Souls, Spirits and Deities

Continuity from paganism in early Christianity

The Twilight Age
Volume Two

Bob Trubshaw

Modern Western ideas about souls, spirits and deities are seemingly materialistic and rational. Yet, when looked at closely, these seemingly-secular ideas rather too clearly betray their origins in Christian doctrines. By looking closely at ethnographical parallels together with recent 'Dark Age' scholarship Bob Trubshaw starts to strip away these more recent ideas. This begins to reveal how pre-Christian Anglo-Saxons might have thought about the differences between souls and spirits – and the similarities of spirits and deities.

About The Twilight Age series

Not that many decades ago English history between the fifth the eleventh centuries was deemed the 'Dark Ages', largely because of the lack of evidence. Much has changed, and scholarship has shed considerable light on the later centuries. However by then many parts of Britain were evolving into Anglo-Scandinavian culture.

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

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

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Heart of Albion

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

The Twilight Age Volume Two

Bob Trubshaw

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Preface to the first edition

This study of souls, spirits and deities is a detailed look at topics explored more superficially in *Singing Up the Country* (Trubshaw 2011). I have aimed to make this work self-contained without excessive duplication of ideas in the previous book. In principle this is an easy distinction as *Singing Up the Country* is mostly concerned with Neolithic culture of about five millennia ago, whereas this study looks back a 'mere' ten to fifteen centuries.

My overall aim is to understand the Anglo-Saxon worldview of souls and spirit-deities. To do so I have used a great number of ethnographical parallels. The end result is to strip away more recent 'assumptions' about the worldview of Anglo-Saxon Christianity and, instead, to see an all-but-seamless continuity between pre-Christian and post-conversion beliefs in both souls and spirit-deities.

Popular thinking – based on decades of academic writing – sees paganism and Christianity as deeply polarised. Recent and emerging scholarship (e.g. Russell 1994; Carver *et al* 2010) differs and, instead, sees the practices of pre-conversion and early Christianity in northern Europe and the British Isles as essentially indistinguishable from each other until perhaps as late as the eleventh century. While senior clergy attempted to impart a creed that was in some respects different to prior beliefs, the evidence suggests that the local priest and his congregation adopted a more conservative approach whereby new beliefs formed either a fairly smooth synthesis or a more contradictory syncretism.

In the process of researching and writing this study I have become increasingly aware that over the last few hundred years Christianity has developed its own worldview of souls, spirits and deities. Broadly speaking, this worldview creates less of a distinction between souls and spirits than it does between spirits and deity. As will be discussed, this is a largely singular worldview. In most traditional worldviews there is a much clearer distinction between souls and spirits, while much less of a distinction between spirits and deities.

Once this comparatively recent Christian worldview is recognised then it becomes clear that it is not the worldview of Anglo-Saxon Christians. I have found myself providing further evidence for the blurring of late pagan and early

Christian worldviews. Note that this understanding only emerged quite late in the process of writing these thoughts down – the earliest drafts assume that I would 'peel away' the Christian worldview to reveal a contrasting pagan one that had been superseded.

Suffice to say for the moment that an understanding of the ideas I am presenting here requires stepping back from the assumption that paganism and Christianity are opposed, and also stepping back from the blurring of souls with spirits, and the clear separation of deity from either. Therefore a more accurate title for this work would be *Souls and Spirit-deities in Anglo-Saxon England.* However, as much of the evidence has far wider cultural horizons (which may be of interest to those who do not share my underlying concern with Dark Age beliefs) I have opted for the title used.

Bob Trubshaw

Avebury December 2011

Preface to the revised editions

One of the wonders of electronic publishing is the comparative ease with which with which works such as this can be revised and updated. While I generally resist the temptation to make minor 'tweaks' I am aware that further research can mean that ideas deserve updating.

The second edition followed barely a year after publishing the first one. Not, I hasten to add, because of fundamental flaws in the original work – although grateful thanks to Bob Morrell for spotting two errors in captions. Rather further reading and thinking has added both breadth and depth to the original suggestions. These have been added in relevant places. Individually most of these additions are relatively insignificant. But they have resulted in the bibliography nearly doubling in length. Collectively they add more 'substance' to what might otherwise be regarded as unduly speculative.

For the third edition I have added numerous additional passages and made several minor amendments. These reflect my deepening interest in Anglo-Saxon worldviews and wider reading of the ethnographical literature relating to animism. The various books by Graham Harvey, together with Tim Ingold's book *Being Alive*, have been especially helpful; however mostly I have quoted

the sources that are the basis for some of their thinking, so neither Harvey nor Ingold get the credit in the main text that they deserve.

The third edition adds a subtitle making the overall theme of the study explicit and, perhaps more importantly, locates it within a growing series of books which make up a series called 'The Twilight Age'. The opening prelims include what might be thought of as a 'mission statement' for this series.

Discussions of *weohs* and *stapols* added to the second edition of this study have been deleted as these form the basis of Volume Three in the Twilight Age series.

There is no necessity to have read Volume One in the Twilight Age series, *Continuity of Worldviews in Anglo-Saxon England,* although this does add additional depth and significance to some of the remarks in this work.

Bob Trubshaw

Avebury January 2016

Following page:

Edwina Bridgeman's informal garden sculptures from found materials on display at the Fresh Air exhibition, Quenington, Gloucestershire, summer 2011. (Author's photograph.)

While these are undoubtedly secular pieces, they have parallels with objects in ethnographical collections where they would normally be labelled as depictions of 'spirit-deities' or such like.

Souls, spirits and deities

Books describing ethnographic fieldwork often seem to be written by people with no soul. And, while we might refer to a group of academic ethnographers as collectively having no souls, it seems odd to refer to an individual as having 'no souls' rather than not having just the one.

The reason is easy to see. Modern Western thinking, with academic paradigms often at its core, is the secularised successor to nearly two millennia of Christian thinking. And, while many aspects of the Christian worldview have shifted and changed, the idea that we have one soul has stayed constant. Secularised Western thinking may simply shift to the position that we do not have a soul, rather than the much more awkward shift to thinking that we do not have more than one soul.

Furthermore, modern Western thinking clearly separates the physical realm from the metaphysical one of souls and deities. So referring to the heart as an anatomical organ is quite distinct to referring to the heart as the seat of our emotions. However much this separation seems 'common sense' to us now, only a few generations ago this division was nothing like so well-defined. This is because 'common sense' tells us only about the usually-unchallenged myths underlying our culture, and often fails to recognise that what was common sense to, say, our great-grandparents would not seem that way today.

The first thing to emphasise is that, contrary to Christian thinking, souls and spirits are not two words for more-or-less the same thing. In traditional worldviews there are likely to be several souls and any number of different types of spirits. While the distinctions between the different souls and different spirits may not always be consistent, the distinctions between souls and spirits are much clearer.

To get an idea of just how different traditional views of the soul can be, here is Clive Tolley's outline of the beliefs of the Nanai (also known as the Hezhen, Golds or Samagir) from Siberia:

> People are possessed of three souls. In heaven, *boa*, there is a soul-tree, *omija-muoni*, where human spirits in the form of birds flit about, and may fly into a woman on earth,

> impregnating her. The shamanic rite for childless women involves the shaman flying up to heaven and selecting a strong spirit, *omija*, to bring back down for the woman. The *omija* exists for the first year of an infant's life. It has the appearance of a small bird. If the infant dies, the *omija* does not go to the world of the dead, *buni*, but flies straight back to heaven, without funeral rites. The mother may pray for the *omija* to return to her; hence she may give birth to the same child several times. In the second year the *omija* is replaced by the *yergeni*, 'sparrow', which has the form of a small person but can transform itself into a sparrow and fly away. If the *yergeni* falls ill, so does its owner. At death the *yergeni* is transformed into the *fania*, which may hover around the dead for a while, or else flee away. It cannot depart from the world until an elaborate funeral wake, *kaza*, is carried out, involving the shaman acting as psychopomp to take the soul to the world of the dead.
> (Tolley 2009: 169–70; based on Lopatin 1960: 28–30)

For the sake of completeness, the oldest known written reference to a soul is on a stele (standing stone) from south-east Turkey erected in the eighth century BCE. The incomplete inscription translates as: 'my soul that is in this stele... '

Ancient Greeks thought of souls as being like bats – or even that bats *were* souls of the dead. In contrast, Hebrews believed that souls remained underground.

Most traditional societies are non-literate so the oldest records are written down by people from literate cultures who – at least before twentieth century ethnographers – usually have a Christian, Buddhist or Muslim worldview. And, in rather too many cases, these scribes pursue a missionary agenda to promote their worldview over the 'primitive' one they are describing. While I will come to Buddhist views of the soul later, in the case of Christian writers they, understandably, have trouble recognising or accurately describing cultures with multiple souls.

Yet despite such distortions of the evidence, throughout the world an overwhelming number of cultures recognise several souls. Ethnographers attempt to differentiate these with such names as 'life soul', 'life force', 'free soul', 'external soul', 'shadow soul', 'mirror soul', 'alter ego', 'double' 'second body' or '*fylgia*'. And this multiplexity seems almost inherent – the clearest early example is from the first century AD when Plutarch, in *De Facie Lunae*, describes souls as 'multi-layered' (Brown 1978: 68–72).

Souls, spirits and deities

What is typically referred to as the 'life soul' is often associated with the breath, whereas the terms 'free soul' and 'shadow soul' refer to souls which can wander free from the body. Variants of these two souls are all-but universal, while a third soul – the bearer of 'psychic life functions' and often referred to by ethnographers as the 'ego-soul' also exists in many societies (Tolley 2009: Ch.8).

In myth and legend the free soul can go on journeys – perhaps with companions, perhaps turning into an animal, perhaps to a 'fairy realm' or to a 'heaven' or to a demonic 'sabbat'. These soul journeys may be to heal or to harm or for other reasons. The soul may even take part in battle with hostile spirits, or the spirits of storms. In different cultures the souls are subtly different, do things differently and for different reasons. Yet, with almost no exceptions, there is a belief in souls. And, unlike Christian cultures, it is 'souls' not 'soul'.

Where traditional legends and myths have survived only through Christian scribes, as with Scandinavia, then the original complexity of beliefs in souls is often blurred by the misunderstanding of people writing from the simpler Christian worldview of a single soul (more-or-less equating to the 'life soul' alone). Or the souls only appear in disguised form:

> Two ravens sit on Odin's shoulders and speak into his ear all the news they see or hear. Their names are Hugin and Munin. He sends them out at dawn to fly over all the world and they return at dinner-time. As a result he gets to find out about many events.
> Snorri Sturluson

Clearly ravens are Otherworldy birds and feature in both literature and visual art of the period. The names Hugin and Munin translate roughly as 'thought' and 'memory/mind'. Superficially, these birds are distinct from souls. But the idea that Óðinn can 'project his mind', to use modern parlance, is shared with pre-Christian Scandinavian beliefs about souls – even if Snorri, writing in the thirteenth century, would have little or no awareness of this.

Such blurring of 'soul' and 'mind' in Anglo-Saxon thinking is also revealed by King Alfred's translation of Boethius. The Latin makes a clear distinction between 'soul' and 'mind' and, while Old English has both *sapol* and *mod,* Alfred uses them interchangeably so fails to retain Boethius's distinction between soul and mind. Furthermore, Alfred also uses *mod* to translate *ego* (i.e. 'I' or 'me') (Tolley 2009: 178–9).

Souls, consciousness and 'other-than-human-persons'

Alfred is all-but anticipating someone of today who uses the words 'consciousness', 'mind', 'self-identity' and maybe even 'soul' as all-but indistinguishable terms. Indeed secular Western thought has substituted 'consciousness' for the Christian concept of 'soul'. And, just as Westerners find it hard to think of having more than one soul, we find it even harder to think of having more than one consciousness. And, outside the realms of cognitive science and neuroscience, few people are happy to believe that consciousness is just an illusion.

Here is not the place to rehearse why we think we 'have' a consciousness (for a useful summary see Danser 2005 Ch.11, which in turns draws on Searle 1997 and Blackmore 2003). Suffice to note that the same 'theory of mind' that creates our illusory sense of unified consciousness also allows us to infer the emotional responses in other people (an ability impaired in people with autistic traits). This ability also spills over into projecting anthropomorphic emotions onto pet animals, and inanimate objects such as teddy bears and other cuddly toys. The same theory of mind is exploited in artificial intelligence – both in the underlying belief that a computer can to some extent 'replicate' consciousness and in the ease with which people emotionally engage with a wide range of computer-generated avatars. One attribute which all these personae share is their anthropomorphism.

While inevitably offending all believers in deities, clearly the same theory of mind creates our concepts of deities. I am not the first to note that the wide spectrum of personality types found among deities – from macho 'smiting thine enemies' ones (such as Yahweh or Jupiter), through to compassionate all-forgiving father figures (such as Jesus), and the various female counterparts (from Kwan Yin to the Blessed Virgin Mary) with considerable diversity in between – seem to reflect entirely human aspirations. On the basis of all the available evidence, our 'theory of mind' creates notions of deities according to all-too human desires. An anthropologist from Mars would have considerable difficulty distinguishing someone praying to a statuette of the Virgin Mary from someone talking to their teddy bear. Both are ritual activities – often performed daily at the liminal time before or after going to bed – and the petitionary requests cover overlapping topics.

Left:: Spiritus *on a sepulchral monument inside Avebury church, Wiltshire. (Author's photograph.)*

*Numerous eighteenth century wall monuments to departed nobility depict the soul of the deceased as a cherubic head with a pair of wings – known as the '*spiritus*'. The head, as back in the early Neolithic in Britain and the Middle East, is seen as the dwelling place of the spirit – in these more secular days which just think of our 'consciousness' as being inside our heads, but the difference is slight.*

Centre: *'Belvoir angel' from the churchyard at Nether Broughton, north Leicestershire. (Author's photograph.)*

This winged head motif also enters lower social strata around the 1730s when slate-like Charnwood rocks (often referred to as Swithland Slate) began to be used for grave markers; some of these have similar but more stylised faces known (incorrectly) as 'Belvoir angels'. The 'Belvoir' (pronounced 'beaver') is from their origin in the Vale of Belvoir on the Leicestershire/ Nottinghamshire border, although they can be found in both those counties and as far south as Northampton, and the adjoining parts of Lincolnshire and Derbyshire.

However they are not angels but the same spiritus *– the soul of the deceased. They are close kin to the Ancient Egyptian* ba *or soul-birds.*

Right: *Ancient Egyptian statue of a* ba *or soul-bird.*

Rethinking animism

The concept of an anthropologist from Mars is counter-intuitive. So too is the notion of an 'anthropologist' from a traditional non-Western society, by which I specifically mean an interest in other cultures but not predicated on Western assumptions. Such a truly 'post-colonial' anthropologist would have one major difficulty. Why do Western people think that 'life' is a property of some things but not others? In other words, why is there an *a priori* distinction between living and non-living entities? It has become such a natural assumption in the West that few people realise that non-Western societies do not make the same assumptions. As Tim Ingold put it:

> This is because for many people, life is not an attribute of things at all. That is to say, it does not emanate from a world that already exists, populated by objects-as-such, but is rather immanent in the very process of that world's continual generation or coming-into-being.
> (Ingold 2011: 67)

This is an understanding of the world found around as far apart as the circumpolar northern hemisphere, Amazonia and in south-east Asia. Anthropologists long ago labelled it 'animistic '– and then invented a different definition of animism (Bird-David 1999), making it almost impossible to understand what these cultures actually believed. Graham Harvey's re-appraisal of animism (Harvey 2005) reveals, this is far more than 'belief in spirits'. This is because, as Ingold incisively observes, animism is not a 'belief *about* the world' but an unquestioned assumption about being *in* it.

> This could be described as a condition of being alive to the world.
> [...] The animacy of the lifeworld, in short, is not the result of an infusion of spirit into substance, or of agency into materiality, but is rather ontologically prior to their differentiation.
> (Ingold 2011: 67–8)

Ingold's insight is quite central to the discussions in this book and, seemingly, reflects some of the ideas of the philosopher Henri Bergson (1859–1940), whose theories include a vital spirit or *elan vital* permeating the universe. This is a worldview shared by children around the world. Only in Western cultures are they taught to reject this viewpoint – and even then the rejection is only partial, as many 'educated adults' act differently, at least some of the time.

This study too is, in large part, about looking at the world without making any cultural assumptions about the distinction between living and non-living beings However, because of the widespread misunderstanding of how 'animistic' cultures actually think about the world, I have avoided using the word animism.

Rethinking persons

Somewhere between ten and twenty percent of people had or have a variety of 'invisible friends' and 'intimate friends', such as imaginary childhood companions (see Hallowell 2007 for one of the most insightful studies). Before them there were the *daimons, genii,* guardian angels known as long ago as late antiquity (Brown 1981: 50–1; 55). In recent decades guardian angels have become almost commonplace in the West.

This whole spectrum of 'other-than-human persons', souls and spirit-deities are manifestations of the same 'theory of mind', the same responses to externalising our desires in an anthropomorphic manner. However to deem any of these – from humble souls through to omnipresent supreme beings – as 'nothing but' mental projections is not my purpose. Rather, I will continue to explore these person-like 'manifestations' as beings of interest in their own right.

In English the word 'person' has a fairly narrow sense, whereas in non-Western cultures there is often a sense that human persons are just part of a spectrum of person-like entities. Irving Hallowell invented the phrase 'other-than-human-persons' to describe Ojibwe beliefs (Hallowell 1960, discussed in Harvey 2005 33–40) and it is an especially useful phrase which provides a most helpful way to think collectively of souls, spirits and deities.

Souls and ghosts

Just as two or more souls are almost ubiquitous outside the West, so too is the distinction between souls and spirits. Traditional beliefs about whether or not souls can become 'ghosts' are very varied. But such ghosts remain linked to the ideas about souls and, unlike Christian concepts of ghosts, are not deemed to part of the spirit realm. However, unlike Christians, traditional cultures may have difficulty distinguishing spirits from gods.

However Christianity is more complex than its creeds might suggest. On the one hand Christianity asserts that there is one God, so spirits and souls are something else. However Christianity also declares that the 'godhead' is a Holy Trinity of God the Father, God the Son and a much less well-understood entity called either the Holy Ghost or the Holy Spirit, which is linked to the breath, revealing the Trinitatian doctrine, developed in fourth century, retains clear links with Classical paganism (see Volume One of The Twilight Age).

Christ in Judgement. The early twelfth century tympanum over the west door of the abbey church at Conques, western France.

So, Christianity too has inherited some of this pre-Christian complexity. Just as Classical Greek religious beliefs reveal traces of their origins among earlier Thracian and Iranian tribes, so too Christianity reveals a synthesis with the ideas it claims to have superseded.

Further complexity about souls is integral to one of the key beliefs of medieval Christianity – that on the Day of Judgement everyone's bones will be reunited with their souls and they will be resurrected. Analysis of this belief usually focuses on whether not a person's soul has been deemed to be redeemed of sin and thereby eligible for this resurrection. There may also be some concerns about how few bones need to be retained to effect this resurrection – the practical outcome was that skulls and long bones made their way into charnel houses or crypts while the rest of the bones were repeatedly disturbed by later burials as the churchyards became ever-more crowded. But what is ignored is that this Christian creed requires a belief that both the body and the soul in some sense 'live on' until the Day of Judgement and the final resurrection. This is much more like the 'bone soul'/'breath soul' dualism seen in non-Western cultures. Indeed, in some Native American societies, the soul is thought to reside in bone marrow – or even that the bone marrow *is* the soul (Hall 1997: 30).

Despite Christianity's apparent change in emphasis to a single soul, the doctrine of the Last Judgement again suggests at least some degree of 'carry

over' of a belief in the posthumous 'identity' of the bones which equates to widespread traditional beliefs in a 'bone soul'.

While the idea of an individual having a single guardian angel was well-established by the twelfth century (based on Matthew 18:10, although the reference is to 'angels' rather than a single one) when souls are depicted on memorials, even in later centuries, they mostly appear as *pairs* (Tudor-Craig 2009: 134).

Depictions of Christ in Judgement are fairly common in northern Europe. As Karen Bek-Pedersen has pointed out, this image seems to favoured because it sustains a pre-Christian worldview in which the *nornir* also acted in quasi-legal judgement. 'Thus the legal mode of thought was maintained, only in a change semi-Christianised guise provided by the Gospel itself.' (Bek-Pedersen 2011: 93–4) Once again we have plausible evidence for the carry over of a pagan worldview into the Christian era.

The spirit-deities of the Orient

'Unpacking' the cultural biases of Christianity can be tricky – it's rather like trying to look at the outside of a goldfish bowl while still swimming inside it. Sometimes it's much easier to understand other people's cultures than the ones we've grown up in. On the basis that anyone reading this will have no recollections of living in India about 2,000 to 2,300 years ago and practising Buddhism, this era is about as 'other' to modern Western thinking as we can go and still have reasonably detailed information. A small number of texts and carvings survive to offer some insights. They reveal that by 2,000 years ago

> When observed in their essential nature, all the mountains, rocks, trees, and rivers appear as magical realms or deities.
> Lelung Shepe Dorje, *The Delightful True Stories of the Supreme Land of Pemako,* 1729
>
> ... landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock.
> Simon Schama *Landscape and Memory,* 1995

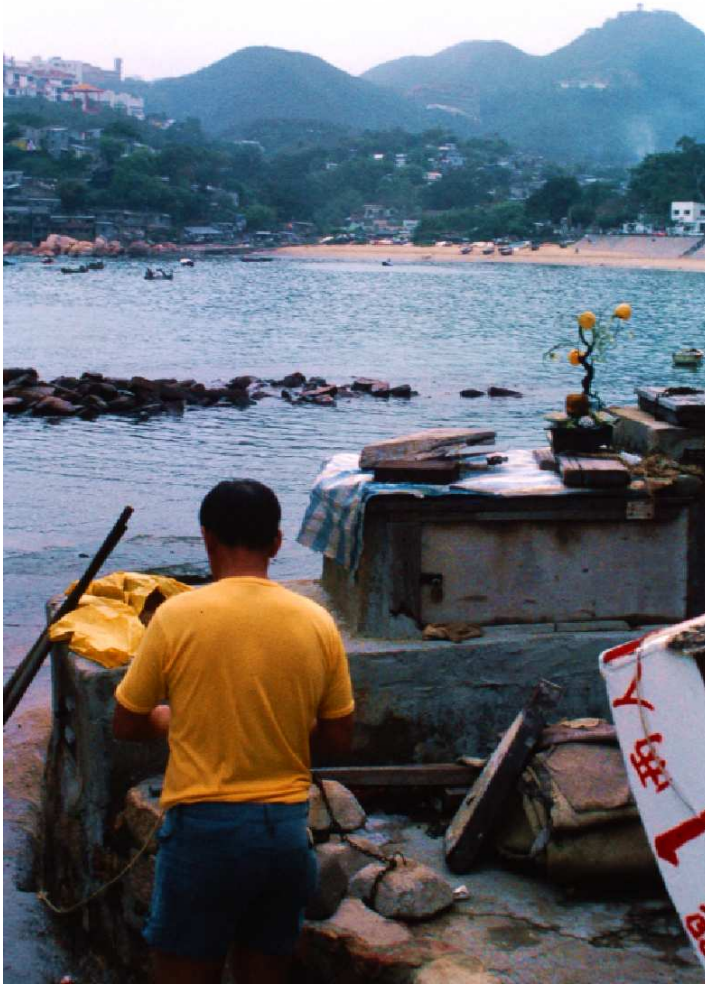
If we think of 'memory' as just an artefact of our here-and-now processes of consciousness then the meaning and significance of the early eighteenth century Tibetan lama blur into the viewpoint of the late twentieth century secular academic.

Antique Chinese incense burners. They always represent the sacred mountain.

we have gone back far enough in the history of Buddhism for boddhisatvas to be in the future. Instead, various 'spirit-deities' are venerated.

Early texts and carvings from this pre-boddhisatva era form the basis of a wonderful book by Robert DeCaroli called *Haunting the Buddha: Indian popular religions and the formulation of Buddhism* (DeCaroli 2004). At the risk of over-simplifying DeCaroli's discussions, he looked at Buddhist texts and statues from the three centuries before the Christian era. In particular, he looked at the many and varied Sanskrit names for ghosts and spirits – and the way they had been grouped together in all sorts of different ways by different writers. He noted that these assorted 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*). Collectively he refers to all these ghosts, spirits, demi-gods and spirits of place as 'spirit-deities'. Later they would blur into boddhisatvas.

DeCaroli spends considerable time establishing that 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. By its very nature, *laukika* varies from place-to-place. But it always involves the worship of a local spirit-deity (collectively termed the Gramadevata and often thought of as a local manifestation of the Mother Goddess known as Mahadevi; see Morris 2006: 124, 130–4; Chandola 2007). Unlike Buddhism or



Fisherman's waterside shrine, Hong Kong, March 1987. (Author's photograph.)

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 *shakti* of the spirit-deity. I'll return to the concept of *shakti* later.

Much as DeCaroli's wonderful study deserves more attention, for present purposes I want to move swiftly on to another unique insight into poplar Oriental rituals. Again this offers better understanding of the centuries just before the Christian era. But the country is China and the popular practice is known – at least to Westerners – as Taoism. In the early 1960s the Belgian scholar Kristofer Schipper became the first Westerner to be trained in the inherited family traditions of the Taoist religion. No ordinary Chinese person would call themselves a Taoist – only a trained master is referred to this way (Schipper 2000: 3). And, until recently, when a word with the literal meaning

A tree with kami*, Japan.*

of 'sectarian doctrine' was invented to translate the English word 'religion', the Chinese did not have a word which equated to the Western notion of religion – exactly as the Indian word *laukika* refers only to customary or prevalent practice, without the dogmatic associations of the Western word 'religion'.

Even less so than Indian *laukika*, Chinese customary practice has no faith or creed or dogma. The customary practices include performing the essential rituals at the four most important annual feasts: New Year; honouring the earth god in spring and autumn; and feeding the hungry spirits (or 'orphan souls') on the fifteenth day of the seventh moon. These rituals honour Heaven, Earth and the local 'god-saint' (Schipper 2000: 22–3). In villages without a formally-trained priest, one family is elected each year to organise the rituals. While such rituals can become elaborate, the only essential requirement is an incense-burner (a metal or ceramic container, almost always antique) which is regarded as a representation of the sacred mountain.

While such rituals were repressed during the Maoist years, they survived in Taiwan and Hong Kong, and have regained importance in mainland China during recent decades. Sadly the many Taoist monasteries in China did not survive the Cultural Revolution and seem unlikely to reappear.

What is clear from Schipper's intimate knowledge of both contemporary Taiwanese practices and the early Taoist literature is that these locally-based venerations focus on what he calls 'local god-saints' in a manner closely analogous to DeCaroli's descriptions of spirit-deities in early Buddhism and the localised Gramadevata and Mahadevi worship among rural Hindus today.

Just as Taoism is used by Western academics to refer to the nameless localised Chinese customary practices, so too Hinduism is a word invented by Westerners to refer collectively to the religious activities of the Indus peoples;

only with the rise of Indian nationalism in the second half of the nineteenth century was 'Hinduism' used by Indians themselves to refer to their religion.

In a similar way the name Shinto has been imposed on the originally unnamed spirit-worship which characterise pre-Buddhist religion in Japan. Shinto has no gods, scriptures or a founder, so it fits in poorly with Western notions of religion. Shinto rituals honour *kami* – which denotes a combination of transcendent power, otherness and mystery – which manifests through all sorts of forms and places, as a tree or a rock or through a powerful person.

Although Japanese spirits are often collectively referred to as *kami*, strictly *kami* are only the most powerful of four types of spirits. There are also *tama* (ancestral ghosts); neglected ghosts (equating to the hungry ghosts and orphan souls of the Chinese worldview); and rather nasty 'witch-animals', of which the fox is the most prevalent.

Although Shinto was recognised as a distinct practice many centuries ago, it happily coexists with Buddhism and other religions – Shinto followers often also practise Buddhism simultaneously. Shinto has changed considerably – more than once – as a result of Japanese political upheavals. In the nineteenth century Shinto was adopted as a 'national religion' (in the same way the Church of England is respected in British state rituals) but historically – and in local practice – Shinto is much more a 'grass roots' tradition than anything 'top down'.

Feeding the hungry ghosts

So far I've simply tried to establish that in India, China and Japan there are deeply-rooted local practices. Although matching rather poorly to Western notions of religion, the core rituals respect local deities or spirits. Indeed, in most cases, they are an amalgam best referred to as 'spirit-deity', as English words distinguish these concepts rather than expressing some sort of sense of commonality. The phrase 'holy spirit' has this sense too, but its Christian connotations confuse the issue.

Before I look at parallels to such spirit-deities in northern Europe, I would like to look more closely at this idea of 'hungry ghosts' or orphan souls. To understand hungry ghosts we must first make the leap outside the Christian one-soul worldview. As already noted, the Chinese worldview normally thinks of two souls. The bone soul (*p'o*) remains with the bones and is treasured by living descendants. The *shen* soul leaves the body soon after death and is usually reincarnated. However there are more *shen* souls than opportunities to be reborn so some of these are 'orphaned' without a body and as such become 'hungry ghosts' or *ku-hun*. (This is the more traditional view – note that contemporary Chinese concepts of the soul are more overtly based on the

yin-yang dualism and think in terms of *hun* [heavenly; *yang*] and *po* [earthly; *yin*] souls (Robinet 1997: 13–14; 51).)

This idea is part of Buddhist and, to a lesser extent, Hindu popular religious practice – the Sanskrit word *preta* is usually translated as 'hungry ghost'. It is also part of Tibetan Yungdrung Bön, where the 'hungry ghosts' are called *yidag, yi-dvag* or *yi-dak*, and Shinto beliefs, where there are two distinct types of such ghosts. Hungry ghosts were also known in the Middle East as described in the apocryphal Book of Enoch.

How old the notion is can only be speculated. DeCaroli has discovered Buddhist sculptures from around 300 BCE with depictions of hungry ghosts, and these carvings are contemporary with the oldest parts of the Book of Enoch, so the idea must have widely known by this time. I have previously discussed how the origins of related ideas about souls may go back to at least the end of the Mesolithic, with Neolithic henges acting as zones for souls-awaiting-rebirth (Trubshaw 2011: Ch.9) in a manner akin to the way the Nanai think of souls waiting on the soul-tree for their next incarnation, as described earlier.

I am steadily collecting references to academic archaeologists who refer to henges as places of the dead (Parker Pearson and Ramilisonina 1998) or 'gatherings of ancestors' (Gillings and Pollard 1999: 184), prehistoric stone monuments as 'spirit bones' or 'stone bodies' (Ingrid Fuglestvedt in Goldhahn *et al* 2010) or 'as either representing deities or ancestors or embodying spiritual forces' (Hutton 2012: 359, based on Scarre 2011). I suspect this is a bandwagon which will attract more followers in the future.

Kami, tse, lolos, boolya, koochie, arangquiltha and *sumangat*

Just as hungry ghosts are known as *ku-hun, preta, yidag, gaki* or *jikininki* in different languages, so too the Japanese concept of *kami* can be recognised in other cultures. The most significant aspect of *kami* is that it exists 'out there' but *manifests* through something such as a rock or tree, or such people as a powerful politician or business leader. For reasons I will explain later, I think of *kami* as 'potency' rather than by overused words such as 'energy' or 'power'.

The Tsangpo Gorge in Pemako, one of the remotest parts of Tibet, is thought by Buddhist lamas to be the body of the goddess Dorje Pagmo and the gathering place of spirit-deities called *dakas* and *dakinis*. Within the Tsangpo Gorge is a small lake which 'shamans' (as the explorer Ian Baker calls them) visit 'on the August full moon to draw power from the clear black waters' (Baker 2004: 27). Quite who these 'shamans' drawing down the moon might be is left unclear, as Baker does not meet them, but clearly they are distinct

Shiva and Shakti.

from Buddhist lamas; presumably they are practitioners of the pre-Buddhist Bön rituals of Tibet. The power which is being drawn down is called *tse* in Tibetan. *Tse* is also what the *dakas* and *dakinis* bring to the Gorge – it is *tse* which empowers the body of the goddess who is the gorge. There is also a different Tibetan word, *tummo*, which means 'inner fire' although, confusingly, the same word in Sanskrit denotes the 'highest yoga tantra' (Anuttarayoga Tantra or Anuyoga). But as this yoga practice is aimed at controlling the Kundalini energy (which could easily be imagined as 'inner fire') then presumably the Tibetan and Sanskrit words are cognate.

In New Guinea the word *lolos* denotes something closely akin to *kami* or *tse*. Indigenous Australian languages have the words *boolya, koochie* and *arangquiltha*. Malays know it as *sumangat* or *semangat* (Endicott 1970: 34).

And then there's *mana* and *mauri*

Among Polynesians the word is *mana*. The Wikipedia entry for *mana* tells us this is:

> … an indigenous Pacific islander concept of an impersonal force or quality that resides in people, animals, and (debatably) inanimate objects. […] It has commonly been interpreted as "the stuff of which magic is formed," as well as the substance of which souls are made.
> (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mana; accessed 10 Oct 2011)

Sadly I have not been able to establish whether or not it was an ethnographer who invented the seemingly-apt description 'the stuff of which magic is formed' as this way of referring to *mana* has been quoted by hundreds of websites – partly because *mana* as a synonym for fantasy magic has been widely adopted by the creators of computer games.

Marcel Mauss provides an extended discussion of *mana* in his 1902 book *A General Theory of Magic* (substantially revised in 1950). Based on the writing of J.N.B. Hewiit, a pioneer ethnographer with Huron (Native American) parents, Mauss refers to *mana* as 'magic potence' (Mauss 1902 [2001: 148]). Mauss also observes that:

> The quality of *mana* – and of the sacred – appertains to things which are given a very definite position in society, often to the extent of their being considered to exist outside the normal world and normal practice.
> (Mauss 1902 [2001: 147])

The most famous of Claude Lévi-Strauss's earlier publications is an extended critique of Mauss's book on magic, and much of his discussion concerns *mana*. As David Pocock outlines in his introduction to the 2001 edition of Mauss's classic, in hindsight Lévi-Strauss's objections need to be tempered. Certainly Pocock's discussion and Mauss's original remarks are essential reading to understand *mana* and, more especially, the substantial influence both Mauss's and Lévi-Strauss's writings have had on Western perceptions of *mana* and the 'magic potence' it denotes.

When a Maori describes *mana* things quickly get more complex. T.P. Tawhai first of all notes that *mana* is just one part of Te Po, a never-ending process which sees all of creation as a kin group. Within this overall Te Po, 'humans consist of a tangible and intangible part.' The intangible part is the *wairua* or 'soul'; this is related to *mauri*. A Maori may speak of the *mauri* of a carving

or of a powerful orator. For Maoris *mauri* has the sense of 'essence' and 'potential', but only in the sense of being unrealised. '*Mauri* construed very briefly in terms of power is *mana*. The privileges and constraints that accompany the possession of *mana* is the *tapu* [origin of the English word 'taboo']. And the dread or awe that surrounds the possession of *mana* is *wehi*.' (Tawhai 2002: 242–5).

The 'dreadfulness' of *mana* is a close match to the medieval European sense of the numinous, which also was 'awful' as much as 'awesome'. Note too that the possession of *mana* brings with it obligations. This seems to be consistent with at least some other cultures, although often overlooked in Western accounts.

In recent years Graham Harvey has discussed the meaning of *mana* with Maoris and suggests that thinking of it as 'potential' risks making invalid comparisons with electrical potential and similar metaphors. Instead, the Maori sense of *mana* is somewhere between charisma and 'gift' – in the way we use the word 'gift' to refer to a 'gifted child' (Harvey 2013: 107; see also Mataira 2000).

There is some overlap between this sense of gift and older ideas about the 'grace of God'. Kenneth Morrison has looked at the way the Christian concepts of grace have been absorbed into indigenous American cultures. He discusses specifically how the Yaqui sense of *tekia* originally meant 'gift, talent, ability, obligation' (note how this matches the *tapu* associated with Maori *mana*) but became the word used to translate Christian grace. Interestingly the word also came to denote the soul after death (Morrison 2002: 116).

There are several broad issues which are relevant here. The sense of *mana* and its near-synonyms in many other cultures has become seriously 'dumbed down' in much Western literature, academic as well as popular. The actual concepts of *mana* are both themselves complex, and furthermore are linked to other complex ideas which make up the cosmology and worldviews of a society.

Ethnographers can normally only offer a 'snapshot' of a culture at one specific time. However the ability for all these complex worldviews to evolve in response to cultural contacts cannot be ignored. Indeed their complexity is likely to be in part a result of external influences, in the same way as early Christianity is a syncretism of Semitic and Graeco-Roman culture (and, if as the evidence from the Essene sects suggests, contact with early Buddhism in India), while medieval Europe is culturally enriched by interactions with the Islamic world, leading directly to the Renaissance. The lack of documentary evidence does not mean that 'traditional' cultures are devoid of the same

richness of renewal as there have always been cultural exchanges between societies.

The Maoris seem far more enlightened than 'old school' Western anthropologists in this respect when they recognise *mana* as part of the Te Po, the never-ending process of creation. Most traditional societies have ancient myths about ongoing creation, whereas modern academics usually thinks along concepts of the construction of social reality which have their roots in the mid-1960s and became a key part of much post-modernist thinking. The difference between Te Po and po-mo is, in my opinion, more of idiom than underlying ontology. *Sub specie aeterni,* both are 'creation myths'. (See Trubshaw 2012 for more thoughts about *The Process of Reality*.)

Manekisu, manitou, Wah'Kon, ashe and *shakti*

With those thoughts in mind I want to look at some more near-synonyms of *mana.* In Florida the native word *manekisu* describes someone 'endowed with *mana*'. New World tribes either side of the Canadian border speak not of *mana* but of *manitou*. But note that this is *not* an 'impersonal force' but a synonym for an other-than-human person (Hallowell 1960; reprinted in Harvey 2002: 42). This seems to be the sense of *manekisu* also. In contrast, among the Osage (one of the Sioux-speaking tribes) the word *Wah'Kon* denotes the 'mystery force'.

In West African traditions and their diaspora the word *ashe* (or *ache* or *ase,* etc) denotes a power which can be 'stimulated and utilised as if it were a vitalising force'. (Harvey 2005: 131) For example, in Voudon (or Voodoo) the central idea of *vodou* denotes a spirit, deity and 'mystical force' (Morris 2006: 194).

If we look at Hindu beliefs, all the gods – even the most powerful ones – acquire their power and 'potency', *shakti* or *prakriti,* from the divine female creative power (often known, understandably, as Shakti). Indeed, one of three major traditions within Hinduism is known as Shaktism, and devotees worship the goddess Shakti as the Supreme Being. In the Hindu tradition of Shaivism, Shiva's *shakti* comes from his female counterpart, Parvati. In Vaishnavism, Vishnu's feminine complement is Lakshmi. But both Shiva and Vishnu rely on the *shakti* they 'channel' from their divine feminine 'other half'.

Here is an 'insider's' view of Shakti:

> The goddess is commonly addressed as *Mata* (Mother) and *Devi* (Goddess) but in her supreme power aspect she is known as *Shakti* (Energy). This energy activates every living being, including the gods. Without this energy the gods would be

Ch'i is neither matter nor spirit.
It existed before the world
And everything in the world is only an aspect of it.

When condensed *chi* becomes life,
When diluted *chi* becomes indefinite potential.

When *chi* expands it turns and animates the world;
While turning it spreads itself into every corner of space and time.
It has no detectable existence except for the forms it takes
and in the transformations of these forms.
When these forms die they become *ch'i* once again.

Ch'i gives form to [*zao*] and transforms [*hua*] everything.
Zaohua is creation without a creator:
it defines the form but changes it constantly.

The only constant reality is *ch'i* in its transformations:
the constant coming and going
from diluted and undetectable
to condensed and manifest.

Ch'i is like infinite potential energy:
the myriad things are nothing but *ch'i*.
Yet when the myriad things disappear
the *ch'i* remains.

(paraphrase of Robinet 1967: 7–8

Energy and matter are not distinct: both reside in the notion of *ch'i*.
We can call *ch'i* both 'vital energy' and 'vital breath'.
The heaviest *ch'i* is found in mountains and rocks.
The most ethereal *ch'i* is found in inner tranquillity.
In between, *ch'i* is found in the life-giving fluids of all living things;
It is found too in our rages and lusts.

When most concentrated yet refined and ethereal *ch'i* is known as *ching*.
We call *ching* 'vital essence'.
This vital essence manifests in three realms of the universe.
This vital essence resembles the very Way itself.

We cannot perceive this vital essence,
Yet we see what it accomplishes.
It is a constantly moving power
Which comes and goes in our mind.
When we store *ching* within our heart or mind
We become sages.

When this vital essence is numinous we call it *ching shen*;
Some call this 'psychic energy'.
With *ching shen* may come *shen ming*.
Shen ming is 'numinous clarity'.
Numinous clarity is a profound state of mind.
This profound state of mind is always fleeting.

(paraphrase of Roth 1999: 42–3; 101–3)

> powerless and the entire universe would be lifeless. Thus, *Shakti* is simultaneously a mother and the Universal Mother. She comes down to earth to destroy evil forces that torment the inhabitants of the triple universes (heaven, earth, and the nether worlds) and brings law and order out of chaos. As a result she assumes various names and forms.
> (Chandola 2007: 1)

Ch'i or *qi*

The Chinese word *ch'i* (also spelt *chi* and *qi*) has the literal meaning of 'breath', 'air' or 'gas' but is understood as the life energy or life force of any living creature, which is released back to the universal source after death. As with concepts of *mana* for a Polynesian, for a Chinese person *ch'i* has complex additional meanings, such as 'auspiciousness' (Hong-Key 1982: 78). The sum total of these meanings makes *ch'i* essentially untranslatable (Berthrong 2011, citing A.C. Graham and H.D. Roth).

Taoist priests 'recycle' old *ch'i* (*ku-ch'i*) for the benefit of the community (Lagerwey 1987: 11) while a cosmic origin is implied when *ch'i* is considered to wax and wane according to the cycles of both the moon and the sun (Puett 2002: 207). Practitioners of Chinese martial arts are encouraged to develop *ch'i*. *Ch'i* is also key to the system of geomancy known as *feng shui*.

Just to add to the complication, the fundamental concepts of *qi* are also found in all other cultures influenced by China, and acquire additional significances as part of the evolution. For example, is *ch'i* is the *ki* of Reiki, developed in Japan during the 1920s from various ideas, including traditional Chinese medicine – where *ch'i* is of central importance. Reiki combines the Japanese words *rei* 'soul, spirit' and *ki* 'vital energy'.

Strip away a great many Western misconceptions about *ch'i* and what is clear is that this is something which is 'out there', manifesting in various different ways. *Ch'i* seems to be all-but synonymous with early Taoist's concepts of *ching*. *Ching* is a key feature of their cosmologies as 'a generative substance of cosmic proportions' usually translated into English as 'vital essence' or 'vital energy'. This is, of course, the eponymous *ching* of the *Tao te Ching*. It resembles but in some subtle way is distinct from the *Tao* or 'Way' itself. The *ching* is the 'manifestation' of the more abstract power or force that is the *Tao* (see Trubshaw 2012 for a more extended summary; see also Roth 1999: 101–7 for a fully-informed discussion of *ching* in early Taoism).

Interestingly, one of the leading scholars of early Taoism, John Lagerwey, translates the Chinese word *ling* as 'potent', most commonly encountered in

the expression 'man is (the most) potent'. This is a key idea in Taoism. Indeed Lagerwey goes so far as to state:

> ... the simplest way to define Taoism is as 'the religion which teaches how to nurture and perfect potency'.
> (Lagerwey 1987: 6)

The significance of translating *ling* as 'potency' will greatly increase when I discuss further the Christian concept of *potentia*. While Lagerwey resists referring to fundamental Taoist beliefs as 'Tantric' his description (Lagerwey 1987: 6–7) of a sexualised cosmology leaves little to the imagination. Jeffrey Kripal, Professor of Philosophy and Religious Thought at the University of Chicago, is less circumspect. He has repeatedly referred to the Tantrism at the core of both Taoism and Tibetan Buddhism (Kripal 2007).

Potentia and *numina*

In the same way *ch'i* is thought to be all-pervasive so similarly (but contrary to Western misconceptions) we should not think of the local spirit-deities in Japan as the *source* of the *kami*. Instead *kami* – this sense of 'otherworldly potency' – *is manifested through* the local spirit-deity. In the same way the early Church fathers had a word for the power manifested through saints and their relics – *potentia* (see Brown 1981: 107–113). This is cognate with such modern concepts as 'potential energy' and 'electrical potential' – although these can, of course, be measured in a way that a saint's *potentia* has yet to be quantified. 'Potential' and 'potency' are both from the Latin *potentem* ('potent').

Potentia seems to derive from a broader sense of *numina*, inherited from the Classical pagan worldview. The sense of energy from 'out there' manifesting through a local spirit-deity continues to fit perfectly with Christian doctrine – except that in the Christian worldview it is the power of Christ which is transmitted by (and, at least until the Reformation, only by) saints and the ordained clergy. In contrast, *numina* seemingly has no specific origin, it was just the *elan vital* which permeated the cosmos, as with so many other traditional societies.

The modern English word 'numinous' – denoting something divine or spiritual – derives from the Latin words *numen* (singular) and *numina* (plural). Depending on when, and in what context, these words are used they can have several overlapping meanings:

- an influence perceptible by mind but not by senses
- a potential guiding the course of events in a particular place or in the whole world;
- a guardian spirit;

Are scarecrows an unwitting carry-over from pre-Christian idols?

An entry in the scarecrow competition, Wymeswold Garden Walkabout,, Leicestershire, June 2007. (Author's photograph.)

- 'godhead';
- the divine power of a living emperor.

They are not mutually contradictory, of course; rather some are more 'active' and others more 'passive'. An additional sense of *numen* is encountered in Roman philosophical and religious thought. The sense of a numinous presence was considered to be present in all the seemingly mundane actions of the natural world, although more noticeable in places dedicated to the deities. (See Trubshaw 2012–14 for a much more extended discussion of *numina* and *potentia*)

Modern historians, such as Ronald Hutton, refer to Iron Age groves (*nemetona*) as places with *numina* or simply as 'numinous places'. So far as I am aware such historians do not concern themselves with the source of such *numina*. It

is just 'there' in certain places, more so than in other places. A bit like churches being more numinous than, say, cinemas even in modern secular thinking.

The idea of *potentia* manifesting through saints steadily become a core belief of Christianity, long before canonisation needed to be authorised by the Pope. So, when the local abbot or bishop died, he would often quickly become sanctified. Such local saints' shrines – with all the expectations of healing and other miracles which went with – are all-but indistinguishable from the 'numinous' shrines of spirit-deities previously discussed for Buddhism and Shinto.

As I said at the beginning, sometimes it is easier to understand other people's cultures than the ones closer to home. And sometimes we simply do not ask the right questions about our own culture. Augustine of Hippo in the 390s demanded that congregations refrain from feasting at either family tombs or the graves of martyrs because this was too much like the pagans whose 'feast days with their idols,' as Augustine put it, 'used to be spent in an abundance of eating and drinking'. Ambrose of Milan had made a similar request a decade earlier and Jerome was to repeat Augustine's request a decade after. (Brown 1981: 26) But history tells us that these were vain attempts. Saints' feast days – which had no Christian precedents and could only be direct successors to pagan customs – became a dominant aspect of medieval European Christianity. Only in the nineteenth century were their Protestant successors – church ales and wakes – finally suppressed, although the early twentieth century 'Pleasant Sunday Afternoons' and the more recent village fêtes and garden walkabouts are their genteel and secularised successors.

While a scarecrow-making competition as part of an annual village garden open day is clearly not a revival of erecting pagan idols – although I wonder just how much a scarecrow's construction owes to what the pagan Anglo-Saxons called *tre mathr* ('tree men') who were ritually re-dressed each year – there is a continuity from pre-Christian annual feasts to the dead, through Catholic saints' feast days, to post-Reformation church ales. While the meaning and significance of the customs have changed repeatedly, there is a continuity of customs which links modern community 'fundraising events' with the pagan activities Augustine failed to curb.

What interests me most is that the reason saints were venerated and feasted is because of the belief in their *potentia*. Graham Jones has written a moving account of visiting the shrine of the late fourth century founder of a Syrian Orthodox community in a remote part of south-east Turkey which led him to state:

> Understandings about *potentia*, the supernatural power of the saint... have changed little over the best part of two millennia.' (Jones 2003: 210)

Later in this work I will look in more detail about how the *potentia* of saints – the underlying reason for their cults and feasts – links to European pre-Christian ideas. Suffice to say *potentia* and its pre-Christian precursors are sufficiently similar to other cultures' ideas of a 'mystery power' which manifested through specific places and people to include them in the same spectrum of belief which spans *kami, tse, mana, ashe, ch'i, shakti, Wah'Kon* and other ethnographic examples.

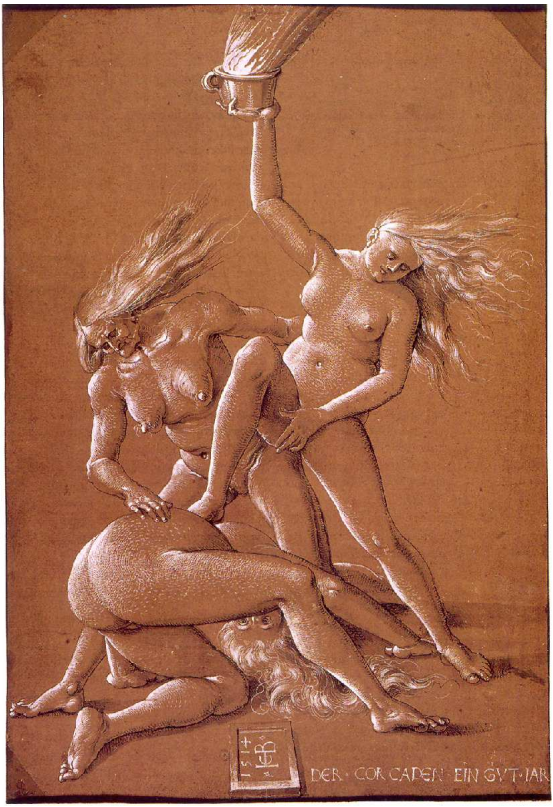
East is not West

It is easy to make generalisations to show how different Eastern concepts of religion are from Western concepts. But generalisations are often only true apart from assorted exceptions. So I'd like to look at some of the major differences. Firstly, as already noted, neither Chinese nor Indian languages have a word which equates exactly to the Western word 'religion'. So clearly there is a fundamental distinction!

Western religions see the world as comprising both a material and non-material reality. This dualism persists in secular thinking. Crucially it gave rise to Descartes' belief that we have both a body and a mind, something which persists in Western 'common sense' views of the world. But the idea that the mind is a 'thinking thing' separate from the body it occupies simply does not fit the facts. Instead we should think of mind not as an entity but as an embodied process. 'Mind in this sense is the process of cognition involved in the process of life.' (Roth 2008: 48)

Eastern worldviews share none of these Western dualisms and see the world as one kind of reality; this is known as 'monism'. In monist worldviews the divine is not separate from creation. Indeed there may no word which equates to the Western sense of a divine entity. Without a primordial creator then the 'beginning' and 'end' of the universe are not important, and oriental religions often teach that nothing useful can be said about such matters. Such worldviews often suggest that the universe has always existed and always will.

However change is inherent in Eastern worldviews – although not necessarily for the better or for the worse. This is in contrast to Western ideas that change is inherently a 'fall from grace' (whether a 'Paradise Lost' or more casual remarks about 'the good old days') with this fall either countered by the Christian creed of salvation or a more secular belief in the triumphalism of Western society. Although often overlooked, the origin of this worldview lies



Left: *Witches concocting an ointment to be used for flying to the Sabbath by Hans Baldung Grien, 1514.*

Right: *New Year's Wish with Three Witches (1514) by Hans Baldung (1485–1545).*

Illustrations such as these spread the lurid ideas about witchcraft invented by the Inquisition. Western society continues to demonise its Other – and those deemed to be Other continue to proliferate.

with Plato's belief that changes in the material world are damaging or degrading, while only the realm of Ideals (such as the idea of God) are unchanging. (For a discussion of how Platonic Ideals contrast with the prior Heraclitian worldview of 'everything is change' – and the close similarities with contemporary Taoist worldviews – see Trubshaw 2011 Ch.10.)

Dualism is inherent in Christianity and Judaism, where the Divine is regarded as transcendent and in some sense different from creation. God is the Father of His creation. This creation myth is associated with a linear concept of time, from a divine act of creation through to divinely-ordained ending, usually messy. In the Bible these are the books of Genesis and Revelation. Secular

worldviews share this and nasty endings are a familiar trope of contemporary Western politics and society. For several decades the West lived with the fear of a nuclear apocalypse (and the critics of nuclear power still voice these) and, when this threat abated, the media became obsessed with the threat of massive ecological changes as a result of climate change. When I first wrote this the media was focused the challenges posed by the imminent breakdown of one or more major currencies; the centre of attention has now shifted to the consequences of assorted conflicts in the Midde East. All these scenarios have 'bad guys' (in the case of the rhetoric of hard-core ecologists, everyone except themselves...) and we will all meet a nasty end unless we find salvation in the belief systems of CND, the Green Party, the Occupy protesters, etc. But, from the perspective of non-Western worldviews, all these scenarios seem like thinly-disguised Christian eschatology and soteriology.

Different ways to be an individual

Oriental worldviews also have a different sense of what it is to be an individual. In the last century or two the West has created a strong sense of 'individualism'. Eastern religions generally see the separateness of humans from creation and from one another as an illusion needing to be overcome. From a Western perspective it seems that the individual is not really real. But that reveals more about Western notions of 'reality'… The oriental blurred sense of identity runs contrary to Christian beliefs in the 'accountability' of the person – or at least their soul – at the Last Judgement. Individual identity – during life and after death – is essential in the Christian scheme of things and this sharp focus on individuality has greatly influenced secular Western attitudes. While increasing individualism correlates closely with the influence of Western culture on non-Western societies, even quite highly Westernised societies, such as Japan, retain strong traditions of group-identity and family ties.

The Western worldview of a single life and afterlife is distinct from widespread Eastern beliefs in reincarnation. While oriental worldviews are more relaxed about lapses from idealised standards of moral behaviour, because the Western belief is that we only get one chance to get it right, self-appointed moralists devote huge effort to attempting to sort out the lives of others. While preaching on the problem of evil was once the preferred option, now political intervention and endless legislation attempts to ensure that everyone does what is perceived to be the 'right thing'.

While it is perhaps not surprising that a Christian worldview underpins ostensibly secular British society – although we need to step out of the 'goldfish bowl' to see just how extensive this underpinning still is – it is more surprising that it persists in the corridors of academe which profess to take a comparative view of world religions. Yet, as Harold Roth has recently argued

(Roth 2008), even academic theologians and anthropologists base their fundamental ideas about religion on a belief in god. Which rather falls apart when Buddhism and Chinese religion have no gods in the Western sense.

Roth's personal involvement in Buddhism and Taoism is combined with incisive intellectual insights, thereby stripping away what he considers undue 'unreflective ethnocentrism' among fellow academics and leading him to focus on what he calls the 'intersubjective universe'. His approach is far more rigorous approach than my attempts at summarising complex ideas can ever be and, as this article is online (http://www.drbu.org/iwr/rew/2008/rew-article-1) Roth's ideas are best read in his own words.

Destination: pre-Christian Europe

With some idea of just how deeply influenced by Christian worldviews we are in the West – even the seemingly-secular realm of academe – let's head closer to home. Many of the historical sources for paganism in northern Europe during the immediate pre-Christian period were written down in Scandinavia and Iceland during the thirteenth century, a century or two after the establishment of Christianity.

Much scholarly thought has been expended on trying to understand whether the Christian authors, writing in most cases long after paganism had been subsumed into a Christian worldview, actually tell us anything very reliable about the pagan worldview. In most cases the answer has to be 'not a lot'. Imagine some dystopian future a millennium hence when all books about Elizabethan magicians, such as John Dee, have long since been destroyed so the only knowledge of ritual magic survived as a small number of incomplete chapters from the various *Harry Potter* novels which had been stitched together to make one book seven hundred years previously. This metaphor gives some sense of how tricky it is to understand Scandinavian paganism from the surviving medieval literature. Mostly we see what the Christians thought the pagan worldview *ought* to have been.

The clearest example of this is the way Christianity invents its arch-enemy: witchcraft. The invention arises in 1484 when a papal decree makes it heretical *not* to believe in witches. This is a complete reversal of previous doctrine when you would have been excommunicated for saying that witches existed. If you find this surprising then think for a moment why there is no equivalent to the Catholic church's persecution of witches in areas where Orthodox Christianity retained the earlier doctrine, such as Greece and Russia (Tolley 2009: 109; 112).

Furthermore, Carlo Ginzburg's detailed study of the Italian witchcraft trials reveals that at the start of the Inquisition the transcriptions of interrogations show that, although the inquisitors were making accusations of a variety of diabolic practices, what the accused say they are doing is quite distinct. However by a hundred years later what the accused say they are doing broadly conforms to the notions of witchcraft invented by their opponents a few generations before (Ginzburg 1991). And it's those invented notions, especially their more lurid and sensational aspects, which entered popular consciousness and manifest in all the stereotypical depictions of witches in the media. Ergo, Christianity invented its nemesis…

The three eras of Dark Age paganism

However the same scholarship which has grappled with the medieval Scandinavian literature has looked closely and more usefully at the words used to describe souls, spirits, deities and even the *kami*- or *shakti*-like 'power' that these otherworldly entities seemingly share. Later I will look in detail at these insights – for the moment I want to look at the broader cultural context in which these ideas thrived.

Pre-Christian religion in the British Isles can, very broadly, be put into three 'phases'. At no time is there anything resembling a 'top down' hierarchy, so local practices would at any one time have revealed considerable variation – and the practices at any one place may have changed quite significantly over just a few generations. Nevertheless the places where the practices took place would have remained similar – many were in the home, while rites of passage took place at places of burial, and there seem to have been a number of 'groves' (Latin *nemeton* and Old English *hearg*) which show continuity of sacred activities from the Iron Age, through the Roman era into Anglo-Saxon times.

Although we have few sources of information, these 'indigenous' traditions probably had their roots in the Brittonic (or Brythonic or 'Celtic') speaking Iron Age and later Bronze Age. Presumably, although not necessarily, this worldview had something in common with the legends written down many centuries later in Wales and Ireland. Mixed in were early Christian communities and perhaps the legacies of other cults brought to these islands from various parts of the Roman empire – these would almost certainly include ideas and practices from closely-related worldviews in northern Europe as well as more 'exotic' Mediterranean cults, such as Mithraism.

After the Romans left and the Anglo-Saxons began to settle we can tell by the change in burial practices that the immigrants retained their own cultures and their ways of life 'took over' from local traditions. One of the most dramatic

and lasting cultural changes in England was the displacement of the Brittonic language by German, which paved the way for English.

Although difficult to prove, presumably religious practice in Britain at this time was as similar as it ever has been to practices in Germany. At the end of the sixth century there was the famous 'Augustinian conversion' instigated by Pope Gregory I, although as a number of churches had long been established in the British Isles this mission might be thought of more as a take-over bid by the Holy Roman Empire.

At the same time that local religious practices are becoming increasingly Christian, some renegade Scandinavian traders are becoming less interested in well-established commerce and more preoccupied with plunder and protection rackets. This was the Viking Age. It was both a time for fear – especially among maritime monastic communities with a great wealth to attract unwelcome attention – and also a time of increasing cultural diversity as the Vikings were even better as traders and craftsmen than they were as raiders. Archaeology reveals the wide variety of goods traded throughout western Europe from beyond the sources of the Rhine and Danube – even as far as Constantinople and other places at the western end of the Silk Roads – and we can assume that ideas travelled every bit as readily as material culture.

Shamanism and Humpty Dumpty

One worldview that the Vikings brought to the British Isles came from no further away than southern Scandinavia. At this time the Sámi tribes had yet to be pushed back into the far north and restricted to a reindeer ranching lifestyle. Instead they were living, mostly from fishing and farming, throughout Scandinavia. Although various Germanic tribes had migrated into southern Scandinavia it seems they were living, apparently peacefully, alongside the local Sámis. Despite a major linguistic difference (Sámis speak a Finno-Ugric rather than Germanic language) there is clear evidence that these Scandinavian-based Germanic tribes – 'Vikings' as they were collectively known in Britain at the time – had been influenced by the shamanic practices of the Sámi (see Price 2002 and Tolley 2009 for two detailed discussions and Hutton 2011a for an overview of both).

As an aside into the way academic terminology hinders as much as helps, here in Britain the Iron Age was deemed to end with the Roman occupation in 54 BCE. After the Romans up sticks in the early fifth century we then had the Anglo-Saxon era and, right at the end, a number of Scandinavian kings (such as Cnut) ruling England, culminating in a regime change when William of Normandy (from 'North man's land, i.e. a successor to the Viking occupation of northern France) defeats the last of this Scandinavian lineage in 1066.

Humpty Dumpty shouting in a servant's ear. John Tenniel's illustration for Alice through the Looking Glass.

However Cnut and other Scandinavian-born eleventh century English kings came from countries that had neither been occupied by the Romans nor settled by Anglo-Saxons. So, in the terminology of scholars, they are 'late Iron Age' cultures – a thousand years after the Iron Age is deemed to have ended in Britain! Confused? Try not to be – it's only the naming schemes of academics that are confusing.

Old English poetry provides an insight into the richness of this late Iron Age – or Viking – culture. And in these poems, such as *Beowulf,* the eye of faith

can glimpse an 'implicit' shamanic initiation legend – at least according to the painstaking research of Stephen Glosecki (Glosecki 1989). However Glosecki's faint evidence for shamanism in the poetry of Anglo-Saxon England all relies on sources which have southern Scandinavian connections. Take these away and only non-shamanic practices seemingly remain.

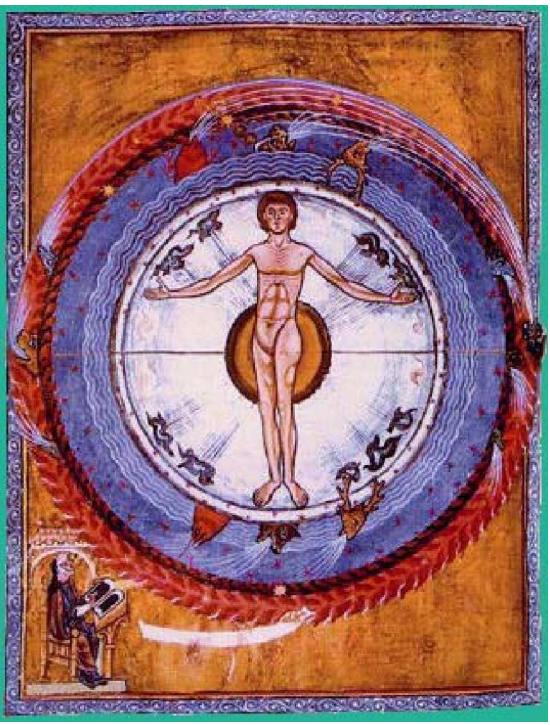
This last sentence is capable of endless debate because it all depends how you define shamanism. And, unless you are from the Evenki people of Sibera – where the word *sama:n* is the correct way to address the person you ask to perform magic on your behalf – the term 'shaman' is simply an attempt by academics to categorise widely disparate worldviews and practices. The words 'shamanism' and 'shamanistic' have become Humpty Dumpty words:

> 'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less.' 'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things.'
> (Carroll 1872 Ch. 6)

'Shamanism' is defined differently by every scholar who has looked closely at the subject. Much more often 'shamanism' is used without any overt definitions to mean 'just what I choose it to mean' by a vast number of less-thorough scholars, not to mention a much greater number of popular writers. Despite the strident claims of Mercea Eliade's pioneering study written during the 1940s (Eliade 1964 (1951)) it is not a 'technique of ecstasy'. Neither, despite many suggestions to the contrary, do shamans always use trance. For example, a great many Siberians who could not be excluded from any meaningful use of the word 'shaman' do not use trance but instead narrate their journeys to the Otherworlds by means of song and such like. And by no means all ritual uses of trance (however we define that or accurately recognise such physiological states) are in a shamanic context.

Indeed the first-hand accounts of medieval Christian mystics' visions (such as Hildegard of Bingen) are more shamanic than many ethnographer's accounts of shamanic practices (see Wilby 2005: 220–2 for a detailed discussion). In a different cultural context spending thirty days in a desert seeking initiation, still less spending three nights on an 'Otherworld journey' in a tomb and then being reborn would be deemed evidence of a shamanic initiation. Being able to resurrect a seemingly-dead patient – as with Lazarus – is also *prima facie* evidence of shamanism.

Imagine that the Crusades had gone in favour of the Muslims, and Europe had become an Arabic-speaking region with little tolerance of the legacy from the Holy Roman Empire, and these 'shamanistic' activities were among the few



These illustrations by the medieval mystic Hildegard of Bingen depict Christian doctrines but might easily be mistaken for Indian mandalas or Tibetan thangkas. *Similarly her ecstatic visions could be mistaken for 'shamanic' visions.*

fragments of Christianity which had come down to us. Scholars would conclude that Christianity was a shamanic religion. But of course we know that in all other respects Christianity is not a shamanic religion. So, if we knew as much about now-lost traditional beliefs and practices partially recorded by ethnographers as we know about Christianity then we might also realise that the apparent evidence for shamanism in these traditional societies is also a distortion of a much more complex worldview.

The worldviews of societies claimed by scholars to be linked with shamanism share several diagnostic features, but not all such societies share them. Furthermore, many of these features are known from societies where anything resembling shamanism is unknown and unlikely. (Four useful guides through the maze of pitfalls in shamanic studies are Hutton 2001, Stone 2003; DuBois 2009; Tolley 2009.)

So, if what shamans think is not diagnostic, then it must be what they do which is distinctive. Yet, as noted, despite trance being bandied about as the key characteristic, it is anything but a clear indication. Some shamans are known for their divinatory powers – but there are many more non-shamanic

diviners in a great variety of traditional societies. What shamans do which has fewest overlaps with non-shamanic practices is to cajole the spirit world into effecting changes in the material world – Clive Tolley refers to this as 'efficatory magic'. But even this attempt at a key characteristic is deeply flawed as, on the face of it, this would make John Dee and his assorted successors in the Western high magic traditions into shamans. Some mistake, surely?

This short discussion of shamanism has only one purpose here – to reveal that there is nothing *unique* about what so-called shamans do or believe. The concept of 'shaman' and 'shamanism' is simply a scholastic invention which brings together some overlapping practices and ideas – while ignoring that these same practices and ideas are also found outside what is deemed to be shamanic. More astute reading reveals that shamanism is a concept which – if not merely used sloppily – is remade according to individual scholars' predilections. While this offers useful insights into the prior assumptions of the scholar, the attempt to impose the Western 'meta-concept' of shamanism confuses more than clarifies any insights into traditional practices.

A concise compendium of Dark Age spirits

One reason that I've given so much emphasis to the invention of the idea of shamanism is that three of the key sources for this work (Glosecki 1989; Price 2002; Tolley 2009) use the concept of shamanism as their 'point of entry' into Dark Age thinking – although Tolley is also deeply critical of the concept. These three scholars looked in exhausting detail at how specific words were used, even though the literature in which they appear is from Christian writers living long after the demise of pagan worldviews. Many of these words appear in sources from various Old German dialects, Old Norse (the academic term for the various Scandinavian dialects) as well as Old English.

There are aspects of Sámi culture which share enough of the attributes of shamanism to justify their inclusion in such a pigeon hole. The same process of pigeon holing reveals that north European cultures share no such shamanic activity. While the *seiðr* (pronounced 'sayther') summoned – and perhaps breathed – spirits as part of their prophesising, they did not send out their souls to the spirit world. *Saiðr* sought information from the spirits but they did not compel the spirits to bring about changes (Tolley 2009: 509).

There is a clear cultural divide between northern European and the Sámi until the Migration, or Viking, Age. A number of popular writers would want us to think otherwise. But claims that the *seiðr* are evidence for indigenous north European shamanism simple fail to fit the known facts and rely wholly on fantasy and wishful thinking. Legends of trances, visions, Otherworld journeys and such like in medieval Irish and Welsh literature have also been deemed shamanic, despite having little in common with enthographical accounts of

Siberian or Sámi shamanism. These medieval legends are as 'shamanic' as Hildegard of Bingen visions or even Christ's resurrection – and indeed, by the time the medieval legends are being written down, such imported Christian narratives will be as familiar to the audience as the home-grown lore. No matter how much we speculate about the earlier oral lore which preceded the Christianised written versions, there is simply no evidence that the main aim of the activities of 'Otherworldly' Irish and Welsh heroes and demi-gods was to cajole the spirit world into making changes in the material world. Simply being 'Otherworldy' is not sufficient to make you a shaman – else every fairy would be *de facto* a shaman.

In all fairness to these popular writers, their books mostly predate the academic studies which attempt to make sense of how British people thought about the spirit world during the Dark Ages.

The Other meaning of elf

Key to understanding the Anglo-Saxon's worldview of spirits is understanding the word *aelf*. This is the origin of the modern words 'elf' and 'elven' but, although Tolkien portrayed the two worlds of the dark elves and the light elves with the elves as diminutive hominids, such notions are based on fairly recent Christian misunderstandings of Old English literature about *aelf* (see Tolley 2009: 220 if you want to know the details). Please put all Tolkien-esque notions of dark and light eleves in an empty cardboard box and park the box outside the door for the duration of reading the next few paragraphs – you can always collect them again afterwards.

Thanks to Alaric Hall's brilliant study (Hall 2007), the origin of the Old English word *aelf* reveals that elves are not what Tolkein – and a great many other scholars – thought. For a start something that was *aelf* was not necessarily a creature, still less a vaguely human-like one. To be *aelfen* was to be enchanted or 'paranormal' – in some sense 'other' to normal reality.

Quite what it was to be *aelfen* is unclear. In large part this is because the word *aelf* and its compounds have survived only as 'passing remarks' in literature which is, overall, just too fragmentary to offer an detailed view (the *Harry Potter* analogy I used previously applies again here, except that even fewer parts of the original tales have survived). But, even if the sources rarely allow clear examples, we can be fairly sure that the sense of *aelfen* did not stay constant. Such changes in meaning are slightly clearer to see with the cognate Old Norse world *álfar*; although Clive Tolley's useful summary of *álfar* in the Scandinavian sources (Tolley 2009: 217–21) sheds little light on *aelf* in Old English.

One reason the word *aelf* dropped out of English is because after the Norman Conquest a French loan word *faerie* (itself a borrowing from the Latin *fata*

meaning 'fates') took over the same sense of enchantment and magic. Again this is not fairies as small human-like entities but the sense of fairy in 'fairy tales' – bearing in mind that few fairy tales are about fairies *per se,* but are always tales of enchantment.

The Greek word *phásma* or *phántasma* shares this wider concept (which is broader than our word 'phantasm' – usually used as a synonym for a ghost). The invisible demons associated with Hekate were called *phásmata* when they appeared in the visible world, as were also some liminal 'undead' beings such as Lamia (Gonzalez 1997).

However, in the fourteenth century Chaucer's tale of the Wife of Bath uses faerie in the abstract sense of 'magic' to complement 'elf', used for the magical creatures, as in the verses 'Al was this lond fulfilled of faerie. / The elf-quene, with hire joly compagnie... '. The word 'fairy' continued to evolve towards its modern sense. The notable historian of medieval religion and magic, Keith Thomas concluded that 'Ancestral spirits, ghosts, sleeping heroes, fertility spirits and pagan gods can all be discerned in the heterogenous fairy lore of medieval England' (Thomas 1971: 724).

It became a 'catch all' category, as we can see when John Aubrey wrote:

> Anno 1670, not far from Cirencester, was an apparition; being demanded whether a good spirit or a bad? returned no answer, but disappeared with a curious perfume and a most melodious twang. Mr W. Lilly believes it was a fairy.

Elves shine and fairies have glamour

Old English *aelf* had something else in common with medieval and later perceptions of fairies. Fairies had 'glamour' – meaning not so much an attractive appearance as the ability to hide their appearances by a veil of magic. As John Aubrey observed, they could change shape in an instant. So too there is the Old English word *aelfscinu* or *aelfscyne* – 'elf shine'. While *scin*, like glamour, could describe a beautiful woman – 'not simply beautiful, but perilously so' (Hall 2007: 93) – its main usage was to denote the deceptive appearance of anything 'paranormal'. So *aelfscinu* is encountered as a description of angels. Overall *aelfschinu* seems to be a synonym for the later expression 'fairy glamour'. But the concept seems to go back at least to the mid-first millennium BCE as this sense of 'shine' and 'glamour' seems to be shared with the ancient Greek words *auge* and *keraunos* (Hideya 1989: 424).

Bearing in mind that the surviving Old English literature was written down within the Christian era, it is perhaps not too surprising that angels (a hitherto Middle Eastern concept imported as part of the 'package' of ideas which made

up Byzantine Christianity) seem to have many of the attributes of 'bright elves'. Whatever *aelf* were in pre-Christian minds, they were distinct from more monstrous Otherworldy entities such as giants, *thurs* and dwarves (Hall 2007: 32). *Aelf* seems to denote 'all Otherwordly things bright and beautiful'. The Ojibwa phrase 'other-than-human-persons' also seems to fit.

Should we bear this in mind when trying to understand ethnographic parallels? Julia Phillips (1998) reported that Australian Aborigines from New South Wales recognise traditional 'guardians of place' whose descriptions tally closely with her first-hand encounters with an 'archetypal' British elf or fairy in 'old' south Wales. Kevin Callahan at the University of Minnesota claims Ojibwa people in the American Midwest see 'little people' for about thirty minutes during hallucinations induced by atrophine-containing plants from the deadly nightshade family (Callahan 1996). And this sounds rather similar to what Terence McKenna called the 'elf-infested spaces' induced by synthetic DMT and the similar pysilocibin of 'magic mushrooms'.

The three-fold Anglo-Saxon 'otherworlds'

But rather than be taken in by the 'glamour' of later medieval and early modern ideas about fairies, we should think of them as part of the *aelf-* (or other-) world which Anglo-Saxons saw as distinct from both more monstrous otherworlds and from the spirit world of the dead. While modern Western thinking conflates these three realms – or, even more confusingly, attempts to shoehorn them into Christian doctrines of heaven and hell – to understand the Anglo-Saxons' worldview we need to keep this three-fold distinction clearly in mind. The souls of the dead are distinct from the denizens of *aelfhame* ('elf home' or, more accurately' 'elf land') which in turn are distinct from more monstrous entities. Get it? If not try again, else you won't make much sense of the next few sections…

Modern reductionist thinking begs to ask how literally Anglo-Saxons 'believed' in this reality. But that only tells us more about modern reductionist thinking than providing a way of understanding Anglo-Saxon thinking better. If we try to step outside our own cultural preconceptions then *both* the Anglo-Saxon three-fold 'otherworlds' *and* modern reductionist thinking are examples of 'social realites'. The one thing that both have in common is that they come about by a collaborative process of social construction which is 'invisible' to the people living in the society. They are, so to speak, the lenses through which we see the world. And, like spectacles, we mostly look through the lenses and rarely stop to look at the lenses themselves (see Danser 2005 for an introduction to social construction in the modern world).

As an example I'd like to look at *aelfsiden,* one of more interesting Old English words based on *aelf.* The meaning is 'elf magic' and the word *siden* seems to be related to the Scandinavian word *seiðr*, already mentioned. While a full discussion what a *seiðr* did – and did not do – would take several paragraphs, suffice to say that clearly she (and *seiðr* usually, although not always, were female), was thought to be able to contact otherworld spirits – the realm of the *aelfs*.

Much less clear is quite what sort of magic was deemed to be *aelfsiden* or 'elf magic'. But, based on my previous remarks, we should think of this as 'otherworldly magic' rather than magic resulting from the action of more modern conceptions of elves. In the Old English charms *aelfsiden* was specified as a cure for 'Lent illness' (seemingly a fever). And perhaps *aelfsiden* was efficacious for the affliction of 'sudden stitch' which was known as *elfshot;* quite what 'elf shot' was is a matter for scholarly debate (Alaric Hall devotes a whole chapter to just this debate – see Hall 2007: Ch.4) but clearly it was one or more ailments which Anglo-Saxon medics had difficulty pinning down to mundane causes. Furthermore, the Old English charms imply that *aelfsiden* was most effective when used to alleviate psychological rather than physiological symptoms (Tolley 2009; 221). But that is to apply modern terminology – in the Anglo-Saxon worldview *aelfsiden* was what was needed to alter minds and bodies. And it is that profound difference in worldviews that hinders our understanding of both *aelfsiden* and *aelf*. Asking 'Did the Anglo-Saxons belief that *aelfs* we real?' is simply asking a question which, while making sense in the modern worldview, would have been even more alien than an *aelf* to the Anglo-Saxons.

Healing, in both pagan and early Christian minds, was something 'otherwordly'. It is not a coincidence that the Old English words *hael* and *haelan(d),* meaning both 'healthy' and 'heal', were used to translate the Greek *sotor* and Latin *salvator* ('Saviour'), that is a by-name for Jesus Christ. So, rather than being promoted as the Saviour of mankind as New Testament doctrines state, Christ was 'promoted' in Anglo-Saxon England as 'the healer'. And, yes, *hael* is still present in modern English in the archaism 'hale and hearty', meaning 'healthy'. Whether or not *hael* is the origin of the Old English word *halig* ('holy' – seemingly used only in Christian and not pagan contexts) I will leave as an open question for etymologists to continue to debate. What this digression is intended to show is just how different 'core' Christian ideas – such as the doctrine of salvation – were in Anglo-Saxon times from what we now expect.

However ideas never stay still! In the later Anglo-Saxon era the concept of *aelfs* seemingly changed into something less 'literal', as personal names such as Alfred (literally 'elf counselled'), Alfwine ('elf friend'), Alfweard ('elf

guardian') and other personal names incorporating *aelf-* attest. In some respects these Anglo-Saxon names are close kin to Elvis Presley's name, as anyone born in Scotland is aware that 'elvis' (a variant of 'elves') is used to refer to what Sassenachs call 'fairies'.

In passing, note that the sense of *aelf* in King Alfred the Great is akin to the way that Japanese people would think of, say, a powerful political leader as having *kami* (i.e. the person's outstanding achievements could only be possible if he was receiving advice from the other-than-human realm). There is also another curious link between *kami* and *aelf*. Just as the *kami* are easily offended if the person honouring them has not ritually cleansed themselves, so too the Scandinavian sagas reveal that *aelfen* folk were driven away by shit. (If you really need to know, the polite way of saying you wished to defecate was *'Gang alfrek'*. Which has the literal meaning of 'drive away the *aelfs*'. TMI?)

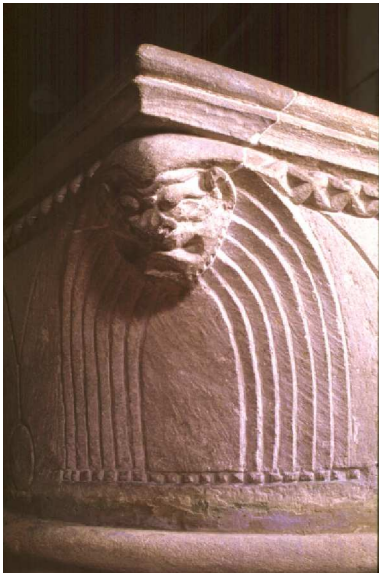
These *Aelf-* personal names are being used at the same time as such Old English poems as *Beowulf* are being composed and, presumably, frequently told. Yet the references to *aelf* in *Beowulf* are, in the opinion of recent scholars, already influenced by Christian ideas of demons (Hall 2007: 54).

Interesting, none of the illustrations in Old English manuscripts, while depicting any number of demons and monsters, seem to depict anything *aelfen* (although just maybe some of the demons in the margins of Old English illuminated gospels might have been thought of as *aelfen* at the time). Neither do *aelfs* appear on jewellery of the period, but this is understandable, given the widespread belief in the powers of wearing protective amulets. Demons and monsters only appear on jewellery if they are being subdued by some powerful deity. In the late Anglo-Saxon period, through into the post-Conquest era, monsters – especially their heads – become a common feature of the decoration inside and outside churches, and even on baptismal fonts

Beside nature, not 'above' or 'other'

The Old English word *landwight* seems to correspond to our phrase 'spirits of place' and the Latin *genii loci*. In other words, it is a collective term for a variety of what are often thought of as supernatural or Otherworldly entities.

Actually, for reasons I have discussed elsewhere (Trubshaw 2013–14), pre-conversion Anglo-Saxons seemed not to have thought in terms of either the 'supernatural' or of Otherworlds. These are concepts which slowly take root from about the tenth century onwards as Christian worldviews, with the transcendent realm of God, Christ, the saints and angels, permeate popular thinking. So far as we can tell from Old English literature the landwights were not Otherwordly but instead were immanent – that is, they were part of this



The twelfth-century Romanesque font inside Greetham church, Rutland. The corners are decorated with three monstrous heads, one emphatically tongue-poking, and a human head. Are these depictions of aelfen*? (Author's photographs.)*

world, albeit perhaps not always so visible or tangible as other aspects. The more appropriate term is 'preternatural'.

Firstly, Germanic deities walk this earth and readily get mortal girls pregnant. They are immanent, not transcendent (see Trubshaw 2014). This means we should be very cautious about using such terms as 'otherworlds' and 'supernatural' because, from the perspective of an immanent worldview, there is no such thing as an otherworld or the supernatual. Everything is part of this world, although not necessarily always as tangible. The better term is 'preternatural' (or praeternatural) from the Latin *præter*, 'outside' or 'beside'. The preternatural is that which appears alongside the natural. In contrast to the supernatural, preternatural phenomena are presumed to have natural explanations that are unknown. The preternatural is 'suspended between the mundane and the miraculous' (Allchin 2007: 565).

Just to confuse things, theologians use the term preternatural to distinguish marvels or deceptive trickery, often attributed to witchcraft or demons, from the purely divine power of the genuinely supernatural to violate the laws of nature. In the early modern period the term was used by scientists to refer to abnormalities and strange phenomena of various kinds that seemed to depart from the norms of nature. Neither of these senses apply to the early medieval worldview.

The best evidence for a preternatural Anglo-Saxon worldview can be found in Irish and Cornish mythology. In Gaelic the counterparts to both English fairies and Germanic *aelfa* are the *aos sí* (also spelt *aes sídhe*) or *daoine sídhe* (pronounced 'deena shee'). *Aos sí* and *daoine sídhe* both mean 'people of the mounds'. I will use the term *aos sí* for convenience. According to 'The Book of Invasions' the *aos sí* walk among the living.

The realm of the *aos sí* is an invisible world which coexists with the world of humans – a 'parallel universe' in the parlance of modern sci-fi writing. In the medieval and later literature they are variously described as ancestors, spirits of nature, or goddesses and gods. The *aos sí* are believed to live underground in the prehistoric cairns and Iron Age ring forts commonly referred to *as ráths* or *sídhe*. Unfortunately English writers have use the word *sidhe* to refer not to the mounds but to the *aos sí* themselves.

Despite much muddled thinking by modern writers, the original literature about the *aos sí* is not describing an 'otherworldly' or 'supernatural' race. Rather it is describing other-than-human entities which are entirely immanent in their ontology. Detailed studies of Cornish fairy lore (see McMahon 2015 for a concise and well-informed account) also describe the pixies and *bocca* in terms which are immanent, not supernatural.

Two Roman carvings depicting the Dea Matrae.

A brief evolution of elves and fairies

Ideas never stand still for long. The references to *aelf* in Old English literature are clearly to male entities (the female counterparts were the *dísir*, which I will discuss later), albeit *sometimes* there is a suggestion of effeminacy (Hall 2007: 87; 157–9). But over the next five hundred years – during which time English survives only as an oral language and emerges, much changed, as the Middle English of Chaucer and his contemporaries – 'elves' change, so that references to them in Middle English show that they were most likely to be thought of as female.

Clearly there had been some interbreeding between indigenous *aelfs* and Norman French *fées* (Hall 2007: 67–8; 81–4). These *fées* become progressively more Anglicised in name and attributes to fairies, until three hundred years further on Shakespeare re-imagined fairies in a whole new way (for example, until *The Midsummer Night's Dream* the Queen of Fairy was always nameless, as to know her name would be to have power over her; and her consort – if any – was far less powerful than a king).

The attentions of numerous popular writers, not least those writing for Victorian children, ensured that our notions of fairies continued to evolve, culminating in J.R.R. Tolkien's expansive re-imagining of elves and other more-or-less invented otherworldly beings. Clearly this brief summary misses out considerable detail – whole books could be devoted to just some aspects of this development (for example, Harte 2004; see also Hutton 2011b).

The female other-than-human realm

So far I have concentrated my attention on the realm of the *aelfs* – originally a masculine realm. I briefly mentioned that they have female counterparts known, at least in northern Europe, as *dísir*, who are female tutelary spirits specific to neighbourhoods and families. However, as I will discuss, the *dísir* seem to fit in with widespread local cults recorded from most parts of the Roman empire, and referred to in Latin as *Dea Matrae* or *Dea Matronae*. The sense is of the 'Goddess Mothers' and various statues of three female deities with cornucopia and other emblems of abundance are known. Almost always one of the three women is clearly much younger than the other two.

With the exception of Roman statues of the *Dea Matrae* we have no direct evidence of pre-Christian *dísir*. However, Bede, writing in about 725 famously refers to a pre-Christian seasonal winter custom as 'the Mother's Night'. Furthermore, the Welsh phrase *Y Mamau* has the literal meaning of 'the mothers' although is used as a euphemism for fairies. As I will explain the *dísir* are decidedly otherworldly, so the *Y Mamau* may once have been sisters to the *dísir* and *Dea Matrae*.

What is clear from all these names – *dísir, Dea Matrae, Y Mamau* – is that they are collective names. Whoever they are, they are never referred to by individual names. One exception is when the goddess Freyja is referred to as 'the *dís* of the *vanir*' This is somewhat odd because usually the natural human tendency is to 'personalise' and 'individualise' deities. However it may well be that there were local and tribal names – so many local names that any literary reference had to be to their collective name. This would parallel the analogous situation with India where, as I have already mentioned, Mahadevi ('Mother Goddess') is worshipped in every village, but by a different name in each place.

Despite the collective name, the *dísir* were undoubtedly thought of as female tutelary spirits of place – and protective spirits for the families who lived at that place (Tolley 2009: 221). Indeed place, lineage and female 'sovereignty' of the land may seem distinct in modern minds but would have been all-but inseparable in traditional societies; this is a key part of *Singing Up the Country* (Trubshaw 2011, esp. Ch.5).

Birth and rebirth

There is some overlap between the *dísir* and the *norns*. The three *norns* are Scandinavian counterparts to the Moriae, Parcae and Fates of Classical Greek and Roman myth. Indeed, early descriptions of the *norns* are seemingly influenced by the writers' knowledge of these Classical parallels. Both the *dísir* and the *norns* are linked to childbirth. But while the *norns* are almost entirely

associated with birth and prophesies made at that time, the *dísir* only occasionally get mentioned in the context of childbearing. Much more frequently the *dísir* are mentioned as female spirits who determined fate – especially death. In later Scandinavian and Germanic myths they merge into the *valkyjur* who in turn evolve into the Valkyries and Swan Maidens of Wagnerian myth. Based on ideas first published by Andrew Collins (Collins 2006) I have recently written at some length about the long-standing significance of swans as otherworld birds and their possible role as psychopomps and bearers of about-to-be-reborn souls (see Trubshaw 2011: Ch.9); this work adds more background about souls to those previously-published ideas.

Valkyjur ostensibly means 'choosers of the slain' and may well have originated as a kenning (poetic allusion) for the *dísir*. At the very least *valkyrjur* were one type of *dísir*; Tolley suggests they were 'less morbid' than the *dísir* (Tolley 2009: 225–6). Myths and legends make it clear that both *valkyrjur* and *dísir* determined fate – not least the moment of death and which warriors would die on the battlefield. However they also seem to have had some sort of fertility function. (Tolley 2009: 226) In this respect there is some overlap with *seiðr* who, when not prophesising, seem also to have helped with birth.

Or maybe the *seiðr* were helping with the *re*birth of the soul. Possibly they were 'fetching a new soul to be born, or fetching back one that had departed, both of which… are comparable with… retrieving the souls of the sick' (Tolley 2009: 166). Tolley proposes that *seiðr* are physical women who have some of the attributes of the otherworldly *dísir.* Tolley's suggestion is paralleled by the work of Thor Ewing who proposes that, at least by the early Christian era, valkyries were flesh-and-blood women who travelled the countryside in small groups (Ewing 2008). Ewing is writing in a much more accessible idiom than Tolley and as a result he does not address some of the key problems with the historical sources. While Ewing presumably would not agree, his suggestions that valkyries were real women *may* be a misunderstanding of the role that *seiðr* (who were undoubtedly flesh-and-blood) continued to play in north European society. Or maybe there is truth in both Tolley and Ewing's observations and the ambiguity is to whether such women were referred to as *seiðr* or valkyries or – even more likely – by some local or tribal byname.

One of these bynames may have been *volva* or *volvur* who recur in the Scandinavian sagas. The sense of *volur* is of a female 'staff-bearer', although the word also implies a personified or deified penis (Price 2002: 112; 219). Indeed iron staffs have been found in female graves by archaeologists (Price 2002: 175ff) and, presumably, a great many more wooden staffs have not survived. Sadly archaeology will never reveal whether the person who carried

A Roman carving depicting the minor deity Genius reused in the wall of the church at Tockenham, Wiltshire. (Author's photograph.)

them was thought of as a *volva,* or a *seiðr* (the word *seiðrstafr* suggests *seiðr* too had staffs) or even a *valkyrjur.*

They could even have been called a *gandul* ('staff' or 'staff-bearer') which is linked to the words *galdr* (chant) and *gandr* (magic). We can reasonably assume that a staff was an essential accoutrement of such magic-workers. (And, yes, you guessed right – Tolkien does name one of his best-known characters from *gandr aelf.*)

Bringing it back home

So far as we can surmise, the *dísir* would have been worshipped locally using names specific to that place. There is also a close similarity to the *verðir,* the

Anglo-Saxon carvings from about AD 800 now inside Breedon on the Hill church, Leicestershire. Are these successors to a tradition of wood carving which depicted aelfs *and* land wights*? (Author's photographs.)*

local 'guardian spirits' of Scandinavian. Although originally *verðir* had the sense of an accompanying or protecting spirit, in *current* Scandinavian folklore the *vordr* is a guardian spirit of the homestead. But *verðir* or *vordr* are passive and cannot be directed. They are considered to be invisible but are still perceptible. However, as with all ideas about otherworldly guardians, there has been a shift in emphasis. Earlier the *vordr* was the tutelary spirit of the home. A tradition of leaving a door open when someone died to allow the *vordr* to depart is

presumably a result of the blurring influence of Christian worldviews, which conflates spirits with souls.

Furthermore, the *vordr* seem to be a more modern name for the *landvaettir*, the guardian spirits of the land mentioned fairly frequently in the Scandinavian sagas. There are also 'hybrid' terms – for example, in Ísafjarðarsýsla there were *landdísasteinar*, 'stones of the land-*dísir*'.

Now the *landvaettir* bring us right back home to the British Isles because here the word becomes the Old English *land wight*. While there has been much discussion about what *land wights* may or may not have been, the best way is to think of the phrase as a 'catch-all' reference to a whole host of other-than-human Otherwordly denizens such as *dweorgas* (dwarves), *þyrs* (giants), *þumas* (perhaps 'hobgoblins'), *pucas* (who evolve into Puck), *entas, eotenas, niceras* (water nymphs), *byrsas* and *wuduwasan* (woodwooses). However, monsters and unfamiliar creatures known from Classic and other foreign literature would also naturally assimilate into this group with the result that tales of real-life African lions or elephants would, in the Anglo-Saxon mind, be thought of as tales about *land wights*. However, more normally the term *land wight* suggested something Otherwordly – but essentially masculine, rather than the feminine *dísir*.

There may have been several differences between *landvaettir* and *dísir* but the one which is most obvious from the surviving Scandinavian literature is that they are strongly associated with the male and female realms respectively. Although it is not so easy to prove, the Anglo-Saxon worldview also seems to make a similar distinction between *land wights* and the *dísir* (who in England seem, at least on the evidence of Bede, to have been known as 'The Mothers', rather than by the Scandinavian word *dísir*).

Given such scant evidence for The Mothers or *dísir* in England, perhaps we should not make too much of gender distinctions. After all, the later medieval view of fairies and elvis was that they were ruled by a Queen, in what – by then – is seen as a gender inversion (Hall 2007: 159–60). 'The world turned upside down' – temporary inversions of the social order for merriment (such as the Church's 'Feast of Fools' and boy bishops) or as a disguise for social rebellion – is also a way of denoting the Otherworld, where everything is 'opposite' to normal. Not for nothing did Alice find Wonderland through a 'looking glass' which renders right as left and left as right. So, if the notion of the Otherworld as 'inverted' extends back into the Viking era or earlier then it is little wonder that the few references to be ambiguous or contradictory.

Land wights, aelfs and *fylgia*

To some extent the term *land wight* included *aelf*. But as *aelf* seems to the sense of masculine supernatural beings who are *not* monstrous (while the various *land wight* entities listed in the previous paragraph were almost all thought of as monstrous) then *aelf* seems to referring to something very akin to a spirit-deity, as Old English *aelf* and its Old Norse cognates blur into words such as *os, regen* and *god* – and all these words have subtly different senses of 'deity' (Hall 2007: 61). Indeed Alaric Hall argues that the word *aelf* might, at least at one time, have been synonymous with the Vanir, the name for a race of Scandinavian gods who precede the Aesir such as Óðinn (Hall 2007: 36–7). Hall's research sits remarkably neatly with Decaroli's studies of the early Buddhist worldview, already described, where just such 'spirit-deities' precede the later boddhisatvas.

Despite the work of Alaric Hall and other scholars such as Clive Tolley, we cannot be exactly sure what the words *land wight* and *aelf* really meant to Anglo-Saxon people. But we do know that they were distinct from *fylgia*. However if the sense of *land wight* and *aelf* are evasive, then the sense of *fylgia* is even more fugitive. It is the origin of the later word 'fetch' but the earlier meaning seems to more akin to 'harbinger'. Most of the references are to animal *fylgia* although just maybe women have them too (Tolley 2009: 176–7; 226–9). Some academics have suggested that the *fylgia* was the 'soul' but this seems not to be the case, merely the consequence of the Christian view of souls being different to traditional cultures.

On the face of things the *fylgia* seems to have much in common with witches' familiars (such as black cats, hares and toads) and shamanistic spirit animals. However such familiars and spirit animals are lacking from any European accounts before the late sixteenth century (Tolley p117–18; 128). While absence of evidence is not secure evidence of absence, the safest assumption is that the *fylgia* were at least somewhat distinct from these later ideas.

Empowering the spirits

So far I have discussed mostly names, and tried to make sense of what – if any – difference a name makes. However I temporarily want to put such distinctions aside and look specifically at what collectively I have termed 'spirit-deities'. I have already noted that in non-Western cultures these are closely associated with some sort of otherworldly 'power' known in Oriental cultures as *ch'i, kami, mana, shakti* and such like.

Ethnographers even have a similar word for the power attributed to Sámi shamans – *luonto* (see Tolley 2009: 501 for a more detailed discussion). And just such notions of numinous energy are found in the more obscure parts of

the medieval Scandinavian literature where *nathur-ur* is the 'numinous power' (or, alternatively, 'independent spirits') which provide power to the *volva* (Tolley 2009*:* 498–50).

A rather obscure source reveals that the spirits responsible for collecting information (and perhaps we should think here of precursors to Óðinn's ravens, Hugin and Munin, already mentioned) were known as *gandar*. Quite what the *gandar* were is unclear but there were distinct from the more protective *verðir*, the spirits of place which seemingly succeed *landvaettir*. And clearly the word *gandar* is closely linked to *galdr,* which has the (to us) dual meaning of both 'magic' and 'chant' although it takes little effort to realise that magic required chanting the appropriate 'words of power'. One example of such magic chanting is called *varðlokur*. This is perhaps a style of singing akin to Sámi *juoigos* (joiks) and presumably intended to strengthen the *volva*'s own protective spirit (Tolley 2009: 504; 507).

Bear in mind that Eastern ideas of *kami, mana* and *shakti* are thought to manifest *through* powerful places or people (rather than be 'created' by the those places or people). And in Old Norse there is a word with exactly the same sense – *óðr* (pronounced 'Oother'). It is what is 'in' the god *Óðinn* – he is '*óðr inn'*, literally 'full of *óðr'*. Indeed there is a minor deity – seemingly distinct from Óðinn – who is known simply as Óðr (Tolley 2009: 453–4). However most of the references to *óðr* in the sagas – and there are plenty of them – are to a 'something' rather than a 'someone'. The frequency of *óðr* in the original texts is hidden because translators use a variety of modern words, such as 'spirit', 'breath', 'prophecy' and 'inspired utterance'.

In addition there are three Old English words. *Ond* may have something of the same sense as *óðr* but the evidence is simply too scant to be certain. Whereas the word *læc* (also written *læce* and *lac*) is much more common and, although the meaning shifts over time, seems to have started out as a close kin to *numina*. And finally there is also the Old English word *wod*, which is perhaps closest in meaning to *numina*. I have discussed these three words in detail as part of an article called 'The potency of leeks and the spirit of alcohol' (Trubshaw 2013–14). Very broadly, *óðr, ond, læc* and *wod* seem to be semantic near-equivalents for *numina*. The shared sense of these words takes on an explicitly Christian context with *potentia*.

While the etymology suggests that Woden is not derived from 'the god with *wod* in' – in many ways the *sense* of his name seems to parallel the notion that *Óðinn* may have been thought of as '*óðr inn'* or 'full of *óðr'*. Given the wide range of beliefs and attributes associated with Woden over the space of a few centuries there is no confident way of excluding this possibility, not least because the notion that Woden was full of *wod* accords remarkably well with Richard North's interpretation of this deity:

> Woden's name survives in proverbs associated with magic and also in some placenames, but Woden may have meant little to most people in England up to the early seventh century, either to peasant farmers or to the advisers who could influence the election and removal of their kings according to politics or this or the next year's harvest. Some nobles might have invoked Tiu and Woden for success in war, but it is unlikely that any of them took Woden for an ancestor. To heathen kings and subjects alike there were more powerful *numina* to propitiate – the natural phenomena and farming activities on which they relied for spring growth, autumn harvest and their winter lives. With no popular animism of this kind, there was no loaf of bread; with no loaf, no *hiaford;* and with no lords, no kingdom. With these urgent priorities, it is unlikely that Woden, a god of magic and warfare, was regarded as the 'All-Father' in heathen times.
> (North 1997: 41)

North's description of an all-pervasive *numina* accords well with Polynesian concepts of *mana* and Japanese understandings of *kami*. It also resonates well with Christian concepts of the 'power of Christ' and, to a lesser extent, with the 'grace of God'.

New faiths are continually being either invented or transposed into new cultures, bringing with them novelty and 'exoticism' (and these are both traits which Christianity brought to northern Europe in the Dark Ages). However, new faiths can only – initially at least – be understood in terms of existing worldviews. So it makes perfect sense for *potentia* to be thought of in terms of *wod*, *leac* or *óðr* (see the first volume of The Twilight Age).

A parallel is the way the Old English word *metod*, originally denoting 'fate', becomes a by-name for the Christian God. This is not because the pagan sense of fate had a close link to a specific deity. Fate was essentially a 'humanistic' concept, although linked with the female *nornir,* who were in some ways more ancient and more powerful than the deities (Stone 1989: 21–2). It was the *nornir*'s role in determining an individual's destiny which was 'taken over' by God. Only subsequently did the concept of God develop in ways which made a word synonymous with 'fate' less suited as a by-name for the deity.

With both *wod/leac/óðr/potentia* and *metod* we seem to be witnessing a carry-over of the underlying pagan worldview into early Christian times, although after a few generations Christian ideologies entirely mask this transitional way of thinking.

Words of power

If you are a Scandinavian poet and need inspiration then, according to several of the sagas, a draft of *óðr* is just what you need. And the mead of inspiration will provide just that. Indeed mead and *óðr* are rarely far apart. Less commonly, *óðr* is used to refer to the 'spirit' of the steam from a sauna. Overall, we should think of *óðr* as 'spirit affording intellectual inspiration' (Tolley 2009: 180).

We need to be alert to semantic subtleties in Old Norse. The words *ond* and *andi* are variants of a word meaning 'breath'. For understandable reasons *ond* is used to translate the Christian concept of 'spirit' but in pre-Christian contexts the sense is of 'life-force'. However *ond* is distinct from *lá,* also denoting life-force, and *óðr*.

Later literature uses *ond* rather than *óðr* but my suspicion is that the original distinctions simply did not make sense within the Christian worldview. So, while the later literature would suggest that *ond* is a direct counterpart to *ch'i, kami* and *mani*, perhaps we should more correctly use the word *óðr* for this sense of creative energy.

For example, when Snorri Sturluson tells us about the contents of the seething cauldron called Hvergelmir which was under the roots of the Scandinavian World Tree, Yggdrassill, he says that Hvergelmir contained *ond*. The sense is that this *ond* is the vital animating power of all creation (closely corresponding to *ch'i* in Chinese thinking). *Ond* was regarded as a chaotic energy, yet 'took shape' as manifest reality. It is all potential and emergence. (I discuss this further in Trubshaw 2011: Ch.10.)

There is a sense of this same creative power in the *potentia* of early Christianity. However the source of this *potentia* is Christ, which the clergy – and the clergy alone – are able to 'channel' for the purposes of blessing and healing. In common with their pre-Christian precursors this power is manifested through words and chants – although the literacy of Christian clergy greatly enhanced the 'power of the word' in the minds of the laity. (See Jolly 1996 for a detailed discussion of 'the power of the word' in early Christian England.) Understandably, words such as *óðr* and *ond* are dropped in favour of *Logos* and similar Biblical phraseology.

To what extent plainchant owes its origins to pre-Christian *galdr* ('chants') is likely to remain an unanswered question but, although the recent scholarship mentioned in the preface (e.g. Carver *et al* 2011) does not address this particular issue, on the basis of this still-evolving approach we should regard the boundaries between pagan precursors and early Christianity in Britain as almost impossible to define until perhaps as late as the eleventh century. In the absence of any evidence to suggest that plainchant has a specifically

Tibetan skull cup.

Christian origin the safest assumption has to be that it is the continuation of older practices.

Cauldrons of inspiration and creation

With the *ond* or *óðr* in the cauldron of Hvergelmir still in our minds, think of the medieval Welsh tales of Taliesin and Ceridwen's cauldron of inspiration. In some versions the contents are described as *awen* (pronounced approximately 'ar-Ooh-enn'), thought of as 'creativity' and associated concepts.

'Cauldrons of inspiration' are closely related to cauldrons of primordial creativity. In Chinese cosmogony it is not a cauldron but a large gourd which contains *wonton* soup (Giradot 1983). Those who are unfamiliar with this staple of Chinese cuisine should think of minestrone soup's varied constituents.

Won ton means swallowing a cloud, and the *wonton* (small dumplings) floating alongside the pieces of vegetables and meat are thought to resemble clouds. More profoundly, the mixture of ingredients in the soup are thought to represent the 'undifferentiated' nature of primordial creation.

In many cultures, although not in China, the creation of the world is associated with the dismemberment of a primordial giant. From the skull of such a giant the primordial 'cauldron' is sometimes created. Real-life skulls (or should that be 'real-dead skulls'?) make ritual drinking vessels the world over. Which beverage was served in these vessels no doubt varied, but in the British Isles from at least the Iron Age onwards we can assume that mead was foremost.

There is clear archaeological evidence that using human skulls as cups dates back to Upper Paleaolithic, around 16,000 to 12,750 BCE. The oldest historical evidence is from the fifth century BCE, when Heroditus states that the Scythians drank from the skulls of their bitterest enemies. (See Haigh 2011 for an overview of the archaeological evidence for skull cups.)

Corpse medicine

Also in recent centuries there has been substantial ethnographical evidence for ritual use of human skulls. The best-attested ritual use of human skulls is from Tibet. Until recent times the skulls of holy men were elaborately engraved and decorated for use as drinking vessels; also pairs of human skulls were made into double-headed 'hourglass' drums.

Until about fifty years ago reports of ritual use of human skulls – usually tinged with actual or implicit allegations of cannibalism – were used to establish how 'civilised' the colonial cultures were in contrast to 'primitive' traditional ones. There is no need to dwell on the 'do as I say, not do as I do' deceit of 'civilised' colonial cultures being built around a Christian mythos which places the consumption of the blood and body of Jesus as a central tenet of belief and worship (even though the deceit is partly masked by the Protestant rejection of transubstantiation) as there was widespread actual cannibalism within European cultures until less than two hundred years ago.

So when scholars discover that the consumption of human brain tissue and scrapings from human skulls for health-giving purposes was prevalent in Europe long after the Reformation it comes as an embarrassment, and is usually quietly ignored. As a result not many people know that King Charles II was especially fond of the 'King's Drops', a concoction made from the scrapings of human skulls. The efficacy of this 'cure' is based on a widespread belief which persisted throughout northern Europe until *at least* the early nineteenth century in a 'life force' distinct from the soul and the body and which lingered after death. This vitality could be captured and consumed. It was why crowds of sick people gathered near scaffolds – they wanted to drink the blood of the

recently-deceased. But not only the executed would be 'consumed'. Ideally the blood, brains, scrapings from the skull, and such like would come from a young male who had died a violent death but, preferably, without the loss of his blood. The vitality was thought to be concentrated in the skull, as the soul was forced there at the moment of a sudden death and then 'hung around'. A 'cerebral paté' of mashed up brains, arteries from the heart and such like could be consumed directly or, better still, distilled. Blood was also distilled (it forms a golden colour i.e. the colour of the soul) as well as drunk fresh. (See Sugg 2011 for all you ever what to know – and perhaps rather more – about corpse medicines.)

As Richard Sugg reminds us, in the heyday of medicinal cannibalism – or 'corpse medicine' – bodies or bones were routinely taken from ancient Egyptian tombs and European graveyards. The burials from a number of Wiltshire Neolithic tombs, including West Kennett long barrow, were excavated to meet this demand. Indeed, until at least the mid-eighteenth century, one of the biggest imports from Ireland into Britain was human skulls.

Cauldron, skull or chalice

The consumption of alcoholic beverages from a human skull cup was clearly in the forefront of Lord Byron's mind in 1808 when he published the following thoughts:

Lines inscribed upon a cup formed from a skull

Start not – nor deem my spirit fled;
In me behold the only skull
From which, unlike a living head,
Whatever flows is never dull.
I lived, I loved, I quaffed, like thee:
I died: let earth my bones resign;
Fill up – thou canst not injure me;
The worm hath fouler lips than thine.
Better to hold the sparkling grape,
Than nurse the earth-worm's slimy brood;
And circle in the goblet's shape
The drink of gods, than reptile's food.
Where once my wit, perchance, hath shone,
In aid of others' let me shine;
And when, alas! our brains are gone,
What nobler substitute than wine?

The Elevation of the chalice. Photograph by Jude M. Beres.

> Quaff while thou canst: another race,
> When thou and thine, like me, are sped,
> May rescue thee from earth's embrace,
> And rhyme and revel with the dead.
> Why not? since through life's little day
> Our heads such sad effects produce;
> Redeemed from worms and wasting clay,
> This chance is theirs, to be of use.

What occasions Byron would wish to skull 'to hold the sparkling grape... The drink of gods' is left unspecified in this poem but the implication is a non-Christian ritual.

But there were plenty of occasions when drinking from a skull was a teetotal event. In the Irish legend the *Tain Bo Cuailnge* the Ulstermen are told they would gain strength by drinking milk from the skull of the hero Conall Cernach. Much more widely-known are the legends associated with healing wells. The water was often believed to be efficacious only if the 'proper ritual' was observed, which often included drinking from a human skull. One of the last-surviving of such skulls was associated with St Teilo's Well (Ffynnon Deilo) at Llandeilo Llwydiarth near Maenclochog (Pembrokeshire). The water was renowned for its ability to cure whooping cough and other ailments, but only if drunk out of the remains of the skull of St Teilo, a sixth-century Welsh monk and bishop. During the First World War people would also go and drink the well water from the skull in the hope that the war would soon end. The skull was lost for many years during the twentieth century, but is now in the safe-keeping of Llandaff Cathedral (Bord 2006).

St Teilo was far from exceptional – the bones of most saints of his time seem to have become powerful relics, with the skull (or at least parts of it) usually being regarded as the most potent. Folklore tells that the dust from inside such skulls, if added to water and drunk, would bring about powerful cures. We

The late fourteenth century reliquary for the head of St Martin from the church of Soudeilles, France, and now in the Louvre Museum.

are back in the same worldview as the *potentia* of late antiquity. On the evidence of the wonderful film *Le Quattro Volte* (released in 2010) then a similar custom still prevails among the Catholic communities living in Italian villages – although in the film it is dust swept from the floor of the church, rather than from inside a saint's skull, which is believed to be curative.

The *potentia* of saints and their relics

While the Christian doctrine offers an entirely different exegesis, quite what the laity thought about a skull-like chalice full of wine-turned-to-blood is a matter of speculation. As the most powerful physical aspect of the most important Christian ritual such chalices and their contents must have been thought to be exceptionally potent sources of *óðr* or *ónd* and to the clergy perhaps as *potentia*.

Rood and rood-screen of St Giles' Catholic Church, Cheadle, Staffordshire, designed by A.W.N. Pugin in the 1840s. Photograph by Oosoom.

Back in 1988 Aron Gurevich wrote that saints

> ... found a much easier path to the consciousness of the common people than did the idea of a distant, invisible and awe-inspiring God. Attitudes towards God lacked the 'intimacy' and 'sincerity which united the faithful with the local saints... (Gurevich 1988: 43)

While Gurevich is no longer alive to argue with me, may I suggest that his 'easy path' was a shared, albeit syncretic, world view that made *potentia* seem little different to *óðr* or *ónd*. Ronald Finucane, wiritng in the 1970s, observed that venerated relics seemingly

> ... emitted a kind of holy radioactivity that bombarded everything in the area and as early as the sixth century it was believed that objects placed next to them would absorb some of their power and grow heavier. They affected oil in the

> lamps that burned above them, cloths placed nearby, water or wine which washed them, dust which settled on them, fragments of the tombs which enclosed them, gems or rings which touched them…
> (Finucane 1977: 26)

The consequences of this belief, as Mark Lewis succinctly states, was that

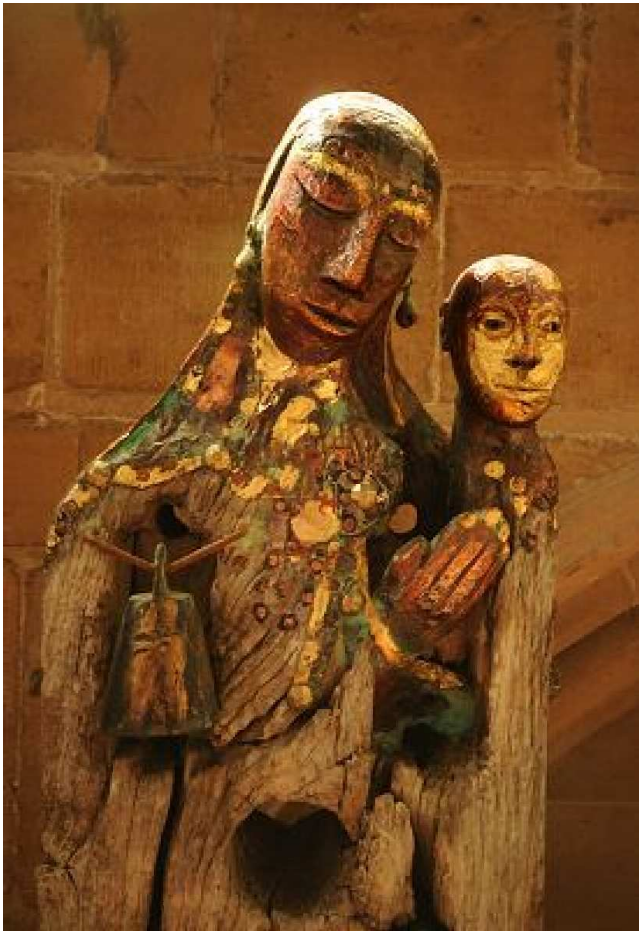
> … for many believers, faith in the power of saintly bones became the very essence of medieval Christianity. In spite of early legislation prohibiting the removal and dismemberment of the dead, the escalating desire for holy relics became a widespread industry, particularly among the monastic orders, with easy opportunities for fraud. The remains of saints were taken around like a travelling theatre and the supernatural power of these sacred objects quickly dominated the landscape of Christianity across Europe.
> (Lewis 2013: 10–11)

Only with the Reformation was this world view disrupted and steadily supplanted by the rationalism of the Enlightenment and subsequent secularisation of Western society.

The Mothers and the Mother of God

Many modern pagan writers assume that the medieval cults associated with the Blessed Virgin Mary are continuations of the veneration of pre-Christian goddesses and the Deae Matronae. It certainly seems like a reasonable assumption. However there is no evidence to confirm this assumption. Furthermore, most such writers think of Mary in later medieval terms, or even in terms of how she is regarded within the more-or-less contemporary Catholic Church. Few seem to be aware of the significant differences between these later ideologies and how she might have been regarded in the early Christian era.

The few scholarly accounts of the cults of the Virgin Mary are almost always written from a perspective of devotional piety so have no reason to even seek, still less confirm, pre-Christian origins (although the contributors to Maunder 2008 are more balanced than most). What these accounts do reveal is that there were various cults to her which were instigated in various parts of Christendom from about the fourth to tenth centuries. None of these became universal cults on the scale of the twelfth century cult established in most parts of western Europe by the Cistercian monasteries. It is the successor to that cult which still greatly influences popular piety among Roman Catholic communities.



Icon or idol?

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

The Eastern Orthodox churches also venerate Mary, but their doctrines differ in that there is no belief in the virgin birth, nor in her bodily assumption to Heaven after her death – so the Latin church's Assumption of the Virgin is matched in Orthodox Christianity by the Dormition of the Mother of God – in other words her 'going to sleep'. And the title of 'Mother of God' is another doctrinal divide – Mary is 'merely' the Mother of Christ, not God, to Roman Catholics.

I'm dwelling on the differences between Latin and Orthodox doctrines about Mary for two reasons. One as evidence of how the Cistercian-led cult of the later Middle Ages differs from how Mary was perceived in cults which date back to closer to the time when Eastern and Western Christianity went their separate ways. Secondly, because later I will discuss in more detail how Mary is still venerated in some more traditional rural communities in Greece.

St Brigid of Kildare: bishop, abbess or *érlam*?

So far I have been unable to find any clear evidence that domestic tutelary goddesses, such as the *lares* and *Deae Matronae* of south European and the dísir of northern Europe, evolve into the Marian cults. I agree it seems probable. After all, a Catholic offer a candle and a prayer to 'Our Lady of X' seems to be remarkably like an invocation of the local *dísir* or *genii loci.* The prayers and requests are likely to for all-but the same reasons – good health of oneself, one's family, the family's livestock, and so forth. The reuse of the Old Irish word *érlam*, originally denoting a tutelary deity, to refer to local saints is not a specifically Irish worldview – think of the orisas of West Africa and its diaspora. Orisas are not deities, although they are similar to Christian saints. We would be best to think of saints, orisas and tutelary spirits as having a similar ontological status, but distinct from both deities and mundane beings.

St Brigid of Kildare – not to be confused with various other Irish saints of the same name – was born around 450. Her hagiography was first written down about 650, and includes magical stories involving cattle, two holy wells and – most notably – sacred fire and holy wells. In later medieval Irish literature these are all associated with pagan goddess rather than early abbesses!

Reputedly her father, a local chieftain, was pagan while her mother, a slave in his household, was Christian. She became an apprentice nun at a young age and performed miracles and wonders of healing and feeding the poor. She gained a reputation as a peacemaker who reconciled rival clans. And, remarkably, instead of becoming a nun, she became a bishop! She established dual monasteries, where monks and nuns lived in separate but adjacent buildings – typical of this early era. In later centuries these grew into important centres of learning and the arts, renowned over a large region.

As a woman, Brigid could not administer the sacraments so appointed St Conleth as the priest. And a 'miraculous' mistake by Conleth meant she became consecrated as a bishop, an honour never before or since bestowed upon a woman. At the ceremony for her to take the veil as a nun he mistakenly read the prescribed prayers for ordaining a bishop. When objections were raised he replied, 'No power have I in this matter. That dignity has been given by God only to Brigid, beyond every other woman.'

Even if Conleth's knowledge of Latin was so poor he read the wrong pages of the missal – an entirely plausible mistake given the poor literacy of priests – what is missing is the necessity of several other bishops being present for the 'making' of a new bishop. This is most improbable for a service set up for one or more women to become nuns.

My suspicion is that the early texts used the word *érlam* to refer to Brigid. This would have been used by the seventh century author of the hagiography to denote a 'local saint' – an quite plausibly a woman who in life had been an abbess (rather than a bishop). It would also neatly 'fudge' a hagiography of an abbess who, for whatever reasons, 'inherited' the attributes of a pre-Christian tutelary goddess (who would also have been referred to as an *érlam*). Later readers of the earlier hagiography would not necessarily be familiar with the word *érlam* and the consequent confusion would allow a 'back formation' legend to 'explain everything'.

We can never know for sure. But St Brigid of Kildare's hagiography is a good example of how the boundaries between pre-Christian tutelary goddesses, Christian abbots, abbesses and (implausibly in this case) bishops can so easily be blurred.

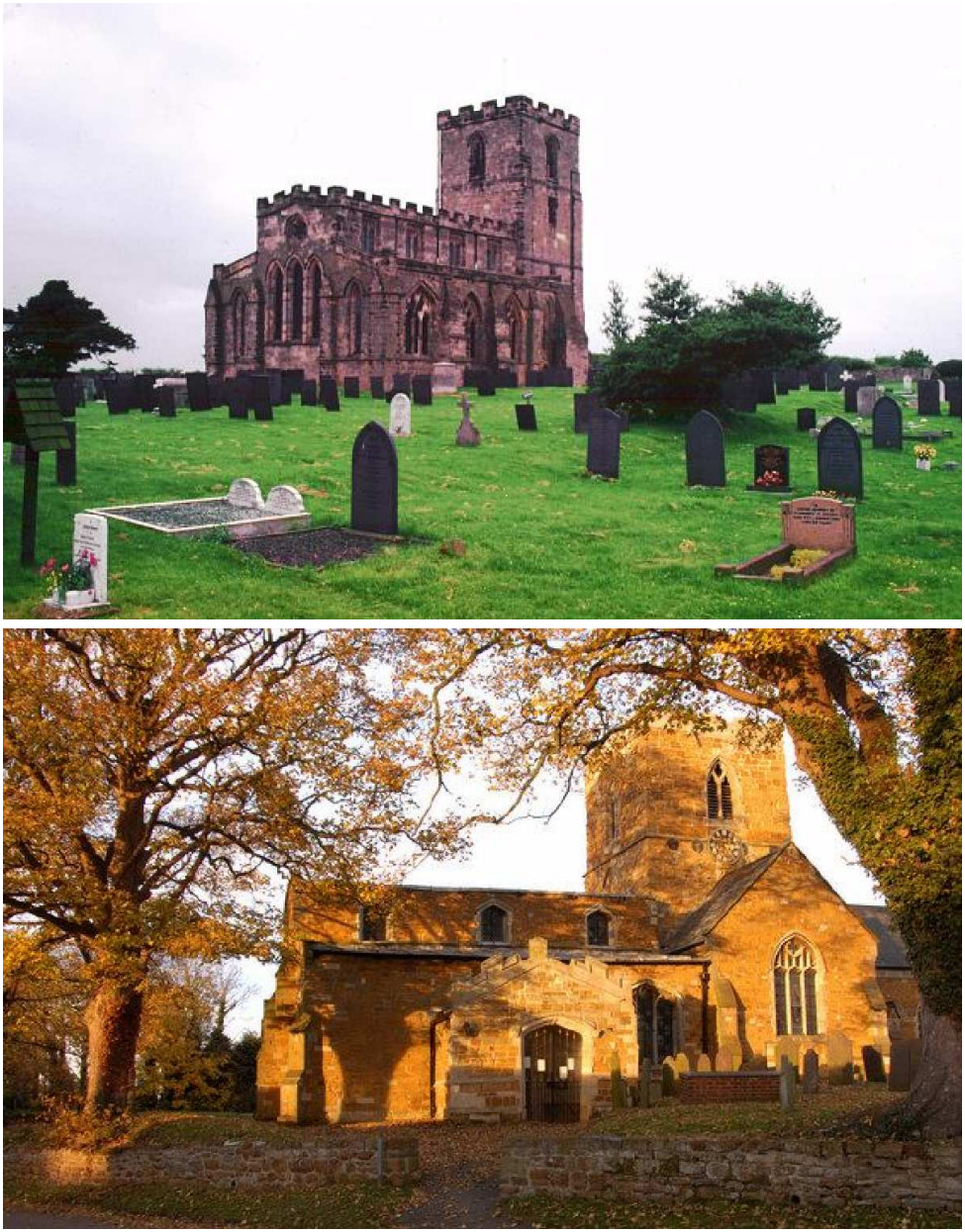
The pre- and post-conversion veneration of *érlams* is somewhat akin to the manner in which Hindus, as well as Moslems and Sufis, undertake pilgrimages to the tombs and shrines of Sufi saints who typically died in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries.

The Three Marys

After the twelfth century Mary became the most important of the intercessionary saints – the ones to pray to if you needed them to 'intercede' with Christ on your behalf. This is the time when cults to local saints were either being suppressed or just simply being forgotten. After all, these local saints were typically the founders of the church back in the eighth or ninth centuries. Three hundred or more years later their hagiographies – almost always transmitted orally except for a handful of more important ones – had probably become decidedly threadbare.

And, if you couldn't ask the local saint to intercede on your behalf any longer, then who could you turn to? The answer proved to be Mary, a role she has continued to dominate ever since.

As already discussed, the most common depiction of the pre-Christian *Deae Matronae* is as three adult women. In Catholic churches there is similarly a long-standing tradition of representing the 'Three Marys'. These are usually the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene and Mary Solome. However this masks a certain amount of confusion as there are five women called Mary mentioned in the New Testament and apocryphal works. Most of these are only referred to briefly so there has been considerable conflation, especially regarding Mary Salome. She is sometimes identified as the wife of Zebedee, the mother of James and John (two of the Apostles) and sometimes as the sister of Mary, mother of Jesus.



The Leicestershire churches of Breedon on the Hill (top) and Long Clawson (bottom) retain their dedications to the Anglo-Saxon Saint Hardulf and the eleventh century Bishop Remigius (respectively).

Mostly the Three Marys are depicted in paintings, although in Spanish-speaking countries, the Orion's Belt asterism is called *Las Tres Marías.*

Assume for a moment that the earlier, pre-twelfth century, Marian cults were indeed a transition from pre-Christian to post-conversion practices, making Mary a successor to the *Deae Matronae.* Who would have most likely been her devotees? Simply put – mostly the women. And who wrote down what little we know of early Christianity? Male clerics.

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

Mary and Baubo

In a fascinating and detailed article (Håland 2013) Evy Håland has shown how the Feast of the Dormition is tied in to the main agrarian cycle of rural Greece and, as such, retains close affinities to annual celebrations of Demeter and her daughter Persephone (also known as Kore) in which the death – and eventual resurrection – of these vegetation goddesses formed a key part of the Eleusinian mysteries. The Feast of the Dormition, as with the Feast of the Assumption, is usually celebrated on 15th August, which corresponds to the start of the grain harvest in Europe.

Evy Håland provides numerous examples of how the modern feasting and food offerings associated with the celebration of the Dormition follow long-established customs. She also notes how in the village of Monokklesia in Greek Macadenia the women get together in the dead of winter, 8th January, to reawaken the 'dead' earth with celebrations to the sacred midwife Babo, otherwise known as Saint Domenika. As Håland objectively notes 'In this festival we encounter obscenities and alcohol consumption.' (Håland 2013: 259). She should know – she was there and took at least one photograph…

Despite taking part in this 'obscene' festival, the women of Monokklesia undoubtedly think of themselves as good Orthodox Christians, despite there being no biblical or liturgical precedents for what they do. This adds further weight, as if it is really needed, to Håland's suggestion that what rural Greeks do at the Feast of the Dormition goes back over two thousand years to the

Roman statue of Baubo lifting her skirt.

Eleusinian mysteries. While the significance and 'context' has shifted, there is a direct continuity of what is done, and when.

If Greece and Orthodox Christianity seems a little too far removed from Anglo-Saxon England to have much relevance then let's stop off on our way back in Catholic Ireland. Here, as Muiris O'Suillivan observes:

> Traditional devotional practices in Ireland often focus on stations associated with the titular founding saint of the local early medieval ecclesiastical site. These stations are marked by a variety of natural features such as wells, trees, pitted stones, hills or caves. While Christian prayers are recited, they are associated with less obviously Christian practices such as:
>
> - the occasional preference for night-time pilgrimage
> - the absolute imperative to keep the pilgrimage station on one's right while circling it in prayer; and
> - the occasional use of cursing stones which, when turned during a pilgrimage, are reputed to bring back luck to an enemy.
>
> Standard Christian signs such as the cross appear to be optional and the place or natural anomaly seem to be the dominant physical feature around which the traditional narrative is framed.'
> (O'Suillivan 2011: 65)

There has been enough study of Irish narrative traditions, which as O'Suillivan puts it, 'frame' such practices, to recognise that while such traditions may well reflect archaic social customs, the tradition maintained in the legends and other narratives is essentially a mythical reality sustained – and largely created by – the transmission of the narrative tradition itself.

Icons and idols

The innumerable icons of Mary, whether painted or carved, owe at least some of their imagery to goddesses such as Isis and Demeter. The makers of these icons, and those who venerate them, are the successors to a tradition which has its roots in idols, *stapols* and *weohs* (see the third volume of The Twilight Age series). That same tradition saw such idols as the 'immanent presence' – *wod* or *leac*, as discussed previously – of the spirit-deity, rather than merely a focus of devotion of a now-transcendent being. And it was this immanent ontology which was deemed 'idolatry' by John Wycliff and other late-medieval Lollards. This was to result in the first phase of iconoclasm – the destruction of statues of saints such as Mary – and ultimately to the almost total destruction of such carvings by a later generation of zealots in the seventeenth century.

This seventeenth century zealotry casts a long shadow which is present not only in modern day Christianity but also in seemingly-secular ethnography. Those brought up with the Protestant perspective that an 'image is not the

Above: *A classic icon of Mary and Jesus.*
Right: *One of the author's carved staffs, photographed at the source of the River Kennett.*

thing' struggle to relate to non-Christian worldviews where the image is indeed 'the thing', or at least indistinguishable from, say, the *genii loci,* orisha, or whatever. Graham Harvey has written a concise but lucid discussion (Harvey 2013: 13), noting that there can be no reproductions or replicas of a Zuni *koko* mask, as each mask is a *koko*, made according to sacred kowledge and, as such, embodying an other-than-human-person.

My own efforts at carving staffs, while reflecting no tradition of sacred knowledge, similarly produces unique 'other-than-human-entities'. Even if I chose to carve more than one to a similar design, one is not a 'replica' or copy of the other – both have a unique existence (as would two humans, even if they look similar, as might two brothers).

Conclusion

Other-than-human-persons best described as 'spirit-deities' have extensive cross-cultural parallels. The same broad span of cultures also recognises a 'potency' that is materialised through these spirit-deities (and sometimes also through trees, rocks, and living humans). While relatively recent Christian worldviews have influenced ethnographical accounts and blurred the descriptions of traditional worldviews, looking closely at earlier Christian practices reveals an unbroken continuity from earlier north European worldviews (even though the exegesis of these practices reflects the Church's doctrines).

We can begin to think more clearly about the primordial creative 'potential' known in Old Norse as *óðr*, *ónd* and in Old English as *leac*, *wod* and, more rarely, as *ond.* While we may never know exactly what an Anglo-Saxon *weoh* or *stapol* looked like (discussed in detail in Volume Three of The Twilight Age series) but presumably this *kami*-like, *mana*-like *wod* was thought to manifest through them, as it did through their successor, the 'blood beam' or rood, and the early saints and the *potentia* of their relics. The third member of the Holy Trinity – the Holy Spirit – also makes more sense when seen as a continuation of this pre-Christian worldview than it does from a post-Reformation perspective.

This same energy or potency also manifested through the *aelfen*, *dísir* and was 'in' *Óðinn* and Woden. This *óðr* was the inspiration present in mead – and would be even more potent if drunk from a cauldron or a human skull cup, just as the Eucharist serves the blood – and *potentia* – of Christ in a similarly-shaped chalice. This sense of a 'life force' is explicitly present in the European medicinal cannibalism which is known to persist until the last two hundred years.

These same worldviews revealed by ethnographers show that at souls are, contrary to modern popular thinking, quite distinct from spirit-deities. Despite Christianity's apparent change in emphasis to a single soul, the doctrine of the Last Judgement again suggests at least some degree of 'carry over' of a belief in the posthumous 'identity' of the bones which equates to widespread traditional beliefs in a 'bone soul'. Perhaps only coincidentally, depictions of Christ in Judgement perhaps sustain a pre-Christian worldview in which the *nornir* also acted in quasi-legal judgement.

To understand the pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon worldview we need to at least partially strip away changes in Christian belief over the last thousand years.

A 'recycled' angel. Edwina Bridgeman's other-than-human-person adding potentia *to the Fresh Air exhibition, Quenington, Gloucestershire, summer 2011. (Author's photograph.)*

However we must be careful not to strip away too much as the early Christian worldview – and indeed a good deal of the popular religious practice before the tenth or eleventh centuries – seemingly shares a wordlview all-but indistinguishable from its pagan precursors (see The Twilight Age Volume One *Continuity of Worldviews in Anglo-Saxon England* and The Twilight Age Volume Three *Continuity of Anglo-Saxon Iconography*). Popular thinking about the Dark Ages has yet to properly recognise that early Christianity is not so much a break with paganism but rather a continuity of early outlooks and practices, albeit with the 'meaning and significance' evolving and shifting.

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This work draws upon the work of many scholars in a wide range of disciplines and I have attempted to indicate specific debts in the references and list of sources. However I would like to draw attention to several people without whose books and original insights my ideas would simply have never been formed. So special appreciation to Martin Carver, Robert DeCaroli, James Russell, Kristofer Schipper, Sarah Semple and Clive Tolley. Suffice to say, they may not agree with everything that is written here.

Greg Hill kindly sent two emails correcting remarks in previous editions about *nwyfre* ('aether' – literally 'not air or sky'). He established that modern Druids seem to use this word when they mean *nwyf* ('passion, desire, vitality'). My reference has been deleted from this edition.

My thanks to all the photographers whose images have been used according to creative commons licenses. Both thanks and apologies to those whose images have been used without a credit, as either no information was available on the website where I found the image or – in just a few instances – where I did not make a note of any information about the image and have not been able to find it again. Please contact me if you would like these omissions corrected.

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