Living in a Magical World
Volume Two

Knowing Your Guardians

Beatrice Walditch
Knowing Your Guardians provides advice and inspiration to help understand the various ways of thinking about protective guardians.

Beatrice Walditch mostly explores the traditional ‘spirits of place’ in Britain, although also shows how similar ideas and concepts are found elsewhere in Europe and beyond. She shows how these guardians have long been thought to have a ‘potency’ or ‘luck’. The final sections of the book explain how to make amulets and ‘charge’ them so that they act as personal guardians.

This is the second book in the Living in a Magical World series. These books will challenge you to recognise the traditional magic still alive in modern society, and empower you with a variety of skills and insights.
Previous books by Beatrice Walditch
from Heart of Albion

You Don’t Just Drink It!
What you need to know – and do –
before drinking mead

Listening to the Stones
Volume One of
Living in a Magical World
Knowing Your Guardians

Beatrice Walditch

Living in a Magical World:
Volume Two

Heart of Albion
Knowing Your Guardians

Beatrice Walditch

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Before Holy Guardian Angels

‘What are you writing about next?’ I was asked by a friend. ‘Knowing your guardians’, I replied. ‘Oh you’re writing a book about guardian angels!’ she replied excitedly. I didn’t have the heart to say ‘Nothing of the sort’ so replied ‘Not really’ and changed the conversation somewhat.

But in many ways my friend was right. In recent decades the idea of guardians has become inextricably linked with guardian angels. I would be wrong not to write about them. The idea of people having a guardian angels comes from the gospels. In the King James translation this reads:

Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven.

Matthew 18:10

Not quite yet ‘guardians’ – but nevertheless in exactly the right place to intercede on behalf of the faithful.

The Anglo-Saxon saint Guthlac, who lived as a hermit in the fens at Croyland around 700, is the first person in Britain we know had a personal guardian angel. An account of his life, written in Old English many years after his death, says:

Good was Guthiac! He bore in his spirit heavenly hope, reached the salvation of eternal life. An angel was close to him, faithful peace-guardian, to him, who, as one of a few settled the borderland.

Guthlac needed all such help, as he was beset with demonic fiends. Between the twelfth century and sixteenth century the idea of guardian angels were a minor part of popular piety as saints mostly took on this
A ‘recycled’ angel. Edwina Bridgeman’s other-than-human-person at the Fresh Air exhibition, Quenington, Gloucestershire, summer 2011. Photograph by Bob Trubshaw.
protective role. The Reformation brought about a major shift in beliefs and neither saints nor guardian angels were part of Protestant thinking.

But in East Anglia – the same region where Guthlac once lived – through into the late twentieth century some locals spoke of ‘fetches’ and ‘ward sprites’. The difference seems to be that ‘fetches’ were more like personal guardian angels while ‘ward sprites’ were a ‘collective’ of wardens or guardians. Both of these have close parallels with the disir – female protective spirits of place – associated with those parts of Germany and Scandinavia from where East Anglian folk originated a thousand or more years ago.

_Ys on Bretone-laade sum fann unmetre mycelnysse jaet ouginnos fraum Graunte ci niht feor fraun þære centre, þy ylean nama ys neamed Graunte-cestaer. Þær synd unmete more, hwilon sweart water-stæl, and hwilon féle ða-rípes yrnende, and swylce eac manige esland and hread and heorgeas and tweaw-gwrido, and hit mið menigfealdan bignyssum wígille and lang þurhwunne on norð-se. Mið þan se foresprecauen wer and þære cadigán gemynde Guthlac þæs wígillan westenes þa uagearcawen stow þe ðæt æcne, þa wæs he mid godeunde fulnume gefylst, and þa sona þan rihtestan wege þyder togeferde. Þa wæs mid þan þe he þyder com þe þæt he fregan þa bigungeca þæs laudes, hwær he on þam westene him earung-stowe findes mihte. Mið þy bi him menigfeald þing sedon be þære wígillnysse_ 

There is in Britain a fen of immense size, which begins from the river Granta not far from the city, which is named Grauntechester. There are immense marshes, now a blank pool of water, now foul running streams, and also many islands, and reeds, and hilly slopes, and thickets, and with manifold windings wide and long it continues up to the north sea. When the aforesaid man, Guthlac, of blessed memory, found out this uncultivated spot of the wide wilderness, he was comforted with divine support, and journeyed forthwith by the straightest way thither. And when he came there he inquired of the inhabitants of the land where he might find himself a dwelling-place in the wilderness. Whereupon they told him many things about the vastness of the wilderness. There was a man named Tutiling, who

**The Life of Guthlac as written in Old English and translated.**
Bringing back HGAs

In the 1870s the idea of Holy Guardian Angels was revitalised by the British occultist Frederick Hockley (1809–85).

Hockley practised a specific form of divination which invoked spirits using crystals. This has sometimes been termed ‘crystal gazing’ or ‘skrying with crystals’, although his own term was ‘crystallomancy’. Hockley’s methods were based on a description of skrying given by the anonymous author of the appendices to the third edition of Reginald Scot’s Discoverie of Witchcraft (published in 1665), where the crystal is used to establish contact with a personal ‘Angel Guardian’. This appendix became better known when Ebenezer Sibley included it in his Fourth Book of Occult Sciences published early in the nineteenth century.

According the modern day occultist Ben Fernee:

Hockley was trying to combine crystallomancy with spiritualist approaches, holding numerous sessions with various seers. The approach to crystal gazing presented has the Call, Exorcism, Discharge and Dismissal, all being done in the name of God Almighty. However, it eschews the names of power, magic circle and more ceremonial aspects...

(email June 2012)

Central to Hockley’s way of skrying was the ‘Crowned Angel’ which he also called ‘the Guardian Spirit of my mirror’. Hockley was a Freemason and a member of the Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia, a forerunner of the exceptionally influential Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. The Adeptus Minor degree of the Golden Dawn came to be associated with ‘Knowledge and Conversation of the Holy Guardian Angel’. This spiritual achievement, together with Crossing
In other words, Frederick Hockley not only brought an old British tradition of crystal skrying to the attention of many leading spiritualists during his own lifetime, but after his death his writings seem to be the inspiration for Crowley’s knowledge and conversation with the Holy Guardian Angel.

Many of Crowley’s ideas have ‘seeped’, often unwittingly, into more recent strands of occultism and New Age thinking. Holy Guardian Angels seem to be just one more example. While many people might think, quite understandably, that Holy Guardian Angels are an entirely Christian concept, the reality – at least since the Reformation – is rather different.
Slavonic personal angels

The idea of personal angels is found in many cultures. For example, among Slavonic people – such as Bulgarians, Carpathains, Croats, Czechs, Macedonians, Serbs, Slovaks and Slovenians – there are widespread beliefs about various ‘Fates’ who visit a baby at the time of birth and determine the child’s destiny. While these beliefs retain some pre-Christian traditions, the various Fates mostly now seek the protection of the Christian God.

In Bulgaria there is a belief that every child has an angel. Unlike most of these Slavonic guardians, which come forth at birth, this angel appears after conception. The angel immediately goes to God to ask about the child’s future.

However this angel is much more like the ‘Fates’ of neighbouring countries than the guardian angels of western Europe, in that it is concerned with establishing the destiny of the child rather than acting as a guardian. The wicked stepmother in Sleeping Beauty is a demonised version of these ‘Fates’.

Slavonic-style angel ornament.
Angels, spirits, deities and souls

What’s the difference between angels, spirits, deities and souls? Most Western people will say that deities are something distinct from angels while spirits and souls are more or less the same. However, ask people from a wide range of traditional cultures and they will tell you that souls are quite distinct from spirits, while spirits and deities are often similar. Traditional societies may not have anything which corresponds closely to angels but would happily assimilate them as another type of ‘spirit’.

Such assimilation is exactly what has happened when the activities of Christian missionaries resulted in a fusing of ideas with traditional religion. The orishas of Candomblé, Obeah, Palo, Santeria and Vodou are perhaps the best-known ‘spirit-deities’ of such hybrid religions, while in South America the Catholic saints have evolved into something closer to orishas than their European counterparts. The orishas are sometimes referred to as ‘gods’ or ‘spirits’ but are distinct from both major deities and souls.

This book is concerned with all such other-than-human-persons that might be termed ‘spirits’, ‘angels’ or even minor deities. I share my thoughts about souls and ‘ancestor spirits’ more fully in the next book in the Living in a Magical World series. Suffice to say for the moment that, contrary to Christian thinking, souls and spirits are not two words for more-or-less the same thing. In traditional worldviews a living person is likely to have several souls but these are quite distinct from any number of different types of spirit-deities.

One of the traditional worldviews which sheds considerable light is early Buddhism about two thousand years ago. A small number of texts and carvings still survive to offer some insights. They reveal that various ‘spirit-deities’ are venerated; bear in mind that back then boddhisatvas were still in the future. Instead, these early texts and carvings provide many Sanskrit names for ghosts and spirits, which
There are many different Orishas, each of which are depicted in numerous ways.
Above: A figurine of Yemaya.
Right: A carving of Osoosi.

were grouped together in a variety of different ways by later writers. These ghosts and spirits blur into devas and yaksas. Devas are gods – or, more usually, demi-gods – and yaksas are local spirits of place (what the Romans called genii loci and modern Italians know as lares).
Customary practice

These assorted ghosts, spirits, demi-gods and spirits of place are all ‘spirit-deities’. In a later period of Buddhism they blur into bodhisatvas (‘enlightened beings’). These spirit-deities are part of the laukika. This word, meaning ‘customary’ or ‘prevalent’, refers to the village religious practices which predate Buddhism in India – the same local practices which evolved into the Hindu practices of rural India today.

Unlike Buddhism or Christianity, laukika has no ‘creed’ and does not offer enlightenment or salvation. The laukika practices both offer respect to the spirit-deity and, where deemed appropriate, seek to benefit from the prana shakti of the spirit-deity.

By its very nature, laukika varies from place-to-place. But it always involves the worship of a chthonic local spirit-deity – in recent centuries most commonly the Mother Goddess known as Mata or Devi or a local by-name. Based on the scant evidence available, there is no reason to think that the pre-conversion religions of northern Europe and the British Isles were significantly different to laukika.

So when, as we will be doing in the course of this book, we start to seek out the guardian ‘spirit-deities’ of Britain we can reasonably expect that they would have been venerated with similar ‘customary’ or ‘prevalent’ practices. There will be plenty of local names but, as I will confirm, a sense that collectively many of these guardians are ‘mothers’. There is also a strong sense that they had a charisma or ‘gift’ akin to the shakti of Buddhist spirit-deities. Note that the ‘textbook’ definition of shakti is ‘the female principle of divine energy’. In this context I am using the word ‘gift’ in the same way we might refer to a ‘gifted child’ or, more poetically, that the ‘gift of a sheep’ is wool and meat.

But before I discuss such matters in more detail, we need to know a little more about what such guardians ‘do’, and where and when they are most needed.
Where guardians are most needed

We live in a world made up of hedges, ditches, fences, walls and any number of less visible demarcations. We are obsessed with boundaries. Or, more accurately, we are obsessed by the idea of anyone or anything transgressing their confines. We hope to keep domesticated animals in. We hope to keep human trespassers out.

We also create physical boundaries against less tangible entities, as with walls or hedges around churchyards. Ostensibly they date from a time when sheep or cattle grazed on God’s Acre. But, reassuringly, they also keep the dead ‘in their place’. There is also the sense of a clear transition from profane to sacred space.

Most boundaries define something even less tangible – ownership. Previously friendly neighbours can end up in passionate legal battles over the boundaries of gardens or small fields and litigation over rights of way recur throughout legal records.

Many traditional legends describe the acquisition of property, usually though the establishment of property boundaries by ‘supernatural’ means. Property limits might be established by a person getting as much land as he could walk or ride round or plough in one day, or as much as one could shoot or throw something across, or as far as one could carry the boundary stone, or as much as could be demarcated by strips cut from a single ox hide.

In North America wrangles over land rights would lead to both claimants erecting fences on either side of the disputed area. This would allow farm wagons to pass along the contentious part – a route which was known as ‘The Devil’s Lane’. An undoubtedly infernal liminal zone was the No Man’s Land of First World War trench warfare. This reflects the function of boundaries in keeping out enemies. The antagonist may not be human – at times of pestilence Slav women went naked dragging a plough and cutting a deep furrow
to enclose the village. Also think of local British customs, such as Beating the Bounds which has been revived in some parishes.

Betwixt-and-between places where the boundaries are disputed or unclear are known as ‘liminal’, from the Latin word *limen* which means ‘threshold’. Liminal places – and, as I will discuss, liminal times – are inherently dangerous. They need guardians.

But such dangerous places also have their appeal! Liminal places can incite inspiration or enchantment. A seer might seek stimulus at that still-fascinating liminal zone between high and low tide that is neither land nor sea. Millions of people each year still do... Other liminal places – still in the modern mind associated with perceived danger – include caves, wells and paths into forests.

Although more difficult for the modern mind to comprehend, crossroads were once considered to be the most magical places, credited with powers of protection and healing, and favoured places
for magical spells and love auguries. Strictly the ‘dangerous’ crossroads were those where parish boundaries met. At a few crossroads three or more parishes come together. Exceptionally, each of these parishes may be in a different county.

Counties often meet in this way where at one time there were communal grazing rights on poor-quality land, such as heaths. Remember that ‘heathens’ were given their name simply because of their practice of worshipping on the heath. Some of these areas remained extra-parochial (and therefore not part of a county) until the end of the nineteenth century.

Crossroads were where penal courts often met and, as a consequence, where the pillory, stocks or gallows were sited. Suicides, gypsies, witches, outlaws and other people for whom Christian burial was denied were buried there. Folklore abounds with the preferences of ghosts for such places.

But the most important boundaries are not ‘out there’ in the countryside. They are the ones which protect you in your own home. Any ‘penetrations’ of these allow for tangible or less tangible incursions. So doorways, windows and chimneys need all the protection we can give them.

Yes chimneys! Modern houses may not have one. And in houses which do we rarely think of them as dangerous portals. But, while we are unlikely to think of Santa Claus as a dangerous entity, significantly
he is an other-than-fully-human person who still makes his annual entrance by that portal.

Above the massive fireplace in the kitchen of a fourteenth century moated farmhouse at Appleby Magna, Leicestershire, is a stone mantle piece. On it are various unsophisticated carvings, including St Michael with a dragon, a pentagram and a panel of ‘nonsense’ writing.

Some, perhaps all, these motifs were intended to protect the house, and its occupants, from any ‘ills’ that might otherwise enter down the chimney. The pentagram is, at this time, still an entirely Christian symbol which has yet to acquire ‘witchy’ connotations. The ‘writing’ seemingly borrows from several different alphabets but does not make sense. Presumably the person who carved it – and also the people it was carved for – were illiterate and the aim was to invoke the ‘magical powers’ of the written word. I have been told that there are plenty of similar inscriptions inside and outside houses in East Anglia.

Throughout England all sorts of protective patterns were drawn on doorsteps – literally, the actual limen of a house – in chalk, red ochre or sap from elder twigs. This tradition persisted until recent times in eastern England and Nigel Pennick has recorded many examples. The
The motifs used are not arbitrary – many of them have known ‘evil-averting’ or apotropaic symbolism.

Something of the same sense of protecting doorways is shared by elaborate metal door knockers. There are other ways of adding symbolic protection without looking too ‘witchy’ or eccentric. Solomon’s knots and compass-drawn ‘daisy wheels’ (also known as ‘hex flowers’) were both frequent examples of medieval graffiti, almost certainly drawn to avert evil.
Putting time in its place

We don’t only create boundaries in space. We also attempt to create clear boundaries between good and bad, illness and health, war and peace, and so forth. Slightly less logically, modern Christianity sees a distinction between sacred and profane. Frankly, although the liminal zone between sacred and profane seems not to have a name, it’s where I seem to live my life – without much inclination to drift too far off into one extreme or the other!

Our sense of time, just like our sense of place, is marked by ‘boundaries’. We observe a solar cycle of festivals such as Christmas (which in recent decades has become less a religious festival than the start of secular celebrations continuing to New Year). The old festivals associated with farming, such as May Day and the ‘first fruits’ festival known as Lammas (from ‘loaf mass’ – bread made with the first corn to be harvested) have become part of the eight-fold ‘wheel of the year’ invented by Gerald Gardner and Ross Nichols in the early 1960s and now celebrated by most modern pagans. Those in Britain who are not pagans still have two May Bank Holidays and any number of village fetes, garden walkabouts, duck races, conkers championships and other seasonal events to celebrate instead.

A different farming festival, the annual slaughter of unwanted livestock before the winter, evolved into the major Christian feast of All Hallows, later known as All Saints. This in turn evolved into the secular malarkies of Hallowe’en, although the pre-occupation with ghosts and such like has nothing to do with All Saints but instead the feast of All Souls, which is on the next day, 2nd November.

Whatever, Hallowe’en celebrations steadily lost out when Guy Fawkes Night was instigated after the failure of the Gunpowder Plot in 1605. Since the 1960s pagans have re-instigated the secular version of Hallowe’en (the one which is really about All Souls) as Samhain. Confused? Yes, that’s modern paganism for you...
Before ‘going to church on Sunday’ became the norm in the sixteenth century, attendance at church meant knowing when a large number of saints’ days and such like fell. The clergy could consult written almanacs. But most people had ‘clog almanacs’, perpetual calendars carved on sticks of wood. The various symbols denote the different saints’ feast days.
Not all such annual events follow the solar cycle. Chinese and Tibetans celebrate New Year at the new moon in February. Indeed, the vestiges of a lunar cycle survive in all major religions. For this reason Easter Sunday is on a different date each year, with the result that many other Christian festivals – from Shrove Tuesday to Pentecost – also shift too.

On a shorter time scale each new day has its boundary. Nowadays this is midnight. Before that days were measured from sunset to sunset. Which is why we have Hallowe’en, Midsummer Night’s Eve, and all the rest. Originally they weren’t the ‘eve’ of something – they were when that day started.

Dusk is still very much a powerfully liminal period. ‘Dark rise’ is the setting for limitless horror novels and films. Those of us who are up for dawn on a regular basis know that this is at least as powerful, although in a more ‘uplifting’ manner. Midnight – either literally, the moment when one day turns into the next or more loosely ‘the midnight hour’ or the ‘witching hour’ – has a different power. This power extends into the ‘wee hours’ when, if you don’t need to draw too many curtains and can avoid switching on electric lights, then a mere trip to the loo becomes a somewhat magical moonlit walk around the time of the full moon, and something different again around the new moon.

In contrast, ‘noon’ has become a somewhat timeless time, a moment rather than a transition. Similarly the arbitrary division of days into hours and minutes creates but barely defines a multitude of interwoven boundaries in secular time. Working in a factory, shop or office means engaging with greater-or-lesser formalities about lunch breaks and tea breaks, although these are less rigid than the timetables of our schooldays.

The time-line of our whole lives is also marked by boundaries. We ‘celebrate’ in all sorts of different ways not just birthdays but more one-off events such as starting school, passing exams, leaving school, starting a first job then – for at least some – engagement, marriage, first baby, naming or baptism, and so forth. These progress through to retirement and the final frontier of death. Traditional customs still influence the principal activities on such occasions.
Betwixt-and-between times

Many of these times are purely for celebration. But sometimes there is a sense of betwixt-and-between, a liminal phase. These are the times when traditionally guardians are most needed. Dusk, the midnight hour and dawn come first to my mind.

On broader timescales, leaving home to go to university might be thought as liminal – no longer a child, no longer subject to the routines of school, yet not ‘properly’ working – and with plenty of opportunities for the subversive activities associated with liminality.

From the viewpoint of ethnography, the three years typically spent as a student are just a rather long example of an initiation ritual. Ethnographers accounts of traditional tribes and reveal how boys, when they reach adolescence, are taken away by the elder men. They are sworn to secrecy, taught the arcane secrets of their society, subjected to an initiation rite – which usually includes a ritual ‘death’ and may include circumcision, tattooing or scarification – and then ‘reborn’ as men and given a new name. The time this takes – which varies from a few days to a few weeks and, very exceptionally, a few years – is regarded by ethnographers as a liminal time.

Yes, there are equivalent rites for girls. But because early ethnographers were almost always male, they were excluded from knowing anything much at all about these corresponding rites of passage.

Western culture has plenty of rites of passage too. Interestingly, some of the more important of them have their own ‘liminal time’. The most obvious is the honeymoon after a wedding. But the stag nights, and in recent decades, hen nights are perhaps better examples of such liminal times. One thing which ‘goes with’ liminal times is the temporary suspension of the usual social order.
Sometimes it is a complete inversion, as with the ‘Feast of Fools’ and the appointment of a ‘boy bishop’ in the post-Christmas period during medieval times. There are some latter-day counterparts in traditional universities where, for one day a year, the dons serve the undergraduates with their food, and so forth. But usually, as with stag and hen nights, the liminal time is associated with licentiousness. Certainly there will be plenty of bawdy remarks which would be considered unsuitable for most other social occasions, and there may be actual transgressive behaviour too.

*Detail from the Feast of Fools as depicted around 1525–1569 by Pieter Bruegel the Elder.*
Temporary and portable protective spaces

Rites of passage are essentially ritualistic. Rituals often take place in an already ‘sacred’ or numinous place – churches, temples, mosques, synagogues, stupas, and such like. Sometimes part of the rites includes the creation of a temporary ritual space, such as the ‘magic circles’ of Western occultism, or the circle of participants in many modern pagan celebrations – ‘hand to hand, heart to heart’ as the opening remarks of Druid ceremonies often put it.

The whole point of a ‘magic circle’ is that it creates a clear division between the safety of a magical space and what lies beyond. Or, in the case of old school high magic, who or what is evoked outside the circle! The ‘bounds’ of such magic circles are both physical and temporal – the circle exists only for the duration of the rite.

Ceremonial magicians famously use magic circles for protection.
There are plenty of ways of taking some of the protective ‘bounds’ of a magic circle around with you. Basic magical training involves visualising a protective ‘bubble’ or imaginary cloak. More macho types sometimes prefer to envisage a medieval suit of armour. But the power of magical protection lies not in what you imagine the protection to look like, but the nature of the ‘energy’ which is directed into it. If this remark seems a tad cryptic then more will be revealed later.

Sometimes a ‘rite of passage’ is itself a quest, a passage from one place to another, or simply a journey of self-discovery. We tend to refer to such ritualised travels as pilgrimages, even when our destination is not necessarily a recognised shrine of a major religion.

Medieval Christian pilgrims had a distinctive way of dressing. And one of the most distinctive aspects was wearing a cross on their clothing. They were invoking the practical and spiritual protection of God. These days it is easy enough to paint or print your own personal ‘protective deities’ on to a T-shirt. Whether you wander around with it for all to see or instead wear it underneath more formal attire is up to you! Suffice to say that buying a commercially-printed T-shirt just doesn’t create the same personal connection. The whole act of selecting, designing and making the protective image is an empowering ‘ritual’ in its own right. But I’m getting ahead of myself.
When guardians are most needed

Wandering around inside imaginary bubbles and wearing protective deities might seem a bit over the top. When would anyone need to take such precautions? Part of me just wants to be a fusspot and answer ‘Well, my dear, you can never be too sure. Always best to be prepared for the worst, even though it may never happen.’ The other part of me simply wants to say ‘When things get liminal!’

Feeling unsure and seeking reassurance in unfamiliar situations is an entirely natural response. These are feelings which arise quite naturally when we set off to new places or find ourselves among people we don’t know. As familiarity begins to set in then the stresses start to ease. Almost by definition when we find ourselves in places which are betwixt-and-between we are least sure of ourselves. Are we really ‘inside’ or ‘outside’, is it really ‘safe’ or not? This sense of liminality can apply to time as well as place.

So, when we enter an ancient wood at dusk, or walk around the bank of a prehistoric henge at dawn, or undertake some more overtly ritual activity then, quite understandably, the need for other-than-human guardians is likely to be greatest.

Some ritual places come complete with guardians. The ‘Dawn Watcher’ simulacra at Avebury.
Guardians of boundaries

So ‘natural’ is this human need for guardians that traditional religions provide plenty of examples. As I have already outlined, crossroads were deemed to be dangerous places. In classical Greece two prime divinities were especially associated with such places: Hermes and Hecate. Hecate came to be especially linked to three-way junctions but started out protecting four-or-more ways too.

Images to both these deities were erected at such locations. Hermes is the trickster *par excellence*. Tricksters revel in crossing the boundaries. Rather too often this includes the boundaries between law and order – and Hermes is indeed the god of thieves. However Hermes’ winged sandals meant he could also cross between life and death and back.
These Greek traditions were shared by early Romans who ‘inherited’ a festival held at the nearest crossroads in early January. This was known as the *Ludi Compitalicii*, from the Latin *compitum*, ‘a cross-way’. Altars and images of the household *lares* were set up at crossroads and sacrifices of food, wool and such like were offered.

But there was one Greek deity who became most associated with the protection of ‘dangerous passages’, such as mountain passes or maritime ports. She was Artemis. She also had temples within cities too and, interestingly, it was to these temples that people most often went for rites of passage.

Perhaps we should be too surprised to find a Christian saint with some of the same functions. And indeed there is. In ports throughout northern Europe there was, and sometimes still is, a chapel close to the landward end of the medieval quay. It was the place where departing mariners and passengers said their prayers before setting off, and the place where they first stopped off on landing, to give grateful thanks for a safe passage. Most often these chapels were dedicated to St James.

Indeed one of the most important places at the tip of the Iberian peninsula – with all the dangers of the Bay of Biscay – takes its name from him. Santiago de Compostela translates as ‘St James of the Field.
of Stars’. Santiago became one of the ‘top three’ pilgrimage destinations for medieval Christians and St James quickly established himself as the patron saint of pilgrims, leaving St Christopher to be patron of more humdrum travel. But seemingly St James was the patron of ‘dangerous passages’ before his shrine at Galicia was created and he became synonymous with pilgrimage.

Left: A seventh century reliquary in the form of a miniature shrine. Right: Veneration of a medieval shrine as depicted in medieval stained glass.

_Medieval people thought of the shrines of saints as places where heaven and earth intersected. They were decorated in a ‘heavenly’ manner – with all the splendour that was expected of the after-life. Because they were thought of as betwixt-and-between heaven and earth they were liminal places, places where the normal ‘rules’ did not apply. So they were exactly where miracles might happen. Such thinking was a direct continuation of pre-conversion ūtiseta (‘sitting out’) at burial mounds to communicate with the dead._
All along the Danube and Rhine frontier there was a Romano-Germanic deity looked to for protection. Indeed his name, Toutatis, is a corruption of *tutela*, the Latin word for protection and watching. This evolves into a later Latin word, *tutelarius*, meaning ‘tribal guardian’, from which the Italian word for a household deity, *lares*, evolves. Similarly, modern English borrows the same Latin word for the phrase ‘tutelary spirits’, which refers to such protective beings. And the word ‘tutor’ originally meant ‘guardian or custodian’ and only in the late seventeenth century began to acquire the sense of a teacher.

Although originating in the Rhineland, Toutatis must have come over with *foederati* troops employed by the Roman army in Britain. In recent years metal detectorists have discovered over eighty metal rings inscribed with the letters ‘TOT’. These are seemingly votive offerings to the deity Toutatis. They were made in the second or third century AD, although the designs of the rings are closer to Iron Age precedents than Roman styles of the time. To put this in perspective, the eighty-or-so inscriptions to Toutatis outnumber the inscriptions on Romano-British jewellery to all other deities combined.

![Romano-British ring dedicated to Toutatis discovered in north Leicestershire.](image)
These ‘Tot’ rings were all found in or near the tribal territory of the Corieltauvi – in other words Lincolnshire, Leicestershire and parts of adjoining counties. Indeed the distribution of the finds suggests that many were deliberately placed at shrines near the boundaries of the territory.

While Toutatis seems to be a male deity – there is an inscription from a silver votive offering at a shrine in Barkway, near Royston in Hertfordshire, which is shared with Mars – both his function and the location of the shrines in the landscape seem more akin to where Artemis temples were situated in Greece.

There is no evidence that the cult of Toutatis survived into the post-Roman period. But the concept of ‘tribal protection’ and shrines on boundaries may well have done. And, in the absence of any dedications or other inscriptions, perhaps it is safest to make no assumptions about the gender of such protective deities.
Protecting dragons

Some of the oldest Christian stone crosses, carved in the eighth century onwards, have ‘dragons’ on them. Why? There are no Biblical reasons for this, and no dragons in early Christian iconography on which the crosses could have been based. The idea of dragons representing ‘Evil’ to be overcome by the forces of Christ only came about in the eleventh century so was still in the future when these carvings were created. And just looking at them readily reveals that, whatever they were supposed to represent, it certainly wasn’t something evil.

The tenth century cross shaft fragment at Sproxton, Leicestershire. The dragon is climbing up from the interlace pattern.
The only logical conclusion is that these crosses have ‘dragons’ on them because whatever was carved before then commonly included this motif. Two things we know about Anglo-Saxon burial mounds is that they often had a wooden post in the centre and, based on Old English poems such as Beowulf, they were protected by ‘dragons’. Actually the Old English word is not draca – a word borrow from Latin which becomes our word ‘dragon’ – but wyrm.

Wyrm is the ancestor of our word ‘worm’ but originally referred to a broad spectrum of wriggling things which mostly lived underground – from maggots, earthworms, tapeworms, snakes and other reptiles and – more surprisingly – scorpions, spiders, lice and fleas.

This definition is clearly not Linnaean. But it does have a rationality of its own. All these creatures possess at least three of the following properties:

- poisonous
- intimate relationship with human flesh
- a taste for human flesh
- uncanny ways of moving
- ability to disappear underground
- closeness to the dead

The twelfth-century tympanum at Hallaton, Leicestershire. No doubts as to who won this battle between Good and Evil.
While it may not be immediately apparent to modern sensibilities, all were thought to have the power to avert evil. So the ‘dragons’ – more properly wyrms – on early Christian crosses are there to ward off evil. Almost the opposite of the later doctrine that dragons depict evil! And these crosses presumably followed a tradition of carving wyrms on the posts erected in the centre of burial mounds.

We can reasonably assume that Anglo-Saxons never encountered dragons. But they lived with an awareness of that possibility. And, had that possibility arisen, they would have known how to make sense of the encounter. This is a direct parallel to modern notions of UFOs and
Quite a different scenario on a font of a similar age at Avebury in Wiltshire. A pair of wingless dragons with one pair of legs – the twelfth century descendants of wyrms as ‘attendants’ of a now-defaced bishop. Seemingly quite a different scenario.

aliens – such encounters are most unlikely, but we know that the aliens all speak English and say ‘Take me to your leader’.

Or, in more recent scenarios, insert an anal probe. Like wyrms and dracas, we demonise the ‘paranormal’ by viewing it through our deepest fears. In a similar manner the evil-averting wyrms become demonised into the dragons who are the adversaries of such evil-slaying saints as Michael, eternal battle of Good versus Evil. or, more typically, the defeat of Evil. It was these dragons – usually, but not always, winged and with either two or four legs – which appear on twelfth century fonts and other carvings in churches, then evolve into whole armies of later heraldic beasties. Just remember that they are very different from their ancestors, the wyrmas.
We cannot be sure that the ‘dragons’ on early stone crosses were successors to wyrms on pre-conversion carvings. But there is no other plausible suggestion. The reason we have no evidence is simply that stone carving was re-introduced to Britain by the church. Anything carved by pre-Christians used wood which, predictably, has rotted away or been burnt.

Nevertheless, we know what the Anglo-Saxons called such wooden carvings.
The smaller carvings were called weohs. This word means both ‘shrine’ and ‘idol’. The nearest parallel is wayside shrines in Catholic countries, where the presence of a statue of a saint ‘is’ the shrine – without the statue there is no proper shrine. Beyond that we have no exact idea of what a weoh looked like.

Left: Tre mathr (‘tree man’) carvings recovered from Danish bogs. Could English weohs have been similar?

Bottom: Are scarecrows and corn dollies the modern day successors to weohs?
Plausible they were the same as the *tre mathr* (‘tree men’) who were from time to time ritually redressed. Then again the term ‘tree man’ could just as easily be given to the classic way of making scarecrows using two crossed sticks as it could to a carved figure.

Just possibly such *tre mathr* may have resembled the wooden ‘stick figures’ found in Danish bogs – which, while ambiguous in almost all other respects, are most certainly male.

Personally, I am inclined to think that the word *weoh* referred to many different types of icons. These might even include ‘standing stones’, perhaps ‘personified’ with some whitewash or other basic pigments, and more certainly included ‘stick figures’ and scarecrow-like *tre mathr*. At the ‘top end of the market’, so to speak, would be carved figures of similar complexity to the stone crosses of later centuries.

Whatever a *weoh* looked like we can assume that it would have been thought to offer protection. It would have been the local spirit-deity, the tutelary spirit.

*While Edwina Bridgwater presumably does not see her work as any sort of continuation of pre-Christian weohs, she does show how basic raw materials can be transformed into characterful individuals by someone with the necessary imagination and skills. Photographed by Bob Trubshaw at the Fresh Air exhibition, Quenington, Gloucestershire, summer 2011.*
The *weohs’* big brothers – and sisters

Sometimes a *weoh* was not enough. There were times when a bigger carving was needed. Presumably something like a totem pole, these were known as *stapols*.

We know *stapols* were sometimes set up beside by fords as there are places called Stapleford in Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire. These, until recent times, were still pronounced locally as ‘stapul’fud’ (although incomers now make it sound like these were fords where people fixed paper together).

*Anglo-Saxon cross-shaft at Stapleford, Nottinghamshire. Possibly the successor to the eponymous stapol.*
Fords, especially at times of flooding, were indisputably dangerous places. A protective guardian – who would no doubt receive offerings either in anticipation of a safe crossing or in thanks for having got across – would have been a welcome sight. Just possibly a carved wooden pillar recovered from the River Zbrucz in Poland is an example of an east European counterpart to this tradition. But, without any more examples, we can only guess.

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

Above: 'The Devil Defeated'. Eighteenth century engraving by Charles Eisen for Fables by Jean de la Fontaine.
A pewter badge from the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century found in the Netherlands depicting a vulva dressed as a pilgrim, complete with hat, staff and rosary. All pilgrimage badges were amulets as much as souvenirs and this one offers the ‘protection’ of the vulva – although presumably with bawdy irony. The irony can go further as another version of this motif has the depiction of a phallic brooch pinned to the ‘lapel’, where such badges were usually worn.

Rivers and smaller watercourses are often boundaries. So rather than the stapols being there to protect travellers, they may have been manifestations of a ‘boundary guardian’, such as Toutatis and Artemis. Indeed, it may be that female guardians were something of the norm. The argument is decidedly speculative but bear with me. Throughout Europe, although less so in Britain, there is considerable folklore about what folklorists politely call ‘female genital display’. By the eighteenth century this is a gesture to ‘frighten away the Devil’. But in eastern Europe it remains a gesture of more general contempt and would seem to be a way of attempting to avert all kinds of ‘evil’.

Pewter badges made around 1375–1425 in France and the Netherlands also depict the human vulva in a surprising variety of ‘parodies’ – usually dressed as a pilgrim but in one case riding a horse while aiming a crossbow. The purpose of these badges is clearly not erotic. Almost certainly they were just a variant on the more ubiquitous pilgrims’ badges, which were worn both as ‘souvenirs’ and as protective amulets.
Many people know of the usual medieval carvings known either as ‘female exhibitionists’ or ‘sheela na gigs’. The latter is a corruption of the Irish expression *shee lena ghee* – the *sí* (or ‘fairy woman’) *lena* (‘with her’) *ghee*. I am told if you walk into any bar in Dublin and mention *ghee* to one of the local lads they will know exactly which part of the female anatomy you mean. It is still an Irish slang word.

We can reasonably assume that a great many of the ‘monstrous’ carvings on medieval churches were intended to frighten away evil. These female exhibitionist carvings would have been seen as just one of the more obvious expressions of such protection. They are rather graphically giving the message to ‘f* * * off’ – and this gives added significance to the shape of the finger gesture used to the same effect.
The queens of the boundaries

What if – and it’s a big ‘if’ – there was a prior tradition of carving boundary *stapols* as female exhibitionists? In other words a graphic way of ‘insulting’ the people the other side of the river or other boundary? ‘What’s the evidence?’ I hear you ask, quite understandably. In Braunston in Rutland, outside the church, is a carving which is not a female exhibitionist but shares the hag-like qualities. This carving is often cited as evidence for ‘pagan survivals’ in medieval churches and referred to as an ‘Earth Mother’. This now-indelible tradition was established in 1973 in the caption to a drawing of the figure in the Reader’s Digest book called *Folklore, Myths and*

Above: Quaintree House, Braunston in Rutland.

Right: The so-called ‘Earth Mother’ carving now outside the west end of Braunston church.
Legends of Britain. And that is the sum total of its ‘pagan’ origins. This carving was probably created in the late fourteenth century. Earlier dates have been proposed but there are simply no similar carvings which give credence to such speculations.

But is it that simple? Could this figure be a ‘bowdlerised’ version of a full-length wooden figure which was indeed a ‘female exhibitionist’? Barely more than a hundred yards from the Braunston figure is the oldest house in the village, known as Quaintree House. This takes its name from the ‘Queen Tree’. But the spelling suggests that it was the derogatory sense of ‘queen’ – usually spelt ‘quean’ – which was intended. A quean was not so much the king’s wife as a ‘harlot’ or, in more modern parlance, a ‘gold digger’. This shift in meaning of the word ‘queen’ perhaps reflects a little of the way common people thought about the wives of kings in late Anglo-Saxon times!

Be that as it may, the sense of the Irish phrase sheelenaghee is not that different from the Old English quean. So was the original quain tree at Braunston either a tree which naturally split into such a configuration – with the breasts and face perhaps enhanced later? Or was it a stapol carved as a sheelenaghee?

Certainly it is exactly the right place for such a stapol. Almost beside the churchyard runs the River Gwash, with a bridge (replacing an earlier ford) near the lych gate. And Braunston is right by the border between Rutland and Leicestershire. The modern boundary does not follow the Gwash. But this part of the boundary has long been disputed as a nearby wood is still known as Flitteris Park. And flitteris is the Anglo-Saxon term for disputed land.

Several researchers have suggested that Irish shee lena ghees were created to protect boundaries. This is entirely in concordance with the considerable evidence in Irish legends for female ‘sovereignty’ of the land, known as flaith. For example, Ulster’s royal centre, Emain Macha, is named after the tutelary deity of the Feis Eamna, the goddess Macha. The Boyne valley retains the name of its tutelary goddess, Bóinn, and the River Shannon also seems to preserve the memory of Sinann. Several other British rivers, including the Severn and the Dee, also take their names from female deities.

We should think of rivers and valleys as the ‘territory’ of a female sovereign, the tutelary deity of the clan or kin group who live in that valley. At one time they may have identified with the whole valley, from the upland springs to the estuary, although no doubt rifts and
rivalries led to more complex and contested notions of who belonged where. But certainly the hills between the valleys would have been the boundaries with distinct kin groups over in the next valley. And this is exactly what archaeology tells us – from Iron Age forts on prominent hills to Greek temples to Artemis beside mountain passes.

In Britain the major Roman roads, such as Watling Street (from London to Chester) and the Fosse Way (from the Dorset coast to Lincoln, via Cirencester, Leicester and Newark) follow watersheds where possible. Indeed Watling Street follows the most important watershed in England, as all the rivers which flow south and west have their sources to one side, while all the rivers which flow north and east have (with the exception of a few hundred yards of a tributary of the River Soar) their origins on the other side. But these routes do not link together Iron Age hill forts, strongly suggesting that they were in use before the Romans. Presumably the Iron Age people thought of them as ‘inter-tribal’ corridors – liminal zones if you prefer – which were not contested and allowed drovers and traders to pass comparatively safely.

High Cross, Leicestershire, in the late 1980s. This is where Watling Street (running from London to Chester) crosses the Fosse Way (running from the Dorset coast to Lincoln). Romans thought of this as the centre of England.
Meet the Mothers

‘An entire mythology is stored within our language.’
Ludwig Wittgenstein (1931 (1993: 133))

Even if the thoughts about sheela-like stapols are rather speculative, there can be little doubt that some of the weohs would have depicted female tutelary spirits. Throughout the Roman Empire there are stone carvings of the three Deae Matronae – the ‘Mother Goddesses’. Beyond doubt the stone ones would have been greatly outnumbered by wooden counterparts but none have survived.

Don’t be fooled by mid-twentieth century speculations about these depicting the ‘three ages of woman’. Yes, one of the women is always younger. But there is no counterpart to the ‘crone’ of modern thinking. All three of these deities are mothers.

We know this cult was not simply a Roman ‘import’ as Germanic literature of the period refers often to the dísir. This is the plural – there is only one sentence where the singular, dis is used and that is because the word is used to describe a specific goddess, Freya.

Among scholars there is little doubt that dísir is the collective name for female tutelary spirits of place – the protective spirits for the families who lived there. Indeed while place, lineage – ‘blood lines’ if you prefer – and female ‘sovereignty’ of the land may seem distinct in modern minds, they were all-but inseparable in most traditional societies.

At the time the Germanic people were venerating their dísir the Celtic-speaking people of Britain were honouring the Mothers. We can be sure of this thanks to one remark in the writings of Bede, the early
Deae Matronae as depicted in three Roman sculptures from the Continent.

eighth century Northumbrian monk. In his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* he lists the pre-Christian names of the months. And for December he states that it was the month of Modranect, ‘Mother’s Night’. While no doubt living mothers and grandmothers were honoured – a custom that later shifted to ‘Mothering Sunday’ – the real
purpose of the rite would have been to pay respects to all maternal ancestors, especially those thought to be the guardians of that particular place.

But, just as there can be no hole in a doughnut without a doughnut, similarly there cannot be a baby without a mother. Indeed every baby ever born has an unbroken sequence of mothers (and fathers too!). To all intents and purposes Christmas Eve is a direct continuation of Modranect, except that the mother now takes second place to the baby – it’s the ‘baby’s Mass’ not the ‘mother’s night’. Nevertheless, Christmas Eve is just as much part of Christmas as Christmas Day itself. Many modern Christians feel a need to go to the midnight church service even if they’re not regular church-goers.

We can be sure that Bede did not make up Modranect as in Germany the same feast was known as Mutternacht, with the same meaning. However the Scandinavian rites to the disir took place in early October. This could have been just pragmatism – after all, December is rather cold and dark in that part of the world! Or, just possibly, this

Mother and baby are both doing well...

was the continuation of a separate annual rite for the tutelary spirits which died out unrecorded in Germany and Britain.

In India during early October the festival of Maha Navaratri is celebrated. This is the greatest of four annual festivals to the divine mother, Shakambari. To devotees she is the creative energy of the Divine and part of tradition of Mother Goddess worship which seemingly predates the Vedas, widely thought to have been composed between 1500 and 500 BC. (For those who like ‘apt coincidences’, these paragraphs were written at the time of the full moon in early October, just as Maha Navaratri is being celebrated.)

The Deae Matronae or Three Mothers can be recognised in medieval Catholicism. They become the ‘Three Marys’ – a slightly fluid concept which includes three of the five-or-so Marys mentioned in the New Testament (some of whom have been wrongly conflated). The Three Marys always include the Blessed Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene while the third Mary is usually Mary Salome (and who she was depends on who you read but is usually thought to be the ‘other Mary’ present at the opening of the tomb three days after Christ’s crucifixion).
The rise of Anglo-Catholicism within the Church of England during the nineteenth century led to a small number of stained glass windows being commissioned which depict the Three Marys. While Christians have their own exegesis, the reality is that, unwittingly, these are the nearest to ‘pagan goddesses’ that are to be found in an Anglican church. They are the descendants of the modra (singular) or modor (plural) whom Bede undoubtedly knew about, more than eleven centuries before these windows were designed, and the Deae Matronae before them.

The modor were not ‘English’ in the modern sense – they were British. We can see this in modern Welsh where the byname for fairies is not ‘the fair folk’, ‘the wee folk’ or ‘the hidden folk’ but Y Mamau – which translates literally as ‘the Mothers’. The idea of fairies has evolved many times over the centuries, not least the transformation into wee, twee gossamer-winged inhabitants of children’s nurseries. But their origins are as other-than-human-persons who were close kin to the guardians of a locality.
Meet the *land wights* and their Irish sisters

The word ‘fairy’ enters the English language after the Norman conquest. Originally it was the French word *fée*. Before then there was the English word *aelf* (plural *aelfa*), which gives us the modern word ‘elf’. But back in Anglo-Saxon times *aelf* did not simply denote diminutive hominids. Instead, it was a collective term for all sorts of other-than-human persons. Mostly it referred to male entities, although this became blurred later.

There was another collective term too – *land wights*. This term included *aelfa* and also such beings as *thyrs, eoten, dwearg, puca, scucca,* and *maere* (with any number of variant spellings). *Thyrs* and *eoten* were two types of giants. There are various minor place-names along the lines of ‘thyrspit’, suggesting that these were natural hollows and former quarries where *thyr* were thought to hang out. *Dwearg* are, yes, dwarves. *Puca* gives us Puck, as in Rudyard Kipling’s *Puck of Pook’s Hill* (although ‘Pook’s Hill’ more probably takes its name from a hill frequented by deer (*pocca*), not by *pucas*). *Scuccas* live on as the Black Shuck, or phantom black dog, of Norfolk. And *maere* is an entity encountered in nightmares.

Confused? Yes, the Old English literature suggests the Anglo-Saxons themselves weren’t always sure who was who and what was what. Safest just to use collective terms like *aelf* and *land wight* rather than more specific names.

All sorts of writers, both academic and popularist, refer to the *aelfa* and the *land wights* as ‘supernatural’ or ‘Otherworldly’. But the Old English literature simply does not provide any evidence for this. Instead, they are part of this realm, but simply less seldom seen. And
the use of specific names for land wights in place-names such as thyrs pit, strongly suggests that they were part of the human realm. The correct term is ‘preternatural’ from the Latin *praeter naturam*, which has the sense of ‘beside nature’ (rather than ‘super natural’, i.e. ‘above nature’). Putting it another way, preternatural describes what might have been a work of nature, but is not.

The Irish legends about the sí (pronounced ‘shee’) reveal what preternatural beings are really like. The sí mostly keep themselves to themselves, living in the ‘hollow hills’ and ‘fairy forts’ or *raths*, and only making contact with the human realm on those occasions when humans can do what they are unable. Although often deemed to be ‘Otherworldly’, the sí are essentially of this world – just rarely seen. Indeed, they are more often heard than seen. Sound passes more readily from one realm to other, especially at certain times of day or of the year.

In the older Irish literature the word sí is specifically female, and often translated as ‘fairy woman’. So the expression *shee lena ghee*, which I have already discussed, could also be written *sí lena ghee*. These sí are most definitely female! The origin of the Irish word *Sidhe* (also spelt
Meet the *land wights* and their Irish sisters

*The frithstool at Sprotbrough church, South Yorkshire.*

*Sith* and *Sidh* but in each case pronounced ‘shee’) is from *Aos si*, meaning ‘the people of the mounds’. This was originally a collective name for various spirits, old gods and assorted pre-Christian legendary characters – a direct counterpart to the Welsh *Tylwyth Teg* and Old English *land wight*. Only in recent centuries has the meaning narrowed to mean ‘fairy’, or more specifically, ‘fairy woman’.

*Sidhe* as a word seems to go back a very long time as it appears to be cognate with Latin *sedes* (‘seat’) and may also be related to Latin *sides* (usually translated as ‘constellation’ but having the original sense of ‘dwelling – or seat – of a god’). There is a real sense that it denotes ‘spirits of place’ – those who by right have a ‘seat of power’ in that locality. The modern English word ‘throne’ (from the Greek *thronos* via Latin and Old French) continues this sense.

A different Irish word which sounds the same, *sith*, means ‘peace’ may have the same roots. If this sounds unlikely then bear in mind that at one time only the great and the good had formal seats – thrones if you prefer – and to sit on one was to act as a peace-broker for disputes and such like. Similarly the Old English word *frithstool* denotes a seat of sanctuary in a church or cathedral – it literally means ‘peace stool’ but has the sense of ‘seat of protection’. Along the same lines there is an Old English salutation *sit heill* which translates as ‘sit in peace’.

Intriguingly, in Scandinavia before the conversion to Christianity there were annual divination rituals at each farmstead which involved peripatetic female seers (known as *voluspa*) sitting in a specially-constructed high seat. There are no references to this in Britain, but similar rites may have taken place at ancestral burial mounds.
From *weohs* to saints

We know too that the Irish once called the local protective spirits *émla*. And this word confirms something else. The pre-conversion *weohs* never died out. They just transformed into the Christian statues of saints. Why can I say this so confidently? Because while the word *émla* is indeed used to refer to pre-conversion tutelary deities, it is most often used to describe the founding saints of early churches.

This makes complete sense. Before the Reformation only the clergy could talk directly to God or Christ. Everyone else had to ask a saint to intercede on their behalf. From about the twelfth century this role increasingly fell upon the Virgin Mary. But before then it was the local saint – or saints – who provided this all-important ‘messenger service’.

The reason was simple. Local saints were dead priests. Just as in life the priest could ‘talk to God’, so in their afterlife – up in Heaven hobnobbing with the Great and the Good – they were well-placed to pass on requests for assistance. Actually, from the perspective of thinking at that time, there’s a crucial mistake in the second sentence. The local saints were not dead priests – they were still very much alive, now resident in Heaven.

While we have no direct evidence of how pre-conversion people in Britain thought about their local protective spirit-deities, we do know how a great many other traditional societies thought about theirs. Such traditional societies include the Romans. When they wrote about the inhabitants of conquered territories they were quick to point out differences in local customs and such like. The absence of any such comments about Germanic and British tribes means we can fairly safely assume that they did things in a similar way to the Romans. Which means that the local deities were ‘bribed’ with sacrifices to have a word with the ‘big gods’ to intercede on behalf of those making the offerings.
A sixth or seventh century icon of Christ ‘embracing’ Abbot Menas with his right hand, thereby showing the formal hierarchy of intercession.

This angel was carved about AD 1000 and is now inside the tower of the church at Breedon on the Hill, Leicestershire.

The pair of opium poppies at his feet suggest he was associated with healing – an ‘angel of mercy’ perhaps, and certainly an intercessionary who could assist with healing.

His right hand forms a gesture of blessing commonly used at the time, and also used to this day in Tibetan Buddhism.
the only logical conclusion is that people carried on doing what they had always done, except with new statues and shrines rather than the old pagan icons at their shrines. Or, as the historical and archaeological evidence tentatively suggests, setting up a new crucifix alongside the existing effigies of established deities.

Even the idea of the female ‘spirit-deity’ being a local guardian survives in the way Catholics refer to ‘Our Lady of Lourdes’, ‘Our Lady of Fatima’, ‘Our Lady of Walsingham’, ‘Our Lady of Guisborough’, ‘Our Lady of Westminster’ and so forth. These are all different manifestations of the Blessed Virgin Mary, yet each has their own identity.

This is exactly how the Devi or ‘mother goddess’ of Indian village religion is known too – by a local name while still ‘an aspect’ of the greater deity. There is no reason to suppose that Germanic and British pre-Christian religion was any different. Indeed, why would medieval Christians have all these ‘Our Lady of Wherever’ unless there was already a well-established precedent?

No surprise that in the fourteenth century such practices as venerating saints were deemed ‘idolatry’ and, in due course, the statues and shrines were destroyed. Subsequently the Reformation led to everyone talking to God directly, an approach followed by most modern pagans, and introduced from Britain into Sri Lankan Buddhism when it was revived at the end of the nineteenth century. Yes, pagans and a surprising number of Theravada Buddhists are ‘protestants’ too.
Founding saints

These founding saints would have given their name to the church where they were buried. And maybe the settlement too. In Cornwall a large proportion of place-names start with ‘Saint’. Even some which don’t, such as Padstow, still have the same sense as this from Petroc’s stow or ‘St Petroc’s special place’. In Devon there is Petrockstow and Newton St Petroc. Similarly in Wales numerous places begin with Llan–. This has a similar sense to stow. So Llanfair is the ‘(holy) place of St Mary’, Llandewi takes its name from St David, Llanellen from St Helen, Llanwrrda from the little-known St Cwrdw, and plenty more examples (although just a handful of llan– place-names derive from rivers or other non-saintly references).

These place-names commemorate the ‘patron saints’. The phrase is used in modern English to denote the saint to whom a church is dedicated. But at the time of the dedication these people were known in Latin as patroni. As the modern French and Italian counterparts, le patron and il padrone, still reveal the original meaning: ‘the boss’. They demanded reverentia, public tokens of respect. Although dead, their spirit remained present at their tombs – so requiring regular visits and annual feasts – and they continued to be regarded as ‘fellow citizens’.

In England they did things a little different. The defensive boundary earthworks which called llan in Welsh were called burh in Old English. This usually comes down to us as place-names ending in ‘–bury’. In various parts of England there are early Christian communities, or ‘mother churches’, which were known to the Anglo-Saxons as mynsters.

In Wiltshire there are several good examples, such as Alderbury, Amesbury, Avebury, Heytesbury, Malmesbury, Ramsbury, Tisbury, Westbury and Yatesbury. Westbury is what it sounds like, though
The interior of Avebury church, Wiltshire. The three round windows are part of the Anglo-Saxon mynster, probably built in the tenth century.
quite where it was to the west of is unclear. All the others are combinations of personal names (though Yatesbury might be the odd one out and refer to either goats or gates instead). Early forms of these names tell us that they were once Æthelwearde’s burh, Ambre’s burh, Afa’s burh, Heathryth’s burh, Maildulfi’s burh, Hraefnes’ burh, Tissa’s burh and – perhaps – Gaeta’s burh. Interestingly half of these eight ‘patrons’ are female – Æthelwearde, Afa, Heathryth and Geata. Which sheds just a little ray of light on the gender equality of early Christianity in this part of England.

Based on archaeological evidence from other early churches, we should imagine that just behind the altar, right at the eastern end of the church as it was then, there would have been the grave of the founding saint. We have little idea of what these ‘shrines’ might have looked like because churches were rebuilt and expanded over the centuries (although the seventh century reliquary shown on page 26 offers clues). If the remains of the founding saint have not been disturbed then they will still be under the floor, but now just to the east of the chancel arch rather than at the far end. If you can dowse then you should be able to locate the spot and establish whether or not the saint’s remains are still there. Don’t forget to pay your respects...

Right through to the fourteenth century the death of a priest was sometimes commemorated by a stone slab with a ‘portrait’. These are among the oldest sepulchral monuments to survive in England and the oldest ones always depict clergy. In cathedrals there may be corresponding effigies for bishops and, although often destroyed at the Reformation, abbeys would once have had effigies of their early abbots.
The potency of the saints and the Mothers

In the Anglo-Saxon period local saints were thought to have *potentia*. This is Latin for ‘potency’ and seems to have the same sense as the Old English word *leac*.

*Leac* is pronounced ‘leek’ or ‘luck’ and is indeed the origin of the name of that vegetable which has both a potent smell and a phallic shape – more so with wild leeks. When we refer disparagingly to doctors as ‘leeches’ we are harking back to the Anglo-Saxon medics and their *leacdom* – their ‘wisdom’ of the potency of medicines (even though it is commonly, but wrongly, supposed that the reference is to the much more recent use of blood-sucking leeches).

This same sense of ‘potency’ underpins the well-known Indian mantra *Om mani padme hum* (pronounced ‘oam-mah-nee-pud-may-hoong’). The literal meaning is ‘Om-jewel-lotus-hum’. *Om* is the syllable used at the start of all Buddhist chants and has the sense of the original vibration at the start of creation. The jewel specifically meant is the *vajra* or diamond-thunderbolt associated with masculine energies. The open lotus flower is regarded as feminine. As if that isn’t ‘potent’ enough, according to Alan Watts ‘*hum* is a sort of virile exclamation’.

My own way of thinking about *leac* is that it’s the Anglo-Saxon counterpart to Afro-Caribbean ‘mojo’ – a charm, talisman or spell with magical powers. So this section of the book is, if you like, about how to ‘get your *leac* working’.

*Leac* and several other Old English words no longer in use provide some clues about how pre-Christian Anglo-Saxons thought about the ‘spirits of place’. Clearly they had the same ‘potency’ as the subsequent saints. In a great many traditional societies – including
China and India as well as the New World – there is a word which describes something similar. English-speaking academics mostly use either the Japanese word *kami* or the Polynesian word *mana*. Both have often been described as some sort of indescribable numinous ‘life force’.

In recent years there has been a greater effort to understand what these words mean in all the various societies where the words are used. What emerges is not a sense of a ‘life force’ – a term which all-too-easily suggests something like a magnetic force or an electric field. Rather, the sense spans both ‘charisma’ and ‘gift’ – that is gift as in *Om mani padme hum* in Tibetan script (reads right to left).

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The potency of the saints and the Mothers

Om mani padme hum *in Tibetan script (reads right to left).*

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Above: A stylised depiction of the Deae Matronae.
Right: *A triple amulet inspired by this depiction.*
'gifted child' or slightly more archaic sense of ‘the gift of a sheep is its wool and meat’. Yes, this is exactly how I described prana shakti earlier. Shakti is indeed close kin to mana, kami and potentia.

In Japan there are ‘sacred’ trees and rocks which are thought to have powerful kami. So too, powerful human beings are thought to have kami – not only government leaders but also the senior directors of multinational organisations such as Sony, Panasonic, Toyota, and all the rest. Most importantly, neither the trees, rocks or humans are thought to ‘possess’ kami, still less to generate or give off kami. Instead kami is ‘out there’ and merely directed through special trees, rocks or people.

This sense of kami broadly matches the sense of Indian, Chinese and New World counterparts. Also, it fits perfectly with the early Christian notion of potentia, which is the power of Christ being ‘channelled’ through both living and dead priests. There is considerable overlap here with early notions of the Sanctus Spiritus, the Holy Spirit (also, confusingly, referred to as the Holy Ghost).

While Christian concepts do not tell us about pre-conversion beliefs, almost always there is some sort of underlying continuity of ideas. So we should think of the spirits of place as the ‘channels’ through which a numinous leac or ‘potency’ could manifest. The Mothers were certainly imbued with leac – the potency-charisma-gift-wisdom-auspiciousness of being able to intercede with the greater deities.

Curiously, while the words ‘luck’ and ‘lucky’ seem not to have been used before the fifteenth century, when we refer to ‘lucky horseshoes’ and other ‘lucky charms’ the sense of ‘luck’ overlaps with that of leac. Although ‘luck’ and leac sound the same only by coincidence, I have taken full advantage! So in the rest of this book I will use the word ‘luck’ to refer to the potency-charisma-gift-wisdom-auspiciousness associated with the Old English word leac.
Founding ‘fathers’

The cult of ‘founding saints’ seems to be only one aspect of pre-conversion Anglo-Saxon culture passing seamlessly into early Christianity. It wasn’t only saints who were revered after death as the names of the founders of a great many other Anglo-Saxon settlements are still known to us. Villages with names ending in ‘-ton’, ‘-ham’ and ‘-by’ often denote such settlements – although at the time the names were given villages were a long way in the future and the name referred to a farm-like settlement occupied by a ‘clan’ or ‘extended family’. The first part of these place-names may be descriptive – such as Ashton, the settlement by the ash trees – but often is a personal name. So Braunston in Rutland and Sproxton (pronounced locally as ‘Sprowkstun’) in Leicestershire, both mentioned earlier, were originally Brant’s settlement and Spro(w)k’s settlement.

Things get even more relevant when the ending is ‘-ingham’ as this means the settlement of the followers of whoever. So Walsingham in Norfolk takes its name from the settlement of the followers of a chap called Wals. The followers of a close namesake in Oxfordshire give us the name Wallingford. A similar combination leads to the Manningfords in Wiltshire, commemorating a founder called Manna. He was almost certainly closely related to another founder called Canna, whose followers are recalled in the names of the nearby villages of All Cannings and Bishops Cannings. Presumably Manna and Canna carved up adjoining parts of central Wiltshire between them soon after the Romans left.

Most English counties have examples of ‘-ingham’ and ‘-ington’ place-names, or even ones just ending in ‘-ing’, such as Wapping or Epping. Thankfully the followers of Effa had a ‘ham’ (think ‘homestead’) so the Surrey village is known as Effingham, thereby avoiding locals having to get there along the Effing road... His near-namesake, Eafa, in
Leicestershire similarly has come down to us as Evington – a spelling which also avoids such indelicacies.

Almost all these ‘–ing’, ‘–ingham’ and –ington’ type names are based around male names. These men would quite probably have been buried under mounds, as best known at Sutton Hoo. These mounds – known to the Anglo-Saxons as *hlaws* (‘lows’) and *beorgs* (‘burys’) – would become ‘shrines’ to these ancestors, a place where in the ‘ingas’ – the ‘followers’ or descendants – could pay their respects with the customary rites.

In addition to the ‘–ingas’ and ‘–ingham’ place-names which incorporate the names of individuals, there are also place-names ending in *hlaw*, such as Taplow in Buckinghamshire, where the church is situated by an Anglo-Saxon burial mound, presumably where Tæppa was laid to rest among many splendid grave goods.

Shropshire gives us Beslow, Longslow, Munslow, Onslow, Peplow, Purslow and Whittingslow while in Herefordshire is Wolferlow. All these appear to be named after individuals, presumably the earliest Anglo-Saxon settlers. In Derbyshire alone *hlaw* appears in over seventy place-names. Over thirty of these are known to have been places with burial mounds. At least eleven of the thirty are comprised of a personal name followed by *hlaw*, for example, Bassa at Baslow, Eatta at Atlow, Hucca at Hucklow and Tidi at Tidelow.

The men who gave their names to *hlaws* lived at about the same time as the men commemorated in ‘–inghams’ and ‘–ingtons’. They were all thought of as founders of a settlement, even though the modern villages known by these names were still many centuries in the future. They are the real ancestors of England.
Ancestral guardians

The next volume in the Living in a Magical World series is devoted to learning from the ancestors. For the moment I simply want to emphasise that these ancestral founders remained the guardians of the living. Manna or Canna had been fierce warlords when alive. If they hadn’t been fierce or warlike then they simply wouldn’t have been the leaders of such a kin group, as a more aggressive rival would have taken then out. So, too, after death, they remained as guardians. The locations of their burials would most likely be on significant boundaries, up on the ridges – the watersheds – between territories.

Note than Manna comes down to us as Manningford – self-evidently a place in a valley and equally clearly an important ‘obstacle’ on a routeway. Fords are good place to defend against enemies – either ones on foot trying to cross the water, or ones in small boats trying to get over the shallows. Manningford is on the upper reaches of the River Avon that flows past Stonehenge into the Solent. There is indeed a small ford in the main village, although a pub still called the Woodbridge on the edge of the parish where a modern bridge crosses a much wider stretch of the Avon suggests that this boundary ford was more likely to be the one of most concern to Manna’s ingas (see photograph on the next page). Whoever controlled that ford controlled access to a large part of central Wiltshire.

In just this one place-name we can see strong links between valleys, ‘kin groups’ – the ingas – and ‘sovereignty’. The founders of ‘–ingham’ and ‘–ington’ were the sort of blokes who could fend off rivals with force – and probably did so on many occasions. They needed to protect their farms and wealth from raiding parties led by ‘heavies’ like themselves. The ability to act as effective guardians was a key part of their lives. No wonder at least some of these attributes survived after death.

After death these founders were the sort of people who you would ask to intercede on your behalf with the gods to ensure good crops, disease-free livestock, healthy family, success in battle, and all the rest. Just the sort of things that a century or so later, when the descendants
of the *ingas* had converted to Christianity, they asked the founding saints of the churches to ‘get right with God’. There is simply no way of putting a knife between the family of Tappa getting together at his *hlaw*, or the *ingas* of Manna getting together at his burial place, and the descendants of all of them going to an early church to venerate the founding saint.

Indeed, as the cult site of the Canningas was quite probably Waden Hill, overlooking Avebury, then they would have had to walk only a few hundred yards to visit the shrine of St Afa, in the earliest church at Avebury. The reality is that before conversion there was a settlement at the foot of Waden Hill, where the main visitors car park is now laid out, and after conversion they relocated a few yards to where the 1970s school would be built, almost adjacent to the church.

Avebury is perhaps exceptional in having a combination of place-name and archaeological evidence which allows for a comparatively good insight into the Anglo-Saxon era. Mostly we only have the place-name evidence with, at best, scant archaeological survivals.
Honesty to your own ancestors

So far this book has been concerned with ‘thinking’ about guardians, especially rethinking how the guardians of pre-conversion Anglo-Saxons transformed, fairly seamlessly, into Christian saints. The next section of the book is more about ‘doing’. But before we put all this thinking into some sort of practice, you need to stop and pause awhile.

So far as I am aware all my ancestors are English, and my paternal line retains an Anglo-Saxon name. I have lived all my life in England, mostly in Leicestershire and more recently in Wiltshire. So I am most comfortable writing about the religion of my forebears. Frankly, it would be as illogical for me to write predominately about Irish or Welsh or Scottish traditions as it would for me to write about the traditions of indigenous people of America, Australia, Tibet or wherever else you care to mention.

The only problem is that far fewer writers have looked at the Anglo-Saxon world than have looked at the so-called ‘Celtic’ traditions. And, frankly, most of what has been written about the Anglo-Saxon period is actually about the ninth and tenth century Anglo-Scandinavian societies, which are significantly different from what was going on in the fifth to ninth centuries when the cultural influences were still Germanic.

So if your idea of Anglo-Saxons is Woden and runes then, sorry, but you’re thinking about a more recent phase of history than I am! Bear in mind that the Anglo-Saxon era is a very long one – if it was moved forwards by a thousand years it would stretch from two generations before the Battle of Bosworth and wouldn’t end until 2066. Just as we think of the fifteenth century being distinct from the sixteenth, and so forth, so too the Anglo-Saxon world too shifted significantly over the centuries. The lives of fifth century Anglo-Saxons would seem almost
The megalithic guardians of the approach to the Neolithic henge at Avebury, Wiltshire.

as alien to those living in, say, the early eleventh century as fifteenth century lifestyles seem to us today.

However, I am well aware that readers of this book may not share my Anglo-Saxon lineage. If so, it is time to step back a little and rethink the various ideas I have presented so far from the perspective of your own background. By and large I suspect you will see close parallels – although if you are from countries where Christianity has arrived more recently, or has never become the dominant religion, then some of what I am saying will be less relevant. In such case I hope that the indigenous ways of thinking have been kept alive far more than Anglo-Saxon ones.

In essence, I am asking you to be ‘honest’ with your own ancestry. There is no point in claiming to be part of some ‘exotic’ tradition from a country far removed from where you live.
Listening to the guardians

If you have already read the first volume in the Living in a Magical World series, *Listening to the Stones*, you will recall my remarks about ‘talking at’ the stones being far removed from listening. Read the relevant parts of that book again, thinking of the stones as guardians. Mentally reword what is written in that book about ‘listening to the stones’ in terms of ‘listening to the guardians’. It’s only a subtle shift – the stones are as much guardians as they are whatever else you might think of them as.

Then go out and get to know the guardians of your own locality. They may not be Neolithic standing stones and such like – mature trees, even those in parks, are also pre-eminent guardians of place. Honour them and listen – with all your senses – to them. Resist the temptation to talk ‘at’ them, projecting all your preconceived ideas about what guardians should and should not be. You are getting to know them to learn from them, not to dump your mental garbage on them.

For the moment resist the temptation to seek out ancestors as guardians – the next book in this series deals with the whys and wherefores – and some of the ‘why not’ too! There is much to learn from the ancestors, but that is every reason not to venture in too deep too quickly! Suffice to say for now that, before you can learn from the ancestors you need to know your guardians. And to know your guardians you need to know how to ‘listen’ to them. In other words, the first three books of the Living in a Magical World series are planned to take you step-by-step.
Wearing your guardians

There is a specific type of guardian which can be carried with you. The form can be quite varied, as I will explain, but to keep things simple I will refer to them all as amulets. The most obvious form of an amulet is something worn as a pendant around the neck, although the same amulet could be worn as a bracelet instead.

There is no reason for an amulet to look ‘pretty’ – it is something which is there to do a job, not a piece of jewellery. So, with pendants think whether the cord should be long enough for the amulet itself to be out of sight. Personally I include such amulets as part of staffs. I need to carry a staff when walking any distance and have carved a number.
Some of these are, in essence, large ‘amulets’ in that the staff and the amuletic carving are inseparable. However I have also made simple, almost uncarved staffs, and tied amulets on with cord or leather thongs.

Amulets can also take an entirely different from – T-shirts. These can be worn underneath other clothing. I am not thinking of T-shirts bought with commercially-printed motifs but of plain T-shirts with a motif you have painted on yourself (see photograph on page 21). At a pinch the motif could be artwork designed or refined on a computer and then printed on as a one-off by a specialist T-shirt printing company.

Again the idea is not to get over-fussy about producing something which is aesthetically ‘perfect’. Instead, come up with a ‘quick and easy’ way of getting the motif which you want to empower onto the fabric. The motif itself is far more important than the craftsmanship (or possible lack of!) when making an amulet.
Your very own aelf ward

While every amulet needs its own individual name, as I will explain in the next section, the types of amulets I am talking about right now might be thought of generically as ‘otherworldly guardians’. Although, as I said earlier, the land wights of Britain were more preternatural than ‘otherworldly’ or supernatural. In Old English the word seems to have been aelf – a collective term for all sorts of other-than-human persons, and not just what we know think of as elves. As I also mentioned, in East Anglia some locals spoke of ‘ward sprites’, collective guardians (and the words ‘warden’ and ‘guardian’ just two ways of pronouncing what was originally the same word). So I’m happy to invent the phrase aelf ward to refer to these types of amulets. Strictly this refers to only one – more than one would be aelfen warden.

What your aelf ward looks like is an entirely personal matter. Mine are usually individual and male-looking, but I also have some threefold ones which I think of as the disir (female protective spirits of place) or the Modor (the Mothers – recall what I mentioned previously about Modor wesath eower weard, ‘May the Mothers watch over you’ or more literally, ‘The Mothers be your over-ward’).

The amulets shown in the photographs were made using a synthetic putty called Milliput. This comes in four natural-looking colours (terracotta, white, black and a greenish-grey) which are ideal for amulets. Milliput can be easily modelled, sanded and polished. It sets overnight at room temperature but this can be speeded up using an oven set to 50–60C. Fimo can also be used. However this needs an oven to ‘set’.

More skill is needed to carve amulets in wood or soapstone, but if you have suitable tools and skills then have a try. Other people cast amulets in pewter (this can be done using a domestic cooker) after
taking a silicone mould from a ‘master’ modelled in Das or Milliput. If you have access to a small kiln then pottery clay would be a good choice. A suitable kiln allows glass to be fused to make amulets, although considerable trial and error is needed to avoid cracks while cooling down.

As I have already said, the motif and the effort of making are more important than whether the amulet ‘looks good’. You are not making something to ‘look pretty’ – you are making a functional talisman.

Amulets made from Milliput and pewter.
More about amulets

If you have prior experience of making amulets and talismans then you may prefer something less representational. Nigel Pennick has identified a number of symbols which he associates with the ‘Nameless Art’ of East Anglia and some of these are shown in the illustrations opposite.

Or you may prefer to create a sigil of your own devising. This is always safer than ‘adopting’ a pre-existing symbol which would have been created and used by other people for their own purposes.

Think of sigils as ‘magical symbols’ rather like the logos of different businesses which carry far more significance than merely being a ‘makers mark’. By far better to create your own ‘logo’ than reuse someone else’s.

I am well aware that some people use ‘found objects’ as amulets. My amulets include small pebbles from ‘interesting places’. There is no reason not to carry a small sliver of wood from a tree growing at a place you want to ‘connect’ with at any time. Animal bones or teeth, especially from carnivores, look impressive. This does not mean hunting some living creature – ‘fossilised’ sharks teeth are fairly easy to obtain and look suitably aggressive; they were traditionally called ‘tongue stones’. I have come across boar’s tusks in ‘flea markets’ from time to time and then created a suitable mount.

Don’t simply tie these ‘found items’ on a cord and wear them – you need to put some thought and effort into the whole item. Personally, I tend to use ‘found objects’ as add-ons to something I have spent time and effort on creating. They are, if you like, ‘adornments’ to the main amulet while enabling an instant ‘connection’ to the place where they came from.
More about amulets

Left to right: ‘Sign of the Nameless Art’; ‘Egershelm of Termagant (for impregnable defence)’; Ipswich warding sign. Drawings by Bob Trubshaw based on Nigel Pennick’s Secrets of East Anglian Magic.

If you are the sort of person who ends up with a motley assortment of such amulets then the best option is to keep them in a small leather pouch. If not too big then this can be worn around the neck, but hanging from a belt is often more practical. Although fabric can be used, avoid synthetic fabrics and be careful to line (or even quilt) two or more layers together as the bags tend to come unstitched at the corners or closures, allowing smaller items to fall out unnoticed.

Medieval makers’ and owners’ marks. These functioned as distinctive ‘monograms’ identifying ownership and as practical protective symbols. Drawings by Bob Trubshaw based on Nigel Pennick’s Primal Signs.
Making amulets ‘lucky’

Protective amulets need to be ‘charged’ or made ‘lucky’ before they acquire their power. Bear in mind I am using ‘luck’ here to mean what the Anglo-Saxons meant by *leac* – something straddling ideas of being gifted, having charisma, auspiciousness and, above all, a strong sense of ‘potency’.

The way of doing this is not especially complicated, but does require care and effort. It is this effort and attention which is focused into the ‘luck’. If you aren’t prepared to put this effort in then the amulet will have little or no potency.

All the amulets I produce and use are ‘charged’ using running water. Ideally this will be a stream running from north to south or from west to east. Here at Avebury the Winterbourne runs from the north and then turns east and becomes the Kennet. But in other places – such as cities and suburbs – finding such watercourses can be tricky. Actually, it can be tricky here in Avebury too as the Winterbourne – as its name suggests – only flows in the winter, and this part of the Kennet is often dry in the summer too.

What to do? Well although its not possible to keep running water in a bottle, we have to do the next best thing. Collect water from a suitable stream as and when you can. Make sure you have a bottle or container which is ‘special’ – recycled plastic bottles aren’t what I have in mind. The vessel needs to be individual enough to have some ‘charisma’ of its own – as well as a tight-fitting cap or stopper. Glass wine decanters are perhaps a little OTT – usually a pottery jar or jug from a flea market or such like can be kitted out with a cork or other ‘bung’ if it doesn’t come with a stopper. Give it a good wash out first.

Some people will want to chose the phase of the moon or the astrological aspect of when they collect the water. I have my own
Making amulets 'lucky'

criteria which are somewhat similar. Once filled, keep the container of water cool and in the dark. It may develop some sort of cloudiness or algae after a time but, as you’re not intending to drink it, then this is not a problem. Some people add a little sea salt as part of the ‘charging’ rite, although I don’t do so myself. I suspect it inhibits the growth of anything which might make the water cloudy.

When you come to use such ‘bottled’ water to charge an amulet then you will need to put some energy back in. Swirl it around (clockwise of course) while saying something like:

Tigath, Tigath, Tigath
In the name of the Old Ones
Into this water I direct my Luck
That it will have the gift of cleanliness.

If you prefer you can begin by naming your own personal ‘spirit guardian’ or guardians’ instead of Tigath. Preferably repeat the name or names three times.

But the irony is I’m showing you how to make amulets to offer protection before going off to ‘meet’ personal guardians. Some readers may already have such guardians – however you name them or think of them. If not, don’t worry, just use the ‘mumbo jumbo’ expression Tigath, Tigath, Tigath – this is exactly what is written at the start of an Anglo-Saxon ‘charm’. A later charm starts ‘Erce, Erce, Erce’. You use the words you feel express your ‘Luck’ – I’ll keep things simple by using Tigath in the examples below. There’s no reason whatsoever not to re-empower amulets later, or to make additional ones linked to specific guardians after you have met them.

Speaking of names, you need to decide what you are going to call the amulet. Think of how powerful weapons and other objects – such as Arthur’s sword Excalibur, Odin’s spear Gungnir, and the cauldron of creation, Hvergelmir – all have names of their own. Your amulet needs it own name too. But never tell anyone else the name – even if you are making and charging the amulet for someone else. To know the name is to know how empower it – and how to revoke the ‘luck’. If the other person is present for the ‘charging’ rite then you may well have to mutter under your breath!

Now, either use the water you have made into ‘lucky water’ – water with leac – or set off to running water. Walk as much of the journey as you sensibly can – don’t just nip out the car and stroll a few yards.
I can easily get to the middle of the water at my 'lucky' place as there are stepping stones and several pedestrian-only bridges nearby. You may have such luck too but, at a pinch, work from the side of the watercourse, taking care to find somewhere safe to stand.

When you find a place that ‘works’ for you, listen to and acknowledge the spirits of the place. I simply tap my staff three times on the ground before focusing my thoughts. You might want to unobtrusively stomp your foot three times, or do what the Japanese do in such circumstances – clap hands three times. If you have already read the first volume in this series, *Listening to the Stones*, you will have a good idea about what I mean by ‘listening’ to special places with all your sense. If not, then please take the time to read that book too.

A similar simple ‘rite’ is needed even when working with water you have collected before. I’m assuming you have some sort of ‘special place’ in your home or garden which seems right. You just might have something akin to an altar or shrine, although your ‘special place’ does not have to be that obvious to other people. A ‘magic circle’ can be created mentally. If you ‘call’ the four directions when creating a circle then don’t forget to also ‘call’ the fifth direction, which is ‘here’ (and ‘now’). Some people prefer to envisage three-sided ritual spaces, with each corner associated with a specific spirit or deity.
Smells and bells

Smells add greatly to the ‘immersive experience’ of rituals. However ready-made joss sticks and cones – rather too often labelled with overly-fanciful names – are best avoided because there is no way of knowing if synthetic ingredients and who knows what else have been added. Better to obtain supplies of the basic ingredients – such as sandalwood and frankincense – and mix these according to your inclinations. Burn using a thurible for maximum versatility.

Best of all collect ingredients which are indigenous. The resin from spruce trees (Picea abies) has long been considered almost as good as frankincense. The resin from other species of pine, especially Scots pine (Pinus sylvestris) and larch (Larix decidua) also make good incense. The dried leaves and berries of juniper (Juniperus communis) can be mixed with spruce resin for a fairly potent mix! One word of warning: never burn any part of the yew tree (Taxus baccata) as this can cause fatal, though not immediate, liver damage.

Some people feel a need to use sage. This is not the culinary sage (Salvia officinalis) but various members of the Artemisia family native to America. Frankly, I consider burning sage to honour the guardians of Britain about the same as singing Hare Krisna to them – inauthentic and frankly bonkers. And quite unnecessary because at least two native plant species – mugwort (Artemisia vulgaris) and groundsel (Senecio vulgaris) – can be dried then crumbled and stored in a jar, to be used as incense. These plants have many regional by-names, including ‘wild wormwood’ and ‘simpson’.

Small tinkling bells also add to the ‘immersiveness’ of the occasion, although clap sticks made of native hardwood and bullroarers (see Listening to the Stones) are equally effective.

But smells and sounds are not essential. Include them if they’re already part of your way of doing things, but if not then just go right ahead without.
Putting the ‘luck’ in your amulet

When you’re sufficiently ‘focused’ on the here and now then say something like:

Tigath, Tigath, Tigath
In the name of the Old Ones
As I sprinkle water over you
I name you [X]
By air and water, earth and fire
So may it be.

You can then move on to the real point of the exercise. Dip the amulet into the water – you may need a long cord with you to dangle into the running water. Bring it out and rest it in the palm of your left hand, while pointing at it with the first two fingers of your right hand. Then say:

Tigath, Tigath, Tigath
[Name] be bearer of my Luck
Use my Luck to do as I bid you and as I bid you only.
I bid you to [say what it will do and where it will do it]
Use my Luck to do my bidding
In the name of the Old Ones.
So may it be!

Sometimes an amulet simply needs to be ‘lucky’ – empowered with leac in an unspecified manner. A simple charm, written down in Canterbury in 1073, says it all in a mere three words:

‘Thor hallow thee.’

What we don’t know is what actions went with these three words. Almost certainly they were considered to be as important as the words themselves. Maybe they had been forgotten by 1073. More likely
everyone at the time knew what needed to be done so there was no point in writing them down.

Amulets can be charged to make something happen or to prevent something happening. In the ‘converse’ way that befits magical practices it makes more sense for a protective amulet not to simply ‘make protection happen’ but for it to protect against something unwanted happening. Charms against something happening are often worded such that whatever is unwanted will only happen after two impossible eventualities of the ‘snowball in hell’ kind. Nursery rhymes are full of such improbabilities:

Hey, diddle, diddle  
The cat and the fiddle  
The cow jumped over the moon  
The little dog laughed  
And the dish ran away with the spoon.
Traditional charms are less coy, and may include lines such as ‘[Such and such] can only happen when the lion and the lamb sleep together’ or ‘May [so and so] never happen until a white wolf ploughs the fields.’ Other examples include sieving the sea or counting every grain of sand on the beach.

So a protective amulet might be charged with:

In the names of [my guardians]  
[name of amulet] be my *aelf ward*  
Until the day the sun rises in the west.  
So may it be.

If you’ve forgotten what an *aelf ward* is then go back to pages 68. Feel free to come up with your own words for these charms. Indeed I have provided examples which are there for inspiration but not aimed for ‘perfection’. Part of the empowerment – the ‘enleacment’ – is to spend the time coming up with your own ideas. Aim for three-fold repetition, while a slightly archaic use of English may seem appropriate – words such as ‘shall’, ‘whilst’ and ‘amongst’.

Never worry about ‘getting the words exactly right’ when doing the empowerment ritual. Once you’ve some experience of thinking through what needs to be said then your own *leac* will take over in the moment and say what needs to be said. As later books in this series will make clear, the ‘magic’ takes place when you focus your intent – not because of any complexity. ‘Thor hallow thee’ – said by someone who has the gift to make those three words really do what they say – is far better than a three minute ‘sermon’ by someone who has neither the knack nor or *leac*. 
Getting knotted – with intent

Many amulets are worn as pendants. The knots on the cord should be tied to ‘fix’ the charge. Bear in mind that a ‘knot’ might be each stage in plaiting three cords together, or merely tying the ends together, or a loop to keep the cords together around the amulet.

I tend to just plait together the black cotton cord widely used for pendants. However, if you prefer, the threads themselves can be an intrinsic part of the amulet. Traditionally they would be red, white and black as they are the three oldest pigments, available to almost all traditional societies. White and yellow are interchangeable in this context. Avoid overly-bright synthetic pigments. Alternatively, ‘recycle’ threads from textiles which have a deep meaning and significance for you, such as a favourite item of clothing which you ‘wore to death’.

Knotting and plaiting lend themselves to charms which follow the traditional format of ‘counting songs’. But there are plenty of variants,
and they can be readily emulated. The following examples should offer some useful inspiration.

By the knot of one, the spell’s begun.
By the knot of two, it cometh true.
By the knot of three, my will shall be.
By the knot of four, the power is more.
By the knot of five, the spell’s alive.
By the knot of six, the energies mix.
By the knot of seven, the stars of heaven.
By the knot of eight, the power of fate.
By the knot of nine, your protection’s mine!

*Traditional Finnish healing charm. From Kati Koppana’s Snake Fat and Knotted Threads.*
Why and what for?

This book has taken the ideas and abilities set out in the first book in this series, *Listening to the Stones* and shown ways of ‘listening’ – with all your senses’ – to other-than-human guardians. I have offered examples of the ways in I do such things, although there are plenty of people who do such things differently but just as well. But be aware of people who make such things ‘effortless’. They are missing the point – it is by focusing your own ‘luck’ (*leac*) that your guardians are empowered. This, by its very nature, takes effort.

I hope to have shown you that there are guardians of place ‘out there’ in the landscape. You may want to relate to them as the Mothers of the land. However if you already have your own ideas about these guardians then stay with the ones you know. I have also tried to show how an amulet can be empowered to act as an *aelf* ward or a guardian we can take with us. The reasons for these amulets will become clearer in the next book in the series, *Learning from the Ancestors*. This will assume that you have learnt to ‘listen’ with all your senses, as shown in the first book, become aware of the guardians of places, and have empowered suitable amulets, as described in this book.
Acknowledgements

My ideas were inspired by a great many authors – who may be dismayed to see their ideas paraphrased without any reference to their own names. Nevertheless, the relevant works are cited in the list of sources. Special thanks to all the contributors of photographs and illustrations – doubly so to those whose work inadvertently appears anonymously.

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