split buttocks, as if to say, 'You can kiss my big, fat, smelly arse!'
>
> (Greer 1999: 238)

Greer continues by drawing a comparison to 'the riotous bare ass displays of the midinettes of Paris who danced the original can-can'. Yes, the sight of frilly knickers was not why the Quadrille (dubbed the 'French Can-Can' after it was exported to London) was deemed so ribald…

I have been told of a woman of east European origin offering exactly the same insult in an English charity shop within the last two decades. But if this gesture seems to be all about being rude – or offering transgressive entertainment – then clearly you are not familiar with the Catalan saying *La mar es posa nona si veu el cony d'una dona* (The sea calms down if it sees a woman's *coney*) (Blackledge 2003: 8). Indeed

everything else you need to know about female genital display makes up the opening chapters of Catherine Blackledge's scholarly *tour de force*. Despite more recent variants, the original is essentially apotropaic.

And, yes, there is a male apotropaic counterpart: to this day, Italian men ward off evil spirits by grabbing their genitals – a gesture 'mimicked' as part of his dance moves by Michael Jackson but which, which Jackson himself was mimicked in 2008, led to a 42-year-old man from Como being fined two hundred Euros for offending public decency (Screeton 2008). And we should also bear in mind that oaths in Mediterranean lands commonly invoke the Virgin's or the Devil's private parts, Jesus' turds, and such like (Anthony Weir, pers. comm. 10 February 2013).

John Grigsby kindly responded to an earlier version of these ideas by drawing my attention to A.J. Greimas's *Of Gods and Men* (1992) which Grigsby describes as 'an attempt to form some sort of order out of Lithuanian myth and folklore' and continues:

> In one section he is talking about a being or beings called Aitvaras, which he sees as a kind of aerial deity or spirit, possibly involved in some original titanic creation myth, but in time becoming a kind of air-born fire demon, a mischievous elf who can bring disease as well as wealth.
>
> Anyway – on seeing one of these entities one could make it depart by 'opening one's nightshirt' or 'showing one's ass' (Greimas 1992: 46) meaning 'one's sexual organs'.
>
> Might a similar process be behind the women of Ulster stripping naked in order to cool the ardour of the enraged Cu Chulainn? It takes three vats of water to cool him down. His fury marks him out as outside societal norms – wild, in need of taming; he is the chaos that needs ordering before he is allowed back in to society. This makes me think of Enkidu, who only becomes civilized after he sleeps with the woman; or the madness of Owein which is 'healed' when he is anointed by the woman (in 'The Lady of the Fountain') in all cases we see calming, taming, ordering. Might the female display of the sheelas and the Lithuanian women be similarly employed?

Weoh cwenes and the *quain* tree

I have discussed medieval depictions of both female and male exhibitionists in considerable detail elsewhere, and also the substantial literature (both popular and academic) which has been devoted to these images (see Trubshaw forthcoming Ch. 8). Suffice to say the meaning and significance of these motifs inevitably evolves. However such inevitable change is often lost on the authors – even many of the

academic ones – so there is a widespread popular 'understanding' of the origins of these carvings based on recent folk customs, or downright supposition, which has little or no relevance to the time when they were created.

To counter these flawed speculations I will now suggest that before there were female exhibitionists carved in stone there were a considerable number of carved wooden precursors, and perhaps a good number of trees with corresponding natural simulacra. The meaning and significance was unambiguous: they were telling troublesome neighbours to 'f*** off' in no uncertain terms.

To suggest that Romanesque female exhibitionists are direct successors to wooden *weohs* with prominent *quims* may seem to be stretching the available evidence unduly. Indeed, there is no such evidence, in that no such wooden carving has survived. But there is other evidence.

Firstly, there are two curious carvings from after the Romanesque which, in their own ways, are unique survivals. And, in their own way, they just might be late successors to earlier depictions of female sovereigns of the land (a topic I have discussed in more detail in Trubshaw 2011 and 2013–14).

The carvings in the bell-shaped man-made cave at Royston depict a variety of saints and other figures which seem to have been carved in the thirteenth century or maybe the early fourteenth. Why they were carved, and by whom is unknown; the long-standing suggestion that the Knights Templars were involved is seemingly spurious. One of the more surprising figures is a female exhibitionist. To her right is a horse and to her left is a sword. As Meghan Rice has observed, this is perfect iconography

Royston female exhibitionist between horse and sword.

for sovereignty. Rice, in an unpublished BA dissertation, too suggests that sheela na gig carvings would be excellent carvings to act as boundary protectors for the sovereign's land (Rice 2013). This section is my elaboration of her suggestion.

Of less certain date is a carving now standing at the base of the tower of the church at Braunston-in-Rutland. Presumably this was once inserted high up in the tower. The best guess is that this is fourteenth century (Trubshaw 1994) although a twelfth century date is perhaps possible. Despite her 'rude' appearance she is not a female exhibitionist. However she could have been inspired by a full-length wooden figure which was an exhibitionist – with the stone version conveniently bowdlerised by the need to insert her waist-deep into the structure of the building.

Braunston-in-Rutland's enigmatic carving.

Quaintree House, Braunston-in-Rutland.

Based on a suggestion by Jill Bourn, I first speculated about this Braunston carving over twenty years ago (Trubshaw 1994). The clue is in the name of a wonderful old house in the village, Quaintree House. *Quain* is from Old English *cwene* which gives us the modern word 'queen'. But in Anglo-Saxon times *cwene* had two-edged connotations. While referring to the wife of a king it also denoted a 'young, robust woman', and developed the secondary sense of a 'female serf, hussy, prostitute'. Quaintree is, seemingly, derived from *cwene treow*, with *treow* (as discussed above) having more of the sense of a gallows or Christian cross than just any old tree.

My suspicion – and it can be no more – is that such a *cwene treow* did not depict an honoured woman but instead something more impudent. Was the 'tree' a carved *stapol?* Or was it really a tree but one with a simulacra with a 'quim' (and presumably, breasts and a face akin to the surviving stone version)? Yew trees famously 'bleed' from damage to their trunks (the best-known examples are in the churchyard at Nevern in Pembrokeshire). This would be entirely in keeping with such a 'quim' – and also perhaps why clergy were keen to offer an alternative exegesis for such trees, based instead around 'expressing devotion' for the death of Christ.

Whether *stapol or* simulacra, such a *cwene treow* would have served as a very suitable boundary marker. Braunston is near the boundary between Rutland and Leicestershire, in an area where the exact border was long disputed (as the nearby place-name Flitteris Park Farm (from Old English *flyt* 'strife, dispute' and *hris* 'brushwood', i.e. 'brushwood-covered land of disputed ownership'). As the River Gwash runs just to the south of the church then if there had been a *stapol* here then the location would be spot on for a *stapol* ford.

Perhaps it is just coincidence but Rutland has deep associations with queens – the regal sort. This anomalously-small county was the dowry of the queens of late Anglo-Saxon England. One village, Edith Weston, is named after such a queen. The Royston carvings suggest that 'emblematic' representations of female 'sovereignty' were sustained well into the medieval era. However I am not aware of any medieval parallels to the Royston imagery, so the sovereignty interpretation must be regarded as tentative.

I realise that neither Royston or Braunston offer conclusive evidence for the one-time existence of female exhibitionists on *weohs* or *stapols*. After all, such phrases as *cwene weoh* or *cwene stapol* do not appear in literary sources or place-names. But, given the pervasive influence of Christianity, were they likely to have been recorded, still less survived?

We know that female exhibitionists are a surprisingly common motif on Romanesque and Gothic churches and, mostly in Ireland, secular buildings too. Why they were being carved at that time remains a wide open question. My interest is specifically in the earlier and, seemingly, geographically widespread origins of the motif. Classical depictions of Baubo do not seem to have travelled to northern Europe. So the motif must have been, like hero-deities and *wyrms*, part of an indigenous woodcarving tradition which spanned the making of *weohs* and *stapols*. A *stapol* on a boundary frightening away unwelcome visitors (whether manifest or preternatural) seems an entirely plausible reason for such impudence to be perpetrated.

What is the meaning of this Germanic barbarity?

Although I have shown illustrations of Anglo-Saxon crosses with what are usually interpreted as a mixture of Christian and 'pagan' motifs (for example those at Breedon on the Hill, see page 56) I have not considered these as evidence for continuity of iconography. One the face of things this seems downright perverse. But I'd aver otherwise.

Firstly there is the fundamental problem of agreeing what it is that these carvings supposedly depict. Scholars seem to find it hard to reach such agreement, and I have none of the skills necessary to evaluate their opinions. These interpretations, at least the older ones, are predicated on an inherent dualism between paganism and Christianity. This dualism is derived, directly or otherwise, from the writings of Bede However there is now a long list of reasons why implicit reliance on Bede's account has unduly influenced Dark Age scholarship (see Dooley-Fairchild 2012).

As Thomas O'Loughlin argued back in 1999, early Christians seem to have regarded paganism as an imperfect precursor to Christianity, one made perfect by the Gospel. From the perspective of piety it may seem that these pioneers grasped the doctrines of salvation. But how quickly did early Christians really understand the message of salvation? Such soteriological considerations are absent from Graeco-Roman religion prior to contact with Semitic cultures and equally absent from Scandinavian sagas. There is no evidence that salvation was part of north European belief.

Indeed, from literary sources, the main 'message' of early Christianity in northern Europe seems to have little or nothing to do with salvation. This reflects the emphasis on the synoptic Gospels, which equally have almost no references to salvation. Salvation is introduced in the fourth Gospel and developed in the *Acts* and Pauline epistles. (Hefner 1993; Jolly 1996: 23–4). Discussions of salvation in surviving Anglo-Saxon texts are in Latin; this was – understandably – of topic of interest to clerics, but seemingly not made available in the vernacular.

Instead, the emphasis in early Old English literature is an imagining of Christ as the Lord. But the words used are *frea* and *dryhten* which, hitherto, had denoted war lords (Pollington 2011: 242), almost literally the provider of the 'daily bread'. Given the kinship feuding which defined Germanic societies at the time of conversion, a deity conceived of as an ideal kin leader makes considerably more sense than notions of salvation.

Until there has been considerably more consideration of how concepts of Christ became 'integrated' into north European and British culture then trying to understand the meaning and significance of images of Christ of the period becomes little better than guesswork. However, whatever the correct interpretation of the images, the iconography is a key part of the evidence! I make no attempt to resolve this conundrum, my purpose here is simply to note that attempts so far to understand 'mixed faith' crosses *may* be based on dubious assumptions about the 'worldview' of the carvers and their patrons and audience.

Maybe there had been a conscious decision by either the patron or the sculptor to make a dualistic 'multi-faith' statement. More realistically, there was no such conscious decision but, instead, repeated subtle shifts in the meaning and significance of specific motifs used on sculpture. In other words, while the form changed little, there were many and various 'exegeses' of the same motif, including contradictory ones.

As an example of more-or-less what seems to be this process, I would like to turn my attention to a group of five Romanesque tympana. Yes, this is later than the period under consideration, but what seems to be the oldest of these, at Stoney Stanton in

The tympanum at Stoney Stanton, Leicestershire, now over the north door to the chancel but originally over the main (south or west) doorway. There is no clear evidence as to why there is a vertical slot. There are no parallels for this being original and I assume it is a fairly recent modification to take a bracket supporting a lantern over the doorway.

Leicestershire, does seem to have links with Anglo-Scandinavian imagery and now-lost associated legends.

The question which forms the title of this section, 'What is the meaning of this Germanic barbarity?', formed the opening sentence of Nikolaus Pevsener's description of the Stoney Stanton tympanum in the first edition of his guide to Leicestershire and Rutland churches (later editions have an amended entry). Pevesner made no attempt to answer his own question. Had he done so he would have followed the understandings of his own time and not taken into consideration most of the points I have raised in this section, nor the broader background of this whole study.

What follows is an edited version of a previously-drafted discussion of Stoney Stanton and several iconographical 'companion works' (Trubshaw forthcoming Ch.11; a much shorter version appeared as Trubshaw 2010). The *meaning* may still elude us, but at least the *context* of this 'Germanic barbarity' becomes clearer.

From *braceates* to tympana

What can be sensibly said about the meaning of Stoney Stanton's splendid sculpture? The protagonists comprise of a man, three animals – one clearly mythical – and a large bird. Elizabeth Williamson, the editor of the later editions, refines Pevsner's description to:

> On the [left] an ox (?) and behind it a bishop with crozier and blessing right hand. The ox attacks a dragon (lion?) whose head is drawn back. From the [right] a wyvern attacks it and an eagle perches on it.

Like Williamson I am not convinced that the left-hand beast is an ox, as such beasts would be depicted with horns. Presumably Pevsner's interpretation was influenced by the emblems of the Evangelists – whereby a lion, ox, eagle and angel signify Mark, Luke, John and Matthew respectively. But, as the scene does not fit representations of the Evangelists, there is little reason to suppose the left-hand figure is an ox. The more obvious candidates are a large canine or feline – perhaps a lioness or leopard, allowing for the probability that the stonemason would have seen neither alive and would be copying other depictions.

The stonemason may have thought of the wyvern as a *wyrm*, the Old English word for dragon-like entities famous for guarding the treasure supposedly concealed in burial mounds.

Although this menagerie of monsters is unique to the Stoney Stanton tympanum, there are parallels at Parwich and Hognaston (two near-adjacent villages in Derbyshire). However there the Lamb of God (or Agnus Dei) is a prominent motif and the accompany creatures are less Otherworldy – note the eponymous 'hog' at Hognaston. (There is perhaps a 'nod' here to an entirely distinct decorative theme for tympana which depicts boar hunts, for example at Little Langford in Wiltshire; see Wood 2012.) However the backward-turned head of the right-hand beast at Parwich (perhaps a lion) closely parallels the central creature at Stoney Stanton. And, common to all three carvings, is a bird (pedantically, two birds at Hognaston).

Another similar tympanum is at Little Paxton in Cambridgeshire. Although this too has a bishop and assorted animals, the wheel cross – now detached from the Lamb of God – dominates, and the animals seem domesticated. Notably the bird has flown away. My guess is that the Lamb of God has transformed into the two lambs or sheep either side of the cross, kneeling in deference to the symbol of God. If this interpretation is correct then the Agnus Dei has inspired a visual reference to the description of the Nativity in the apocryphal Gospel of St James, where the ox and ass are described as joining Mary and the shepherds in kneeling by the manger where the infant Jesus lay (although the sheep are described as being uncannily

motionless rather than kneeling, so if the Little Paxton scene is a reference to St James' account, then it is an inaccurate one).

The 'wheel cross' begins life as an emblem of the sky or thunder god Taranis (worshipped principally in Gaul and the British Isles, but also in the Rhineland and Danube regions). It continued until recent times as a popular decorative motif in East Anglian pargetting (decorative plasterwork) and other 'folk art', usually as an apotropaic emblem. Quite what it meant to the minds of twelfth century Christians is a moot point. The commonest suggestion by art historians is that it was thought of as 'the wheel of eternity' but this may be no more than an oft-repeated 'truism' as I am not aware of any scholarly evidence.

Compare and contrast

All four tympana incorporate at least two motifs found on the other four, but none of the motifs are found on all four. The scores are: bishop (3), one or two birds (3),

The Parwich tympanum includes a Lamb of God, with another lamb-/sheep-like creature facing and a pig (hog) and bird above. The backward-facing lion-like beast on the right appears to have two large leaves at the end of its tail but as the carving is somewhat damaged in this area then other interpretations are possible, including the 'leaves' being the wings of a dragon.

Top: *The tympanum at Hognaston, Derbyshire with birds, Lamb of God, bishop, hog, dog? and (incomplete) biting beasts.*

Bottom: *Little Paxton tympanum with the wheel cross dominating. This is flanked with two kneeling animals (probably lambs or sheep), with a bishop and what may be a horse completing the composition.*

Note that two beasts 'adoring' the cross on both the Hognaston and Little Paxton tympana are common on Anglo-Saxon depictions of the crucifixion. The similarly-paired animals at Hognaston and Little Paxton are, of course, a compositional device readily suited to the shape of tympana. But I suspect a deliberate 'echoing' of the crucifixion. Just possibly such triptychs owe their origin to the conventional placement of pre-conversion idols, although direct evidence is understandably lacking.

Lamb of God or prominent wheel cross (3), backward-facing 'lion' (2), hog/pig (2), and possible dogs (2). Of these, the Stoney Stanton carving does not share the Lamb of God/wheel cross or the hog/pig.

Bear in mind that such tympana would have originally been painted, perhaps quite garishly. In a pre-literate society the decoration of a church was intended to clearly communicate well-known Christian parables and legends, usually biblical but sometimes taken from the lives of the saints. The nearest Biblical story approximating to the Stoney Stanton activities is Daniel in the lion's den. Meyer Schapiro has discussed in some detail the various depictions of Daniel in the lion's den in the Romanesque sculptures of northern France (Schapiro 2006: 140–2).

In such undisputed depictions Daniel is almost always shown sitting down, with his hands held in the open-armed or *orans* prayer position, while two to seven lions sit

The tympanum now inside Southwell minster.

passively, overawed by his divine protection (Pollington *et al* 2010: 447). The angel Habakkuk is also usually depicted too. Even if we take the left-hand and central beasts at Stoney Stanton to both be lions, so far as I am aware, none of the French carvings have any parallels for the bishop, wyvern or large bird.

Similarly the Stoney Stanton images does not show St Michael taking on the dragon. The much more accomplished carving at Southwell minster shares similar beasties and overall layout. But the wings, sword and shield all signify someone quite different to the bishop of the other four tympana. Conventionally this tympanum is described as St Michael, but it is similar to depictions of Christ with wings found on other Romanesque carvings. The absence of a nimbus or halo on the Southwell carving prevents a clear distinction (Christ was shown with a different shaped nimbus to archangels).

If we interpret the left-hand animal as a lion then Christ becomes more likely. A capital at Castor near Peterborough which is a close contemporary of these tympana depicts a lion and a dragon in a manner which is closely matched by a somewhat later bestiary image clearly labelled as Christ and Satan. Bearing in mind the more clearly lion-like figure on the left-hand side of the Southwell tympanum, together with the strong lateral polarisation of good and evil in the tympana of northern France and this 'reading' of the iconography is perhaps close to what was intended.

It's about the bird

We can discount the bird at Stoney Stanton being the dove of the Holy Trinity as this iconography is not found in Norman carvings. In any event the bird looks too threatening – if it is not an eagle, as Pevsner and Williamson suggest, then it is an ominous raven or crow. In Old English and early medieval literature such birds are thought of Otherworldy messengers, bearers of omens (Raw 1978: 56; Wilson 1992: 27). If all this sounds remote from modern thinking, then bear in mind that many people today know – even if they do not 'believe in' – such auspicial aphorisms as 'one for sorrow, two for joy, three for a girl, four for a boy, five for silver, six for gold, seven for a secret that must never be told' (and numerous variants for up to twenty birds) to be repeated when sighting magpies – close cousins of ravens and crows.

Early Christian authorities in England issued repeated edicts against divination from birds – either from watching their flight patterns or by listening to their cries. The need for recurrent decrees suggests that such practices remained part of 'popular culture' for many centuries. Indeed, in a curious example of imposing a Christian veneer on such practices, in Anglo-Saxon popular Christianity the prophet Daniel was credited with inventing the interpretation of divinatory dreams of birds (Flint 1991: 196). While this might be thought to support the interpretation of the Stoney

Stanton tympanum as Daniel in the lion's den, the birds in the Derbyshire carvings are clearly not part of a depiction of Daniel.

I have little doubt that the intention of such carvings was to supplant earlier ideas about birds with more Christian ones. Examples of this Christianising of pre-Christian bird portents can be discerned frequently in hagiographies of early saints. Prominent among these is the account of St Cuthbert persuading a sea eagle to change its ways and defer to the needs of the saint by feeding him with fish. On the Continent St Desiderius of Vienne and his companions also benefited from an eagle willing to drop them food. St Servatius of Tongres, St Bertoul of Flanders, St Lutwin and St Medard were all protected by eagles acting as either an umbrella or a sunshade! However we should not take this too literally, as the bird forms a cross-like shape in the sky, symbolically protecting the saint from demons (who, in the early medieval worldview, mostly lived in the space between the earth and the moon). Other saints

The 'Dear Bird' (outlined with red dots on this photograph) on Avebury font – where a bishop confronts two dragons. Significantly the 'Dear Bird' is on his right – possibly signifying the power of Christ to help defeat the two 'Leviathans'.

benefited from birds after martyrdom, such as St Vincent, St Vitus and St Stanislaus of Cracow, whose bodies were protected by one or more eagles from dogs and other carrion-eating beasts. (Flint 1991: 197–8)

The eagles featuring in these lives of saints are clearly borrowed from pre-Christian worldviews, but with new meanings superimposed on the previous divinatory significance. In Anglo-Saxon England ravens seemed to share with eagles such auspicial associations (Raw 1978: 56) – and also bear in mind that folklore still holds that Britain is safe from invasion so long as ravens reside at the Tower of London.

Mary Webb has discussed the large bird on the font from Hampstead Norreys, Berkshire (now in the church at Stone, Buckinghamshire) as part of a depiction of a passage from early versions of the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus* (Webb 2010: 116–17). However the presence of a large bird in this scene seems to be based more specifically on several passages in Pope Gregory the First's commentary on the book of Job, known as the *Magna Moralia* or simply *Moralia*, written in the later part of the sixth century but widely known in copies throughout the medieval era. This refers to Christ as 'the Mediator between God and Man [rightly] called a Vulture.' In the Anglo-Saxon poems of Cynewulf these passages from *Moralia* become paraphrased as 'the flight of the Dear Bird from heaven to earth', and other passages use the phrase 'Dear Bird' to refer to the resurrected Christ (the origin of this seems to be a text attributed to Justin Martyr where the resurrected Christ is equated to a phoenix). One of the bestiaries attributes vultures with the ability to give birth without copulation, furthering the parallels with Christ. (Webb 2010: 109; 121–2; 215 n.8)

The Stoney Stanton sculptor may have intended his bird to be seen as the 'Dear Bird from heaven'. He may have thought of it as a vulture – even though he had never seen one. However lack of first-hand observation did not deter the illustrators of later bestiaries from creating images of vultures – even though the birds shown lack all the distinctive attributes of the species!

Is this the Harrowing of Hell?

One of the strongest and most prevalent of the images in medieval churches was of the Harrowing of Hell. There are also corresponding written accounts of Christ's decent into Hell. The details can be quite varied – sometimes he is accompanied by St Michael, sometimes not. Christ overcomes Satan, who is depicted as a dragon. In an old penitential prayer used at Winchester in the eleventh century, a dragon and a lion are mentioned as the guardians of Hell. This prayer is addressed to St Michael:

> I therefore beseech and entreat, archangel St Michael, that you... deign to take up my soul when it leaves my body and free it from the power of the enemy, so that it may bypass the gates of Hell and the ways of darkness, so

> that the lion or dragon who is accustomed to receive souls into Hell and lead them to eternal torments may not obstruct it.

St Michael is a useful ally on outings to Hell. Long before became fixated in people's minds with dracocide he was the archangel who acted as the soul's pyschopomp. Early churches on hilltops were commonly dedicated to St Michael because hill tops were nearer to Heaven so anyone buried there would have a head start. Perhaps the elevated location and angelic assistance attracted those who thought their soul would need all the help it could get...

An illustration in the *Tiberius Psalter* of the Harrowing shows Christ before the gates of Hell in combat with both a lion and a dragon (Openshaw 1989: 22). Such details intentionally echo Psalm 90: 13 'You will tread on the lion and the adder, the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot' as this phrase is an example of supersessionism known as as *Christus super aspidem*.

Clearly a biblical or Apocryphal reading is intended for all these tympana. The Southwell tympanum fits well with how the Harrowing of Hell is described, adding weight to the suggestions that this depicts a winged Christ. Yet, while there are elements at Stoney Stanton which belong in the Harrowing of Hell, there is 'something else' going on here.

Just as the Apocryphal accounts of the Harrowing weave in details from Psalm 50, perhaps this tympanum is weaving in a story well-known at the time, albeit from neither Old nor New Testament sources. After all *Beowulf* is known to us because it was transcribed and copied by Christian monks, presumably because it too – with a Christ-like 'superhero' taking on a dragon – can be regarded as a pagan precedent for the Apocryphal narrative. And many tales once as well-known as *Beowulf* simply did not get written down.

Is the answer in Denmark?

The clearest pre-Christian precedent for the events depicted in the Stoney Stanton carving is a gold bracteate from Skrydstrup, Denmark. Bracteates were produced between *circa* 500 to *circa* 600 AD and worn as protective amulets. The Skrydstrup example shows Óðinn (Odin) or Tyr with a wolf, stag, intertwined snakes and two birds. Scandinavian legends retold by Snorri Sturluson in the thirteenth century tell how two ravens sat on Óðinn's shoulders and spoke into his ears all the news they saw or heard. Their names were Hugin (thought) and Munin (memory). Óðinn sent them out at dawn to fly over all the world and they returned at dinner-time, with the result he got to know about many events. Clearly this can either be taken at face value or regarded as a disguised reference to divination by observing the flight of birds. Óðinn also lost an eye in return for gaining the wisdom of the runes (a further

Above: *Gold bracteate (amulet) from Skrydstrup, Denmark, depicting Odin or Tyr with a wolf, stag, intertwined snakes and two birds. Drawing by Lindsay Kerr (from Pollington 2000: 484).*

Right Óðinn *and the Fenris Wolf on the Thorwald Cross shaft from Andreas, Isle of Man, now in the Manx Museum.*

reference to divination); the implication is that it was pecked out by a carrion-eating bird while he was 'otherwise distracted', hanging by the neck from a tree for three days.

However the figure's hand is in the mouth of the wolf and this recalls the legend of Tyr who sacrificed a hand to the wolf Fenrir. So, whether the figure on this bracteate should be thought of as Óðinn or Tyr, or a merging of both, is a moot point. But clearly this depiction of a deity amidst assorted animals illustrates legends familiar to the maker and owner of the bracteate.

Although examples from as late as the twelfth century are rare, there a number of surviving of precedents for such syncretic blends of Scandinavian paganism with Christian imagery. A fragment of a tenth-century slate cross from Kirk Andreas, Isle

of Man, depicts an interlace-decorated cross flanked on the left by a saint (or perhaps Christ) with a cross and book treading on a serpent and accompanied by a fish (the biblical reference is *Genesis* 3:15 according to DuBois 1999: 148), while on the right is Óðinn, with a spear and raven on the right, treading on the jaw of a wolf, Fenrir. DuBois also sees similar merging of Scandinavian paganism with Christian iconography on the Gosforth cross, and also on cross fragments now in Leeds and at Sherburn. He suggests that there would also have been many, now lost, similar wooden carvings as well (DuBois 1999: 150). Mary Webb draws attention to the font once at Hampstead Norreys which shows a wolf at the right hand of Christ. (Webb 2010: 111).

As Aleks Pluskowski has noted, in the Scandinavian poem *Völupsá* (which mostly describes the beginning and end of time, a pagan counterpart to *Genesis* and *Revelations*) the gods who survive the final battle, Ragnarök, will talk about the two animals, the Midgard serpent and Fenriswolf (Pluskowski 2003: 157). And, on the extreme left and right of the Stoney Stanton tympanum are two creatures which can plausibly be interpreted as as a wolf and a serpent ('wingless dragon').

Such Germanic and Scandinavian legends are exactly what early Christianty attempted to 'over-write' with its own exegeses, a process that seems to have taken several centuries to accomplish (see Russell 1994; Carver and Semple 2010; plus Volume One of the Twilight Age). Indeed, the surviving texts of *Völupsá* seem to be attempts to reinterpret pagan cosmology within a Christian worldview (Schach 1983: 112).

It is entirely feasible that a version of the legend depicted in the bracteate, but with a saint or bishop supplanting the Óðinn/Tyr figure (and, presumably, an entirely different exegesis) had entered popular or 'folk' Christianity by the late eleventh or early twelfth century when the Stoney Stanton tympanum was created. Seemingly the bird has lost any association with divinatory powers, although it remains an 'auspicious' presence, perhaps related to the 'Dear Bird' which evokes Christ. The bishop or saint is presumably drawing upon the power (*potentia*) of Christ to quell the quarrelsome demonic beasts around him.

As I discussed in Volume Two of The Twilight Age, Óðinn's name has the literal sense of *óðr in* or 'full of *óðr*'. This *óðr* or, in Old English, *leac* or *wod*, seems to be a direct precursor of the *potentia* of Christ. Pedantically, the key difference is that while *óðr* has no source but merely manifests through Óðinn, Christ is the source of *potentia*, which may also manifest through living priests and bishops and the relics of once-living clergy who, post mortem, evolve into local saints.

Another telling difference is that, while Christ is triumphant over demonic entities, such as dragons, and is very much a key player at the End of Days, Óðinn is eaten by Fenriswolf during the apocalyptic battle of Ragnarök.

The tympanum from Stoney Stanton and its three 'companions' are seemingly the only surviving evidence for a syncretic legend which is otherwise lost. Such legends would not be a part of formal Christian teaching and therefore not to be found in the surviving Old English homilies, although so little has survived that not even educated guesswork can suggest what else might have been circulating at the time. All were swept aside by later medieval parables and preaching.

While the full meaning of 'this Germanic barbarity' – more accurately Anglo-Scandinavian – remains unclear, the pre-Christian bracteate seems to the the oldest of what might be thought to be a 'series' of five surviving images, with the Stoney Stanton tympanum continuing the chronology into the Christian era. The Agnus Dei of the Parwich and Hognaston carvings seems to represent a slightly later stage in the christianisation of the legend, with the Little Paxton carving perhaps following shortly after.

Older but as complex

Romanesque carvings, with or without putative pagan Scandinavian precedents, come with a much richer 'literature' – both contemporary and academic – than is so far the case for carvings a few centuries older. My main reason for discussing this 'set' of Romanesque tympana in a work ostensibly devoted to iconography of around the eighth century is simply to show that the 'meaning and significance' – more accurately, always 'meanings and significances' – draw from different aspects of culture all at the same time. And then shift over time. Trying to understand 'dual faith' crosses, such as those at Breedon on the Hill, without taking into account similar diachronic and synchronic complexity is, at the very least, foolhardy.

Key to avoiding the worst excesses of such foolishness is to understanding the worldview within which the carvings were created. Considerable more research and thought is needed before that worldview becomes clearer. But, as this study hopefully suggests, by taking a cosmological approach to iconography we can step back from the post-Reformation reading of Bede which has overly-influenced academic approaches until recent years.

Acknowledgements

The rather messy origin of this work from multiple previous publications necessarily means that these acknowledgements risk inadvertently omitting people who have been of assistance. So my apologies to anyone who sees their ideas or input uncredited; please let me know and I will amend accordingly.

The references in the text and the sources listed on the following pages reveal where I have been influenced by prior research. Tina Negus, Anthony Weir and Ruth Wylie have discussed various aspects of medieval carvings with me over the last twenty years. Susan Kilby most kindly made available drafts of several so-far unpublished essays and also drew my attention to various key sources I had overlooked, not least K.M. Openshaw's publication on the *Tiberius Psalter.*

More specifically, my thanks to Ben Elliot for making available a copy of Mary Curtis Webb's work on twelfth century sculpture; John Grigsby for the information about Lithuanian lore; and Megan Rice for sharing her suggestion about sheela na gigs as boundary protectors.

Grateful thanks also to Stephen Pollington for permission to reproduce Lindsay Kerr's drawing and for much-needed advice on Old English words such as *beam, treow* , *rood* and *mael*.

None of these authors and acquaintances will necessarily agree with my interpretations or suggestions.

Sources

Blackledge, Catherine, 2003, *The Story of V: A natural history of female sexuality,* Weidenfeld and Nicholson.

Broadhurst, Dale, 2005, 'Hathor: the divine "flasher"?'; online at sidneyrigdon.com/DRB/BEGIN/flasher.htm

Camphausen, Rufus C., 1989, 'The Ka'bah at Mecca', *Bres*, No.139.

Dooley-Fairchild, Sira Madalena, 2012, *Material Belief: A critical history of archaeological approaches to religious change in Anglo-Saxon England*, PhD thesis Durham University; online at etheses.dur.ac.uk/5899/1/Sira_PhD.pdf?DDD6+

Dowden, Ken, 2000, *European Paganism: The realities of cult from antiquity to the Middle Ages,* Routledge.

DuBois, T.A., 1999, *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age,* University of Pennsylvania Press.

Flint, Valerie, 1991, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe,* Clarendon.

Greer, Germaine, 1999, *The Whole Woman,* Transworld. www.iupress.indiana.edu/product_info.php?products_id=20180

Greimas, Algirdas J. , 1992, *Of Gods and Men. Studies in Lithuanian Mythology.* Indiana UP.

Håland, Evy Johanne, 2012, 'When the dead ensure the food: death and the regeneration of life through the festivals, food and social gathering during the ritual year in modern and ancient Greece', in *Cosmos* Vol. 28.

Hefner, Robert (ed), 1993, *Conversion to Christianity,* University of California Press.

Jolly, Karen Louise, 1996, *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England,* University of North Carolina Press.

Jones, Malcolm, 2002, *The Secret Middle Ages*, Sutton.

Kilmer, Martin, 1982, 'Genital phobia and depilation'?, *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, Vol. 102, p104–12.

O'Loughlin, Thomas, 1999, *Saint Patrick: The man, the saint and his works,* SPCK.

Openshaw, K. M., 1989, 'The Battle between Christ and Satan in the Tiberius Psalter', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 52, p14–33.

Pevsner, Nikolaus (revised by E. Williamson *et al*), 1984, *Leicestershire and Rutland* (The Buildings of England series), 2nd end (reprinted with corrections 1998), Penguin.

Pollington, Stephen, 2000, *Leechcraft: Early English charms, plant-lore and healing,* Anglo-Saxon Books.

Pollington, Stephen, 2011, *The Elder Gods: The Otherworld of early England,* Anglo-Saxon Books.

Pollington, Stephen, Lindsay Kerr and Brett Hammond, 2010, *Wayland's Work: Anglo-Saxon art, myth and material culture 4th–7th century,* Anglo-Saxon Books.

Pluskowski, Aleks, 2003, 'Apocalyptic monsters', in B. Bildhauer, B. and R. Mills (eds), *The Monstrous Middle Ages*, University of Toronto Press.

Raw, Barbara C., 1978, *Art and Background of Old English Poetry*, Edward Arnold.

Rice, Meghan, 2013, talk at Alternative Archaeology conference, Pewsey, October.

Russell, James C., 1994, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity,* Oxford U P.

Schach, Paul, 1983, 'Some thoughts on Völupsá', in R.J. Glendinning and H. Bessason (eds), *Edda: A collection of essays*, University of Manitoba Press.

Screeton, Paul, 2008, 'Load of bollocks', *Folklore Frontiers,* No.58 p7 (summarising a report in *The Sunday Times News Review*, 2nd March 2008).

Schapiro , Meyer, 2006, *Romanesque Architectural Sculpture: The Charles Eliot Norton lectures,* University of Chicago Press.

Semple, Sarah, 2013, *Perceptions of the Prehistoric in Anglo-Saxon England,* Oxford UP.

Thompson, Victoria, 2004, *Dying and Death in Later Anglo-Saxon England,* Boydell Press.

Trubshaw, Bob, 1993, 'The black stone: the omphalos of the goddess'?, *Mercian Mysteries*, No.14; online at www.indigogroup.co.uk/edge/blstone.htm

Trubshaw, Bob, 1994, 'Goddess or Queen? The enigmatic carving at Braunston in Rutland', Mercian Mysteries, No.21; online at www.indigogroup.co.uk/edge/braunstn.htm

Trubshaw, Bob, 2002, *Explore Folklore*, Explore Books.

Trubshaw, Bob, 2010, 'What is the meaning of this Germanic barbarity?' *Leicestershire Historian*, No.46, p43–7

Trubshaw, Bob, 2011, *Singing Up the Country: The songlines of Avebury and beyond,* Heart of Albion.

Trubshaw, Bob, 2012, *The Especially Sacred Grove: Six Hills and Vernemetum, Leicestershire;* online at www.hoap.co.uk/localhis.htm#sixhills

Trubshaw, Bob, 2013–14, 'The queen of the valley'; online at www.indigogroup.co.uk/twilight/ast0340.htm

Trubshaw, Bob, forthcoming, *Mawming and Mooning: Towards an understanding of medieval carvings and their carvers,* Heart of Albion; draft online at www.hoap.co.uk/mawming_and_mooning.pdf

Webb, Mary Curtis, 2010, *Ideas and Images in Twelfth Century Sculpture,* privately published Gillian Greenwood.

Weir , Anthony and James Jerman, 1986, *Images of Lust: Sexual Carvings on Medieval Churches,* Batsford.

Wilson, David, 1992, *Anglo-Saxon Paganism*, Routledge.

Wood, Rita, 2012, 'The Romanesque doorway at Little Langford', *Wiltshire Studies*, Vol. 105, p145–56.

More complete lists of relevant sources can be found online at www.indigogroup.co.uk/twilight/sources.htm52 and as part of Trubshaw (forthcoming).