

# Pre-Christian Ruins as Reservoirs of Supernatural Agency in Egypt, Ireland and Peru

Lloyd D. Graham

## *Introduction*

This brief note highlights the fact that a range of ancient ruins, which collectively span three continents (Africa, Europe and South America) and date from the Neolithic to the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> millennium CE, were – and often still are – viewed as repositories of negative supernatural power by their Christian heirs. Here the phenomenon is illustrated by examples from Egypt, Ireland and Peru. As we shall see, most of the sites both were and are strongly associated with the realm of the dead. In Christian times, fear of misadventure or calamity typically inspired a respectful avoidance of such pre-Christian sites and structures (Irish *sí* mounds and megaliths, Peruvian *huacas*), but it could also precipitate monkish interventions which sought to destroy, neutralise or constrain the sites' perceived demonic power (Egyptian tombs and temples).

Suitably qualified ritual practitioners could also access the power of these sites for magical or medical use; such exploitation could either be negative (in curses and sorcery) or positive (in traditional healing). A particularly simple healing practice – one associated with Egyptian temples – probably did not require the mediation of a specialist practitioner.

## *Egypt*

The early Copts perceived ancient Egyptian tombs and temples as sources of non-Christian supernatural power; accordingly, they frequently defaced what they considered to be demonic entities in the ancient wall art,<sup>1</sup> as well as adding Biblical texts to the walls and incising Christian crosses into the plasterwork to neutralise the resident evil.<sup>2</sup> In other cases, they plastered over the ancient scenes to conceal them in their entirety.<sup>3</sup> Such modifications were considered sufficiently effective that monks could then use rock-cut ancient tombs for living-quarters, schools and even churches.<sup>4</sup>

---

Unless otherwise indicated, all URLs were accessed 20 Aug, 2022.

<sup>1</sup> Sydney Aufrère (1998) “L’Égypte Traditionnelle, ses Démones Vus par les Premiers Chrétiens,” In: *Études Coptes V: Sixième Journée d’Études, Limoges, 18-20 Juin 1993, et Septième Journée d’Études, Neuchâtel, 18-20 Mai 1995*, ed. M. Rassart-Debergh, Peeters, Paris, 63-92.

<sup>2</sup> Jun Yi Wong (2016) “Raze of Glory: Interpreting Iconoclasm at Edfu and Dendera,” *Journal of Late Antiquity* 9 (1): 89-131; Nicole B. Hansen (2020) “Egyptian Iconoclasm: The Mother of All Art Destruction,” *The Collector*, 25 July, online at <https://www.thecollector.com/egyptian-iconoclasm/>.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., Sara Isaac, Youssri Abdelwahed & Eltayeb Abbas (2018) “Coptic Modifications in the Tombs of Beni Hassan,” *Minia Journal of Tourism and Hospitality Research* 6 (2/2): 118-148, online at [https://mjthr.journals.ekb.eg/article\\_209002\\_c383927406eb19fa48c65cb6246655b4.pdf](https://mjthr.journals.ekb.eg/article_209002_c383927406eb19fa48c65cb6246655b4.pdf); Hansen (2020).

<sup>4</sup> Isaac *et al.* (2018); Hansen (2020).

After the Islamic conquest of Egypt in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE, Muslim iconoclasm against ancient Egyptian remains occurred sporadically, but was very limited in scale:

Hostility towards the Pharaonic past sometimes took the form of attacks on ancient monuments during the medieval period. Such attacks did not always meet with widespread approval, and it seems clear that many Egyptians took a more ambivalent attitude towards their distant past. [...] Throughout the medieval and modern periods there was always at least some degree of popular veneration for the country's ancient monuments.<sup>5</sup>

One expression of this ongoing veneration saw the spiritual power of ancient Egyptian temples and tombs being recruited for medico-magical purposes. Publicly accessible parts of many temple walls bear long vertical grooves known as “pilgrim’s gouges”<sup>6</sup> where – over the course of millennia – the fabric of the stone has been scraped away by (probably illiterate) people to ingest as a magical cure.<sup>7</sup> The practice is attested from the New Kingdom down to modern times,<sup>8</sup> so it was presumably adopted in turn by Coptic and Muslim Egyptians. It had a Roman Catholic counterpart in which “The powder obtained by scraping the tombstones of saints, when placed in water or wine, was in great repute as a remedy,”<sup>9</sup> and this type of cure was dispensed liberally to the sick by the 6<sup>th</sup>-century bishop, Gregory of Tours. A similar practice no doubt explains the conspicuous oblong cavities gouged into the walls of many European churches.<sup>10</sup> Presumably, Egyptian patients (or relatives acting on their behalf) were able to scrape the temple walls for themselves without needing the services of a ritualist.

The magical use of Egyptian tombs in the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium CE also seems to have perpetuated earlier pharaonic practices, but to have been darker in nature. Robert Ritner points out that:

the most notable feature of [ancient] Egyptian cursing was its reliance on the vengeful nature of the angry dead. [...] Curses were regularly deposited in abandoned graveyards, effectively handing over the intended victim to the disgruntled ghost, who was further compelled to service by oaths. [...] With the Christianization of Egypt, older concepts and techniques were not simply abandoned, and the mechanics of ancient Egyptian cursing reappear in Coptic, and later Islamic, practices.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Michael Wood (1998) “The Use of the Pharaonic Past in Modern Egyptian Nationalism,” *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 35: 179-196, at 187.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Brand (2007) “Veils, Votives, and Marginalia: The Use of Sacred Space at Karnak and Luxor,” In: *Sacred Space and Sacred Function in Ancient Thebes* [Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization 61], eds. Peter F. Dorman & Betsy M. Bryan, 51-84, at 60 (fn. 99).

<sup>7</sup> Claude Traunecker (1987) “Une Pratique de Magie Populaire dans les Temples de Karnak,” In: *La Magia in Egitto ai Tempi dei Faraoni: Atti, Convegno Internazionale di Studi, Milano, 29-31 Ottobre 1985*, eds. Alessandro Roccati & Alberto Siliotti, Rassegna Internazionale di Cinematografia Archeologica Arte e Natura Libri, Verona, 221-242.

<sup>8</sup> Traunecker (1987), from the English-language summary in the Online Egyptological Bibliography, online at [https://oeb.griffith.ox.ac.uk/oeb\\_entry.aspx?item=32540](https://oeb.griffith.ox.ac.uk/oeb_entry.aspx?item=32540).

<sup>9</sup> Robert M. Lawrence (1910) *Primitive Psycho-Therapy and Quackery*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston & New York, 168.

<sup>10</sup> Traunecker (1987), from the summary in the Online Egyptological Bibliography.

<sup>11</sup> Robert K. Ritner (1999) “Introduction” [to Chap. 7, “Curses”], In: *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power*, eds. Marvin W. Meyer & Richard Smith, Harper Collins, San Francisco, 183-186, at 184.

Several texts in the associated compendium of Coptic curses (*ACM* 88-102) rely on this mechanism.<sup>12</sup> For example, within the text of *ACM* 96 – “Lead curse against the health of Kyriakos” (Cologne T 10 , 6-7<sup>th</sup> century CE) we read: “At the moment that I shall place you [i.e. the curse tablet] beneath this corpse, you must cast Kyr(i)akos son of Sanne, the man from Penjeho, into a painful sickness.”<sup>13</sup> While it is possible that in this case the corpse did not need to be ancient, in the text of *ACM* 109 – “Curse to separate a man and a woman” (Louvre E.14.250, *ca.* 10<sup>th</sup> century CE) we are told that the curse will be placed “at the door of this tomb of these Greeks.”<sup>14</sup> For the Copts of Late Antiquity, “individuals who had lived before the Christianisation of Egypt were understood as ‘pagans’ (*hellēnes*, literally ‘Greeks’),”<sup>15</sup> so it is almost certain that the curse’s efficacy relied on it being placed at the entrance to an ancient Egyptian tomb.<sup>16</sup> As Korshi Dosoo has recently pointed out, “The remains of Pharaonic civilisation could thus serve as a resource for those wishing to carry out curse rituals.”<sup>17</sup>

A 9/10<sup>th</sup>-century CE Coptic curse formula, found inscribed in three versions upon animal rib-bones, instructs the soul of a deceased ancient Egyptian to inflict death and the torments of hell – where, naturally, the soul of such a pre-Christian man was presumed to reside<sup>18</sup> – upon a named living victim. One of the embodiments was found in a nomarch’s tomb at Asyut, which dates back to the First Intermediate Period (*ca.* 2040 BCE); the complex underwent extensive reuse for human and animal burials before finally being converted into a monastic dwelling in 4<sup>th</sup> century CE.<sup>19</sup> Presumably the inscribed rib-bone had originally been placed beneath an ancient Egyptian mummy with the intention that the soul of this individual should implement the curse.<sup>20</sup> The relevant section of the Coptic text reads: “I adjure you (s.), oh dead one, by the way upon which they took you and the punishment that came upon you [...] that [...] at the moment that I place this bone under you, that just as you have suffered, you shall bring your suffering down upon Harōn the son of Tkouikira! Yea, yea! Quickly, quickly! Go, quickly!”<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Marvin W. Meyer & Richard Smith (eds.) *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power*, Harper Collins, San Francisco, 187-226.

<sup>13</sup> Robert K. Ritner (1999) “Lead curse against the health of Kyriakos,” In: *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power*, eds. Marvin W. Meyer & Richard Smith, Harper Collins, San Francisco, 202.

<sup>14</sup> Marvin Meyer (1999) “Curse to separate a man and a woman, using necromancy and a blade-shaped parchment,” In: *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power*, eds. Marvin W. Meyer & Richard Smith, Harper Collins, San Francisco, 221.

<sup>15</sup> Korshi Dosoo (2021) “The Powers of Death : Memory, Place and Eschatology in a Coptic Curse,” *Religion in the Roman Empire* 7 (1): 167-194, at 184.

<sup>16</sup> Dosoo (2021: 184).

<sup>17</sup> Dosoo (2021: 184).

<sup>18</sup> Dosoo (2021: 185-187 & 189); Abba Wissa (2015) *The Life of St. Shenouda: Translation of the Arabic Life*, St. Shenouda’s Monastery, Sydney, 163-164.

<sup>19</sup> Dosoo (2021: 170).

<sup>20</sup> Dosoo (2021: 181).

<sup>21</sup> Dosoo (2021: 173-174).

## *Ireland*

Neolithic burial tumuli (i.e. mounds) – called *sí* in modern Irish – are scattered liberally across the Irish landscape;<sup>22</sup> in some cases, the covering of earth has been lost and the stone skeleton stands exposed as a dolmen or other bare megalith. These structures testify to the ancient belief in “the pre-eminent role of the dead, and the involvement of the dead within the realm of the living.”<sup>23</sup> In mythology, the *sí* mounds became the refuge and subterranean home of the Tuatha Dé Danann,<sup>24</sup> the pantheon of the island who predated – and were displaced by – the coming of the Gaels.<sup>25</sup> Early Christian writers ensured that the *aes síde* [“people of the *sí*”] were perceived as “deeply alien, semi-demonized” beings.<sup>26</sup> In Irish folklore they are considered to be hosts of the afterlife and are themselves identified with the dead, especially with the pre-Christian dead or with more recently deceased individuals lost to the Church.<sup>27</sup> The wailing of the banshee – from the Irish *bean sí* [“woman of the *sí*”] – presages an imminent death.<sup>28</sup> As portals to the Otherworld, *sí* sites inspired awe and dread among the living; the *sí* spirits were propitiated at seasonal festivals (including Samhain, the forerunner of Halloween) and their inhabitants were routinely referred to by the euphemism *na daoine uaisle* – “the good people” – in the hope that flattery would avert any malice on their part.<sup>29</sup>

The *sí* folk were feared because they were known to abduct healthy children and replace them with withered changelings;<sup>30</sup> they were also able to turn milk sour and to inflict harm by way of elfshot, the fairy wind, and the evil eye.<sup>31</sup> They could even invade the homes of humans with a view to harassing or exploiting them.<sup>32</sup> The reverse situation – the entry of a human into a *sí* mound – was usually a bittersweet experience which did not end well for the protagonist. In mythology, the intrepid human is typically a hunter who unwittingly gives chase to the queen of the *sí* in her animal or human form. Soon,

he becomes disoriented as he finds himself in an unfamiliar part of the forest. Still he follows the chase and is soon led to the entrance into the fairy mound, or *sidhe*. When he enters he finds himself in a beautiful world of boundless happiness and the

---

<sup>22</sup> Tok Thompson (2004) “The Irish Sí Tradition: Connections between the Disciplines, and What’s in a Word?” *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 11 (4): 335-368, at 353.

<sup>23</sup> Thompson (2004: 353).

<sup>24</sup> Thompson (2004: 348, 352 & 355).

<sup>25</sup> Lloyd D. Graham (2002) “The *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* at a Glance: An Overview of the 11<sup>th</sup> Century Irish Book of Invasions,” hosted at Mary Jones’ *Celtic Encyclopedia*, most recent version online at [https://www.academia.edu/440499/The\\_Lebor\\_Gab%C3%A1la\\_%C3%89renn\\_at\\_a\\_Glance\\_an\\_Overview\\_of\\_the\\_11th\\_Century\\_Irish\\_Book\\_of\\_Invasions](https://www.academia.edu/440499/The_Lebor_Gab%C3%A1la_%C3%89renn_at_a_Glance_an_Overview_of_the_11th_Century_Irish_Book_of_Invasions).

<sup>26</sup> John T. Koch (1991) “Ériu, Alba and Letha: When was a Language Ancestral to Gaelic First Spoken in Ireland?” *Emania* 9: 17-27, at 24.

<sup>27</sup> Thompson (2004: 357-358).

<sup>28</sup> Thompson (2004: 350-351).

<sup>29</sup> Thompson (2004: 360).

<sup>30</sup> Thomas J. Westropp (1921) “A Study of Folklore on the Coasts of Connacht, Ireland,” *Folklore* 32 (2): 101-123, at 103-105.

<sup>31</sup> L. MacDonald (1993) “Celtic Folklore: The People of the Mounds – Articles on the Sidhe,” *Dalriada Magazine*, now archived at [https://deoxy.org/h\\_mounds.htm](https://deoxy.org/h_mounds.htm); Morgan Daimler (2014) “The Witch, the *Bean Feasa*, and the Fairy Doctor in Irish Culture,” *Air n-Aithesc* 1 (2), online at [https://www.academia.edu/17823067/The\\_Witch\\_the\\_Bean\\_Feasa\\_and\\_the\\_Fairy\\_Doctor\\_in\\_Irish\\_Culture](https://www.academia.edu/17823067/The_Witch_the_Bean_Feasa_and_the_Fairy_Doctor_in_Irish_Culture).

<sup>32</sup> Áine O’Neill (1991) “‘The Fairy Hill is on Fire!’ (MLSIT 6071),” *Béaloidéas* 59 [Proceedings of the Symposium on the Supernatural in Irish and Scottish Migratory Legends 1991], 189-196.

source of all wisdom. [...] In this Otherworld, the hero is immeasurably happy while he participates in abundant feasting, drinking, fighting, and sexual activity. Soon, however, the hero yearns to revisit the human world to see old friends and loved ones and he is ultimately granted permission to leave. When the hero returns to the normal human world he discovers that, while only a year or two had passed inside the fairy mound, hundreds of years have passed in the world of humans, and all of his friends and loved ones have long been dead.<sup>33</sup>

In their original form, *sí* structures were adorned with white quartzite pebbles and boulders which glittered brightly in sunlight.<sup>34</sup> The retaining wall at the front of the large Neolithic passage tomb at Newgrange, Co. Meath, has been reconstructed using the countless white quartzite cobblestones found at the site.<sup>35</sup> The living were forbidden to use this type of stone; great misfortune was expected to befall transgressors of this taboo.<sup>36</sup> As a result, any evicted peasant family was able to curse its dwelling before quitting it by placing such stones in a fire on the hearth, whereupon “the *sí* spirits would manifest in all their righteous malevolence.”<sup>37</sup> When employed by suitably qualified practitioners, however, such “fairy stones” could be used to heal the sick and injured. For example, St. Columba is reported to have healed patients by means of a special white stone, and folkloric accounts often refer to the curative powers of the white crystal pebbles, which were used by traditional healers known (in an outmoded English phrase) as “fairy doctors.”<sup>38</sup> These practitioners were often female; there was substantial overlap between the “fairy doctor” and the *bean feasa* (“wise woman”).<sup>39</sup>

## **Peru**

The pre-Columbian ruins of Peru, known today as *huacas*, are viewed by locals as repositories of supernatural agency and feared as potential sources of illness. The Moche (100-750 CE), like the Sicán people that succeeded them (700-1350 CE), were pyramid-builders, so many prominent *huacas* are in fact the remains of pyramids. The Moche practiced blood sacrifice;<sup>40</sup> in the Moche archaeological complex near Trujillo known as El Brujo, the Cao Viejo temple is adorned by a coloured frieze showing bound captives being led to their deaths,<sup>41</sup> while at Cerro Blanco – the ancient Moche capital – the Huaca de la Luna (Pyramid of the Moon) contained the remains of over 60 young males, seemingly

---

<sup>33</sup> Craig A. Childress (1999) “Archetypal Conceptualization of Cyberspace as the Celtic Otherworld,” *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 2 (3): 261-265, at 262.

<sup>34</sup> Thompson (2004: 358-359).

<sup>35</sup> Claire O’Kelly (2003) *Concise Guide to Newgrange*, O’Kelly, Cork, 9-10.

<sup>36</sup> Thompson (2004: 359-360).

<sup>37</sup> Thompson (2004: 359).

<sup>38</sup> Thompson (2004: 360).

<sup>39</sup> Daimler (2014).

<sup>40</sup> Carod-Artal, F.J. & Vázquez-Cabrera, C.B. (2007) “Semillas Psicoactivas Sagradas y Sacrificios Rituales en la Cultura Moche,” *Revista de Neurología* 44 (1): 43-50.

<sup>41</sup> [Peru-Specialist] (n.d.) “The Pyramids of El Brujo and the Señora de Cao,” [peru-specialist.com](https://en.peru-spezialisten.com/the-pyramids-of-el-brujo-and-the-senora-de-cao/), online at <https://en.peru-spezialisten.com/the-pyramids-of-el-brujo-and-the-senora-de-cao/>; Martha Conboy (ed.) (1995) *Lost Civilizations*, ep. 8: *The Inca: Secrets of the Ancestors*, narr. Sam Waterston, Time Life DVD series, at 0:37:14-0:39:25; Lloyd D. Graham (2021) “Between *Catrin*as and *Ñatitas*: The Decorated Skulls of a North Peruvian Shaman,” online at [https://www.academia.edu/46757155/Between\\_catrin\\_and\\_%C3%B1atitas\\_The\\_decorated\\_skulls\\_of\\_a\\_north\\_Peruvian\\_shaman](https://www.academia.edu/46757155/Between_catrin_and_%C3%B1atitas_The_decorated_skulls_of_a_north_Peruvian_shaman), 8-10, incl. Fig. 9.

victims who were sacrificed *ca.* 500 CE.<sup>42</sup> Such events would have lingered long in local memory. In modern Peru, the Spanish phrase *aire de huaca* denotes “a sickness caused by the air from archaeological ruins.”<sup>43</sup> It is one of several “illnesses caused by spirits of the dead, such as *susto* (soul loss), *aire de muerto* (air of the dead, especially common near cemeteries), and *aire de huaca* (air of dead pagans, *gentiles*; found especially near archaeological ruins).”<sup>44</sup>

The Sicán people (700-1350 CE) built the impressive site of Túcume.<sup>45</sup> The precinct – which is today called “El Purgatorio” [“Purgatory”]<sup>46</sup> – contains the remains of twenty-six monumental mudbrick pyramids grouped around a sacred mountain or hill (*cerro*),<sup>47</sup> whose form and function the man-made constructions were probably intended to emulate.<sup>48</sup> For the Sicán, this was a sacred space to which only a privileged group had access.<sup>49</sup> “The hill was a place of contact with the mythical world, a place of sacrifices, probably including people ‘eaten’ by the mountain.”<sup>50</sup> Indigenous fear of the site seems to have been exploited and amplified by Spaniards in early colonial times;<sup>51</sup> it is little wonder, then, that local people seek to avoid the site today.<sup>52</sup>

On the other hand, items taken from *huacas* – such as stones, ceramics and/or skulls<sup>53</sup> – are commonly included as power-objects in the *mesas* (ceremonial altars) that are indispensable to the practice of *curanderismo*, an indigenous form of shamanistic healing which straddles both Roman Catholic and local pre-Christian beliefs. Such objects are usually placed in the left-hand half of the *mesa*, the so-called *Campo Ganadero* (Field of the Dominator), which

---

<sup>42</sup> John W. Verano (2000) “Paleopathological Analysis of Sacrificial Victims at the Pyramid of the Moon, Moche River Valley, Northern Peru,” *Chungara: Revista de Antropología Chilena* 32 (1): 61-70; Graham (2021: 8-10, incl. Fig. 10).

<sup>43</sup> Donald Joralemon & Douglas Sharon (1993) *Sorcery and Shamanism: Curanderos and Clients in Northern Peru*, University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City, 36.

<sup>44</sup> Joralemon & Sharon (1993: 50-51).

<sup>45</sup> Antonio Aimi, Krzysztof Makowski & Emilia Perassi (eds.) (2017) *Lambayeque: Nuevos Horizontes de la Arqueología Peruana*, LediPublishing, Milan; Izumi Shimada (2003) “Sicán,” In: *Grove Art Online*, Oxford, online at <https://doi.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T078493>.

<sup>46</sup> Graham (2021: 20, 31 [Figs. 31 & 32] & 32).

<sup>47</sup> Izumi Shimada (2000) “The Late Prehispanic Coastal States,” In: *The Inca World: The Development of Pre-Columbian Peru, A.D. 1000-1534*, ed. Laura Laurencich Minelli, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 49-110, at 62-63; [World Monuments Fund] (n.d.) “Túcume Archaeological Site,” World Monuments Fund, online at <https://www.wmf.org/project/t%C3%BAcume-archaeological-site>; Bernarda Delgado & Alfredo Narváez (2017) “Huaca las Balsas y las Pirámides de Túcume,” In: *Lambayeque: Nuevos Horizontes de la Arqueología Peruana*, eds. Antonio Aimi, Krzysztof Makowski & Emilia Perassi, LediPublishing, Milan. 219-242 (incl. map on p.223).

<sup>48</sup> Joralemon & Sharon (1993: 105).

<sup>49</sup> Delgado & Narváez (2017: 222). Quotations have been translated into English by the present author.

<sup>50</sup> Delgado & Narváez (2017: 229-230).

<sup>51</sup> [Lonely Planet] (n.d.) “Túcume,” Lonely Planet South America – Peru, online at <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/peru/around-chiclayo/attractions/tucume/a/poi-sig/1165747/1327131>.

<sup>52</sup> InkaNatura, cited by [La Datco Tours] (n.d.) “Tucume,” La Datco Tours, online at <https://www.ladatco.com/PER%20CIX-Tucume.htm>; [Anywhere – Peru] (n.d.) “Tucume,” Anywhere – Peru, online at <https://www.anywhere.com/peru/attractions/tucume-archaeological-site>.

<sup>53</sup> For stones, see below; for ceramics: see Graham (2021: 27 [Fig. 26] & 34 [Fig. 34]); for skulls, see Graham (2021: 41-44, incl. Figs. 38 & 39).



is associated with black magic, suffering and Satan.<sup>54</sup> Artifacts in this field are used to provide defence against sorcerers' spells and dangerous supernatural forces, either by domination or deflection.<sup>55</sup> The Moche archaeological site of El Brujo – which translates as “the Wizard”<sup>56</sup> – is thought to be named for the modern-day *curanderos* (i.e. healers and shamans) who visit the Moche pyramids to charge their magical artifacts (*artes*) with energy for their work.<sup>57</sup> Some of the *artes* in the *mesa* assemblage of Eduardo Calderón – “perhaps the most famous of contemporary Peruvian healers” – consisted of stones taken from archaeological ruins.<sup>58</sup> When treating illnesses that are believed to have been caused by sorcery (*daño*), fortifying ingredients may need to be added to the traditional San Pedro brew that grants the *curandero* his hallucinatory insight; typical additives include powdered bones, dust taken from a cemetery and – in a practice reminiscent of Egyptian temple wall-scrapings – dirt collected from a *huaca*.<sup>59</sup> Since objects from *huacas* are placed in the field of the *mesa* which contains “artifacts associated with the forces of evil and death,”<sup>60</sup> and since sorcery is typically cured by counter-sorcery effected by the *curandero*,<sup>61</sup> it seems inevitable that power-objects from *huacas* can be used both to inflict and to relieve suffering.

In trance, the wandering spirits of the *curanderos* are able to visit the interiors of *huacas* and commune with the inhabitants.<sup>62</sup> Helmer Aguilar, a north Peruvian *curandero*, explained that each of the seeds in a shaman's rattle opens a door within a *huaca* (or its equivalent, a sacred mountain). There are so many doors that it would be exhausting to have to knock on each one individually to gain access to the spirit behind it, so the rattle acts as a labour-saving device.<sup>63</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This note has outlined in brief several features common to the reception of ancient ruins by the Christian populations of three countries, each located on a different continent. The countries in question are Egypt, Ireland and Peru. The ancient sites were (for Egypt) and still are (for Ireland and Peru) feared as sources of supernatural agency by older and more traditionally-minded members of the local populations. In all three countries, the ancient sites – with the exception of Egyptian temples – are strongly associated with the realm of the dead, which reflects rather well the structures' original purpose as funerary monuments (Egyptian tombs, Irish *sí* mounds and megaliths) or as sites of recurring human sacrifice (Peruvian *huacas*).

---

<sup>54</sup> Joralemon & Sharon (1993: 8, 20-21, 31 & 65); Graham (2021: 34-35, incl. Fig. 34).

<sup>55</sup> Joralemon & Sharon (1993: 31 & 58).

<sup>56</sup> Gwin, Peter (2004) “Peruvian Temple of Doom,” *National Geographic* 206 (1), 102.

<sup>57</sup> Jordán, Régulo F. (n.d.) “El Brujo and Lady of Cao: The Witch Archaeological Complex,” Go2Peru, online at [https://www.go2peru.com/peru\\_guide/trujillo/brujo\\_trujillo.htm](https://www.go2peru.com/peru_guide/trujillo/brujo_trujillo.htm); accessed 10 Apr, 2021.

<sup>58</sup> Joralemon & Sharon (1993: 20).

<sup>59</sup> La Barre, Weston (1979) “Peyotl and Mescaline,” *Journal of Psychedelic Drugs* 11 (1-2), 33-39, at 33.

<sup>60</sup> Joralemon & Sharon (1993: 5).

<sup>61</sup> Joralemon & Sharon (1993: 197).

<sup>62</sup> Joralemon & Sharon (1993: 105).

<sup>63</sup> Joralemon & Sharon (1993: 108).

Suitably qualified ritual practitioners were/are able to access the power of these sites for magical or medical use; such exploitation might either be negative (in Coptic and Irish curses and in Peruvian sorcery) or positive (in healings by Irish “fairy doctors” and Peruvian *curanderos*). It is probably no accident that the one magical practice that seems not to have required expert mediation – i.e. the ingestion of wall-scrapings – involved a simple and therapeutic use of Egyptian temples, the only category of structure not associated with the dead. Another possible reason is that the practice originated within the culture that built the ancient structures, where the monuments would have lacked the mystique, strangeness and danger imputed to them by subsequent cultures.

Magical-medical exploitation usually involved removing ancient material from the pre-Christian sites for subsequent ritual use (Egyptian temple-powder cures; Irish and Peruvian healings and curses), although Peruvian ritualists could also bring their own items to *huacas* in order to “charge” them with the sites’ magical power. Coptic curses, however, required the permanent deposition of a newly-made ritual object within the ancient structure – in this case, an Egyptian tomb. The anomalous nature of this last practice may arise from the fact that – as with the ingestion of wall-scrapings – it represents a latter-day continuation of a practice which originated within the culture that built the ancient structures. In this practice, the tombs were exploited for what they truly were – repositories of corpses – rather than as incomprehensibly alien hypostases of antiquity whose “otherness” could be put to magical use at a time and place of the ritualist’s choosing via tokens removed from (or empowered at) the sites.

Given the large temporal and geographic separation of the cultures exhibiting the commonalities of reception adduced in this paper, it seems likely that further examples of the same nexus (i.e. ancient monument – supernatural power – realm of the dead – awe and fear – magico-medical exploitation) will be found elsewhere. As observed here, each instantiation can be expected to have its own idiosyncrasies; for example, magical practices whose roots lie in the original builder-civilisation may differ noticeably from the innovations of subsequent cultures for whom the monuments were essentially a mystery.

---

Text (excluding third-party quotations) © Lloyd D. Graham, 2022. v.01\_22.08.22

*Cite as:* Lloyd D. Graham (2022) “Pre-Christian Ruins as Reservoirs of Supernatural Agency in Egypt, Ireland and Peru,” online at [https://www.academia.edu/85326011/Pre\\_Christian\\_Ruins\\_as\\_Reservoirs\\_of\\_Supernatural\\_Agency\\_in\\_Egypt\\_Ireland\\_and\\_Peru](https://www.academia.edu/85326011/Pre_Christian_Ruins_as_Reservoirs_of_Supernatural_Agency_in_Egypt_Ireland_and_Peru)

*Keywords:* Intercultural comparison, cross-cultural comparison, reception studies, Egyptology, Coptic studies, Irish studies, Peruvian studies, Egyptian temples and tombs, Neolithic megaliths, pre-Hispanic monuments, Moche, Sicán, *huacas*, *sidhe / sí*, Irish fairies, folklore, traditional healing, *curanderismo*, sorcery, curses