

The Land between God and the Devil

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In the late 10th century, Abbot Ælfric of Eynsham wrote worriedly about witches in the English countryside, claiming they stood on ancient barrows to summon the Devil, who arrived in the guise of the dead buried beneath their feet. Writings from early medieval England hint at apprehension about the ancient landscape, and particularly with these man-made mounds, which housed a great unknown beneath them: the dead of the pre-Christian inhabitants of the island, whose practices, to the converted English, were disturbing ones to think upon. Even today, time seems to sit thin on these landscapes. The past seeps through the soil and the stone and the grass in some places: a feeling that those who came before you might still be there.

To Ælfric, the threat of witchcraft was real. Many Christian and Jewish exegetes in the early middle ages inferred so from several sources including the Biblical story of the witch of Endor. The tale from the Torah, found in the Old Testament 1 Samuel 28:3-25, tells how King Saul, having worn through every possibility to defeat the Philistines, calls for a diviner to summon the spirit of the prophet Samuel for advice. Despite having exiled all mediums and diviners from the land, Saul's men knew where to find one: in the city of Endor. The woman diviner reluctantly summons Samuel from below the ground, and he correctly predicts Saul's demise the very next day.

Since necromancy was an act of witchcraft, and divination—also considered magic—was frowned upon, medieval exegetes tried to find ways to justify Saul's behaviour. For example, in around 1030, Samuel ben Hofni wrote that the woman had deceived the king, and that neither prophecy nor necromancy were involved. Nevertheless, the majority of Christian and Jewish exegetes in the early middle ages believed that a demon had appeared in the guise of the prophet Samuel. This, of course, was no small cause for concern, as active danger could come from summoning a demon or the Devil himself.

Witches and their landscapes

This stance of many exegetes is the one Ælfric took. In his work *De Auguriis*, "About Omens", he claimed that witches' work and prophecies were solely from the Devil. Like their counterpart from Endor, the witches who lived in Ælfric's time worked harm. Witches, he wrote, "still go to cross-roads and to heathen burials with their delusive magic and call to the devil; and he comes to them in the likeness of the man who is buried there, as if he arose from death." Non-Christian rituals, including consulting auguries, oracles or diviners, worried the church fathers. Many early medieval penitentials assign penance for these actions. The seventh-century *Life of St Eligius* condemned practices of magic which sometimes took place at crossroads. Martin of Braga, in the sixth century, wrote with dismay about the habit of travellers placing stones at crossroads to form cairns, which, as late as the eleventh century, Burchard of Worms was also noting with displeasure. Some of these are simply non-Christian customs, an offering to a god. But other practices at crossroads, as well as barrows, were deeper causes of concern.

Ælfric's account speaks of many worries, but there are many linked with the land itself. In *De Auguriis*, in addition to condemning calling the devil at barrows, he also claimed that the heathen practice of drawing children from the ground took place at crossroads. This was further described by the great archbishop and law-writer Wulfstan of York (d. 1023), though tantalisingly vaguely: "each priest... forbids... the devil's craft that one performs when people draw children through the earth" (translated by Roger Fowler). What this practice is remains unknown, though Ælfric believed the women were giving their children over to the Devil. Sally Crawford suggests this is some sort of an initiation ceremony: "Just as a Christian child is sacrificed through the waters of baptism, effectively to die to allow for a rebirth in Christ," Crawford writes, "so these children were being given a symbolic death in the ground, presumably as an act of dedication to another deity."

The other landscape feature Ælfric associates with the practice of witchcraft is barrows. An Old English charm from the turn of the millennium now known as *Wið færstice* also links witches with barrows. It starts with these lines: "They were loud, yes, when they rode over the burial mound"—the "they" in question here are *mihtigan wif*, mighty women. Later in the charm they are called *hægtessan*, a difficult word to translate as it only occurs six times in the Old English narrative sources, three in this particular charm. Although generically translated as hag or witch, the connotations of *hægtessan* imply those with "erotic and mind-altering characteristics", as Eric Lacey explains—not necessarily summoning or demon-related witches. But in this charm, these mighty women are also associated with a barrow, riding over one to chase after a man overcome with fear.

Landscape as memoryscape

Records of lands and landscapes in early medieval England reflect a certain worries about the past, **rendering landscape into memoryscape**. A landscape is never just a passive backdrop, but an active anchor of history and memory. A memoryscape, as Mark Nuttall has said, is a place whose name is imbued with past events, the meaning of which—whether historical or mythological—was known by all people in a community. Landscapes hold and shape memory, and affect those who walk in them.

In an early 10th-century charter (a record of a land transaction) outlining the boundaries of the estate at Aughton, Wiltshire, one barrow is marked as *haepen an byrgelsan*, a "heathen burial place". The boundaries of Crondall, Hampshire, also note two "heathen burials", one which was the burial place of a man named Ælfstan. The notation "heathen burials" for barrows was used frequently, evoking fears about the strange limbo inhabited by those who were buried beneath. One boundary in Sussex, though, is even more specific about the contents of a barrow found there. It is a place *on Echilde hlæwe a þa smye wicce*. Although the translation is contested, one possibility is akin to 'Echild's mound, where there is always that crafty witch,' implying a mound that was the place of the burial of a witch, or a place where the witch tended to be, such as with the women in the charm mentioned above. The difficulties with this particular text, which is only in existence from a fifteenth-century copy, means an exact translation is impossible. However, we can take this charter boundary clause in combination with another charter containing the same bounds, which called this place *eccinga hlæwe*,

the mound of the descendants of Eocce. The meanings of this place remain elusive, stuck in possibilities rather than certainties.

That so many of these memory-filled barrows are on boundaries also speaks volumes. These boundaries prosaically marked the lines between estates, parishes, and shires—in-between places that were neither one nor the other. But the barrows on those boundaries made them further liminal, and also thresholds: sites between the dead and the living, the criminal and the innocent, life and afterlife. One illustration in the early eleventh-century Harley Psalter (British Library 603) shows decapitated men, likely criminals, buried beneath a mound. Boundaries lines were often used as the place for the gallows to execute condemned men and women, and execution cemeteries were usually nearby. On these boundaries, the heads of criminals were sometimes displayed on stakes, their visual impact making them sites of warning. Several charter boundaries reference *heofod stocc* – head stakes – where this would have been, one most notably where the boundaries of the estates of Headbourne Worthy, Chilcomb and Easton, Hampshire, meet. (Today, significantly, this village outside of Winchester derives its name Harestock from *heofod stocc*, its gory past hidden below leafy suburbia.) In the early middle ages, boundaries, crossroads and barrows were a place for the damned in this life and possibly the next.

Othered people and other places

According to King Alfred's laws, no doubt an elaboration from the biblical Exodus, witches were not allowed to live. In the coronation homily for King Edward in 975, Archbishop (later Saint) Dunstan made it a part of the king's duties to expel witches from the kingdom. But the words of Alfred, Ælfric, and Dunstan aren't necessarily indicative of how pervasive any practices of witchcraft were, and probably reflect Christian anxiety: the only historical, rather than literary or hagiographical, record of witchcraft in pre-Conquest England, in fact, is the record of a woman being drowned for it in the later 10th century. It's part of a charter that gives a brief account of how the estate at Ailsworth, Northamptonshire, had come to Wulfstan Ucce. The previous owner, a widow and her son, had been accused of putting iron stakes into an image of Wulfstan's father. The widow was charged and drowned below the bridge on the ancient Roman Ermine Street at the River Nene—perhaps, as Anthony Davies has suggested, an early example of the trial by cold water, in which the accused was found innocent if they sank and guilty if they floated. The king took the dead widow's estate and gave it to Wulfstan Ucce. The witchcraft accusation likely masked tension over property ownership and a convenient way to rid oneself of a landowner. No barrows were involved in this incident either.

The links between the earth and death were ones which were strong in the early medieval period, though. In the epic poem *Beowulf*, Grendel's mother dwelled in a subterranean lair, which, set against the spectacular wooden hall of Heorot, indicated a darkness, dankness and distrust to features seen as cold and still. Later in the epic, the dragon also lives in a stone and earth structure, thought to possibly represent a long barrow itself. The poem manifests in the land too: charter bounds in Devon notes a Grendel's pit/hole/(even more ominously) grave (*Grendeles pyt*). Grendel's pit and Grendel's mere appear in several more records in Worcestershire and Wiltshire. The Old English poem *The Wife's Lament*, found in the 10th-century Exeter Book, is also reminiscent of this liminal existence.

The narrator is an exiled woman mournfully living in an earthen dugout (*eorðscraefe*). In some interpretations, however, this woman is not simply exiled, but dead and confined to a barrow. The earthen mound linked the past to the medieval present in a visible, tangible way: a reminder of mortality as well as a link to the great unknown of both the past and one's own afterlife.

From ancient times, the links between the dead and the earth were strong. Hittite cultures gave to the dead in the underworld at offering pits. Sacrifices to the Greek Chthonic gods included the letting of animal blood directly into the ground at their shrines. Even the witch of Endor brings Samuel from the ground, rising up from the earth like a ghostly figure (1 Samuel 28:13-14.) By the 11th century, concept of holy ground had taken root within the Christian church, with the dead only to be buried in consecrated lands. The tension between 'good' earth and dangerous grounds was clear, to say nothing of the fretfulness of Church writers over continuing offerings to different gods at crossroads. The anger with which Ælfric thought of witches summoning the Devil at burial mounds lies in tension with practices of multi-faceted religions, but speaks to deep unease about "othered" people and "other" places. The landscape of England, formed into a memoryscape with the knowledge of its use in the past, created mounds where witches could summon, criminals could be executed, and boundaries laid and maintained. To some, these were places of unease, a reminder of liminality and mortality. These barrows dotted the landscape, perhaps haunted by those within them, the *pagani* of the past who might be the vessel for the Devil.

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