Book Section:

Chapter 1

Agency, intellect and the archaeological agenda

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Introduction

On the battlefield, the valkyries have arrived, their horses gallop across the sky with a light rain falling as they shake the sweat from their flanks. Sorcerers send spells and counter-spells across the field; they change form, their spirits fighting in the sky in constantly shifting animal shapes. On the ground below berserker and ulfhetnar echo the bestial theme. They run howling and foaming through the groups of fighting men. Some wear animal skins, some are naked and some have thrown away shield and armour and rely on their consuming frenzy alone. Perhaps a pale man in a broad-brimmed hat can be seen walking here and there in the field. He carries a staff and two ravens fly above his head. None of this can be seen by the ordinary Viking of course; but what else could explain that lucky spear cast, that man's amazing survival after such a blow, the incredible accuracy of that arrow? It's a good thing that your side has its own sorcerers, lucky you remembered to bring your amulets and charms. That jackdaw's leg has never failed you yet. But there is always the chance that today you will be among the chosen slain; that you will quench the thirst of battle with the horn of mead and hear yourself welcomed into the hall of the gods.

This passage is paraphrased from Neil Price's remarkable book *The Viking Way* (2002) which offered a well-argued evocation of Viking spirituality, and has done much to make the study of non-Christian religion once more respectable among archaeologists. His method was multidisciplinary, putting anthropological observation, early literature and archaeological discoveries in discourse with each other, and letting each source of evidence complement and support and patch up the holes in the others. He uses the observations of anthropologists studying Siberian, Canadian and Saami shamans to provide analogies for spiritual specialists, arguing in turn for Viking shamans both male and female, whose task, like that of their later analogues, is to heal and prophesy. The Siberian shaman encountered in the 19th century takes intoxicating drink, beats a drum and waves it in the air to conjure up spirits with chanting. He foams at the mouth and emits high pitched noises, before being guided back to the world by a girl who makes copulating gestures (Price 2002, 266). The Saami shaman had a belt hung

with a needle case, knife, brass rings, bird claws and the penis bone of a bear (*ibid.* 269). Some of these items survive and have been collected – for example there are about 80 Siberian ritual drums – so that in addition to observations of contemporary ritual performance, we have some of the stage props.

Taking a step back in time, Price reviews literature of the Medieval and later periods that record the comments of writers thought to have been in touch with non-Christian beliefs and practices. He collects 51 descriptions of valkyries and 204 of Odin. Among the Saami he sketches an eccentric community of divine players (irresistibly reminiscent of the members of an archaeology department): the 'silent one', 'the wind man', 'the thunderer', 'the ancestral mother' and 'the old one in furs'. He draws attention particularly to the shamanistic woman, as here in Eriks' saga: *When she arrived in the evening, together with the man who had been sent to escort her, she was wearing a blue or black cloak fitted with straps, decorated with stones right down to the hem. She wore a string of glass beads around her neck. On her head she wore a black lambskin hood lined with white catskin. She had hairy calfskin shoes, with long sturdy laces, and they had great knobs of tin on the end. On her hands she wore catskin gloves which were white and furry inside.* And then we are introduced to some of the tools of her trade*: Around her waist she had a belt of tinder wood, on which was a large leather pouch. In this she kept the charms that she used for her sorcery. And she carried a staff with a knob at the top* (*ibid.*, 168).

Equipped with such images we are then ready to go back still further – to Viking times – and see whether such spiritual specialists have been captured within the archaeological record. Neil Price finds them waiting for us, particularly the women, in their graves. For example the lady buried in a wagon body in Fyrkat 4, with her silver toe-rings, knife and whetstone, numerous silver pendants, bronze bowl and miniature chair. By her side, a meat spit, a wooden staff and an oak box containing a pig's jaw bone, seeds of henbane and owl pellets. Here surely is the once famous and powerful female shaman, source of wisdom and reassurance, mistress of life and death, whose authority was to be challenged and eventually expunged by institutionalised Christianity.

This hypothetical female specialist has been glimpsed in earlier centuries too. Tania Dickinson's "cunning woman" buried in the 6th century at Bidford on Avon (Wa.), was equipped with brooches, a knife, glass and amber beads, bronze tubes and a dozen tiny pendants shape like miniature buckets. These buckets had been worn on a kind of bib beneath the chin, and the assemblage as a whole led even the sober and logical Dickinson to suggest that this was "the grave of someone with special powers" (1993). For Helen Geake (2003) the cunning woman was not only an agent of healing, no doubt of quarrels as well as wounds, but the supervisor and caretaker of the Anglo-Saxon cemetery. This idea, while tentative, is attractive, since it credits women with the psychosomatic expertise of seeing people out of the world as well as bringing them into it.

A number of recent studies have proposed a new model for what happened to these specialists at Christianisation, by looking at graves of the relevant period and noting that it is women who are the leaders in symbolic innovation. Bierbrauer (2003) maps the arrival of crosses and peacocks on brooches and ear-rings south of the Alps between the 5th and 7th centuries, and suggests that it implies an adoption of Christianity

independent of social structure. By implication, it is an adoption led by women, since they were the bearers of the symbols concerned. North of the Alps, the Alamans and Bavarians sewed gold foil crosses onto tunics, but the adoption of cruciform brooches is otherwise delayed, because, according to Bierbrauer, "in the sixth and seventh century … the Germanic world north of the Alps was still deep in syncretism" (2003, 442). From the 8th century Jörn Staecker (2003) finds the symbolic repertoire expressive of a varied and changing ideological allegiance, and it is the female graves that carry the main investment: Thor's hammer pendants and crucifix pendants. Female leadership in the adaptation of Christianity was also discovered by Anne-Sofie Gräslund (2003) on the rune-stones of eastern Sweden; and Linn Lager (2003) proposes that the rune-stones show a geographically varied and drawn-out conversion process. Here we have a picture of Christianisation in Scandinavia, in which women, key spiritual agents in the pagan period, remained in charge during the conversion process. Only when Christianity became institutionalised within the political process of nation-building did women all over Europe surrender their spiritual authority (Carver 2001, 2003; *cf.* Hutton 1991, 250; and compare his 1991, 324: "the victory of the new faith was relatively swift and absolute").

What was it then, this 'paganism' that was abandoned so definitively at the beginning of the Middle Ages? We are used to seeing paganism only as the dead ghost behind Christianity, as the philosophy of "not-Christ"; Christian writers have made sure of that. The pagan is an intellectual cave-man, a spiritual half-wit, a manic depressive amazed to hear about heaven, a mindless practitioner of ancestral rites, looking for meaning in trees and pondweed. The message is clear – don't go there: it is only for the weird, the witches and the irredeemably wicked.

Is there another road back that navigates between the prurient and the judgemental? It is a tough assignment, not only because of the misconceptions and wishful thinking of modern pagans, hedonists and Christian historians, but because we are not sure where we are going. Even when we think we can argue from graves and sculpture that pre-Christian religion had a high intellectual content and was just as interested in virtue as its successor, we have only opened the steel door of propaganda a chink onto the pagan garden. We are aware that the pagan world deserves our sense of equality and diversity, but can we give it? How can we compete with the relentless rhetoric of Christian salvation and its inheritance? Archaeology offers one way forward, but as we will see, there is no ready-made archaeological toolbox. If the theoretical kit is broadly cognitive, we will need a lot more tools than that (see Hutton 1993).

We do however have an advantage over previous scholars who delved into old religion and thankfully saved much of the evidence for us. In the last twenty years, early medieval archaeologists have explored religion as politics, religion as process, religion as symbolic language, as the architect of landscape, as multi-vocal and reflexive, and designed the archaeological protocols to go with these new approaches. It may also be that in our period of interest, the chances of understanding paganism are greatly increased, precisely because its oppressor was so well recorded: Christianity becomes the protector of the pre-Christian. We are also better equipped in that triad of disciplines that, as Neil Price showed, are the most effective way of opening the chink still further. In this we have yet another advantage over any who pursued the pagans

in the Europe of the 19th and 20th centuries: a wholly new order of archaeological investigation.

Detecting, deducing and defining

David Lewis-Williams' stimulating book *The Mind in the Cave* (2002) has redefined the world of early spirituality for archaeologists and can be used as a hypothetical underpinning of every thing that was to come later. He argues that cave art is a record of dreams, and offers a persuasive case that the shaman became a religious specialist through a facility to interpret dreams or to enter the world of dreams (and return with inspiring messages) through self-induced trance. He also demonstrates how, in times of social stress, such people can transmogrify into politicians, and raises in the mind of the reader the startling implication that every leader from the Palaeolithic to the present has successfully professed guidance from the spirit world. Such an apparently indestructible delusion could not have been possible unless the propensity was embedded in most human beings.

There may also be a connection between the degree to which spiritual dependence operates and the physical deprivation experienced by its protagonists – deprivation that we encounter relatively infrequently in the western world. Price mentions for example the anthropological observation of "arctic hysteria", the tendency of very tired and hungry people to hallucinate. Whatever scepticism may be felt at such generalities, I can personally vouch for the truth of it: in situations of prolonged fatigue you do see rocks move, dead people reappear and animals talk. Not only fatigue and drugs, but starvation and fear can deprive the brain of oxygen so that it plays its tricks. It is not difficult to see why certain peoples sought entrance to the spirit world from those about to die, or by inflicting persistent torture on themselves like the early Christian monks.

This is only to suggest that *if* the pagan Anglo-Saxons had shamans and believed in a spirit world entered occasionally through pain or ectasy, they would be conforming to a global norm, active as long as there had been humans (Hutton 1991, 109; Sanmark, this vol.). Furthermore, in this respect at least (the need to contact and propitiate the 'other') Christianity was a no less enthusiastic champion of the irrational delusion than paganism. With its sins and relics, its devotions and penances, angels and saints, cherubim and seraphim, heaven, hell and purgatory, its transubstantiation of bread and wine into flesh and its fondness for ritual killing, especially of religious deviants, Christianity was simply much the same, only more so.

The kind of research that seeks to penetrate the ancient mind is archaeology's current frontier and involves a new kind of discourse between the different media. David Lewis-Williams is not reticent about using art, anthropology, psychology, ethnology, drug experience and 19th century politics to support his argument. Francis Thackeray (2005) recently connected three figures in a Lesotho cave with a photograph taken in 1934 at the edge of the Kalahari desert of a man dancing in an animal skin. The scenes, suggesting the enactment of a dying roan antelope striped with wounds, implied sympathetic magic to aid hunting and seemed to be endorsed by surviving linguistic connections between words for wounds, stripes and need. Such multi-disciplinary inquiries require us to open different windows on to the past and put the

different vistas presented by each into discourse. We can stop believing theorists who maintain that the human being is helplessly partial, the past is an illusion and that all observation is contradictory. Instead we can believe, if we are brave enough, that humans are irredeemably inquisitive, the world is diverse and that all observations are complementary (Carver 2002). In the Viking period we have ethnological observation, sagas and graves – which can be woven together to give an evocative vision of the non-Christian mind, as Price has shown. And in the pre-Viking period we have at least that, and perhaps more: a broader range of sites, literature, and if we allow ourselves to roam more freely, more ethnological analogy.

However before we embark on an exploration of *The Saxon Way*, it might be worth confronting some of the epistemological problems. The first of these lies in making equations with the very old, the very new and the not-so-new's version of the not-so-old. *Ethnography* provides detailed information for the observer, but it is 1000 years too late and not untainted by the agenda of the performer, as demonstrated by Derrida's critique of the Nambikwara "writing lesson" which gave reflexivity its impetus (Carver 2002, 469–470). The *literature* is inspiring, evocative and imprecise, but 200 years out of date. And the *archaeological evidence* is contemporary, but partial, allusive, coded and equivocal. Cross-referencing between these three sources, with their three different contexts can certainly provide a measure of comfort, but each link between them – the rod of office for example, may acquire spurious ritual airs.

A second problem is that we cannot see ritual, religion or magic archaeologically unless it is the subject of some material investment. Logically, the ordinary cannot of itself imply the extraordinary, or the normal imply the para-normal, without special pleading. Therefore we tend to be confined in archaeology to the high investment sector, rich burials and buildings well-dated and associated with distinctive finds, since it is only there that the unusual is evident. But by the same token this is a theatre in which political interference is almost guaranteed. In other words the evidence from graves and monuments, while embracing belief, does so in a context of political purpose. And in most cases we can expect to get more politics than paganism. We are left wondering whether Price's shamanistic woman (above) might not have been a queen, just as rich male warrior graves were leaders rather than shamans.

A third problem, in Anglo-Saxon England at least, has been the study of pagan belief as though it belonged sui generis to the 5–8th century and to the island. This may be our period and place of interest, but no people on earth has ever lived in a timeless vacuum. Anglo-Saxon England did not then exist, nor did Christian institutions; what did exist was a variety of peoples on the east side of Britain who were constructing a variety of beliefs fuelled by their ancestral memories, the prehistoric landscapes they could see or remember, and their contacts with adjacent territories, perhaps most importantly Scandinavia. It would be more productive, it seems to me, to move the whole study of Anglo-Saxon paganism, or indeed the whole study of Anglo-Saxon archaeology, into a region defined by the Northern Seas, and give it a strong prehistoric dimension. To do otherwise would be like trying to study Christianity in Britain without Rome, though we shall need Rome with us here too.

If we take the well-known site of Sutton Hoo, it is easy to see that it is high investment that gives it archaeological visibility. High investment also qualifies it to express the

numinous and the religious and their public messages; the ideological and the political. The burial chambers of Sutton Hoo are illuminated by texts, such as Beowulf, but are not explained or even given a context by them. Nor are texts provided with an anchor of reality by the chambers. This is because a burial chamber is itself a text, laden with *topos* and *intertextuality* (Carver 2000). Although there are suggestive links between the burial and the text, to compare the two is only to compare a competition in rhetoric. The barrows and the chambers make allusions to local prehistory and to Roman and German ideas, including eclectic samples of intellectual constructs relating to virtue, death and resurrection that we group crudely and inaccurately as "pagan" or "Christian". It is highly unlikely that the burial parties were trying to conform to, or combine, orthodox Christianity and paganism, because neither existed; or, if they existed, neither was sufficiently institutionalised to command uniformity of practice. Whatever the contemporary documents may claim (and few are contemporary), during the period 5–8th century in north-west Europe no monolithic paganism, and no monolithic Christianity is asserted in the material record. What is asserted, in sites and cemeteries and metalwork, is an astonishing variety of intellectual and metaphysical ideas, which made this truly one of the great periods for thinking people to be alive: it is an age of the unorthodox, although orthodoxy would triumph before the millennium was out.

Cognitive approaches, as developed by Colin Renfrew for non-literate societies (1985a, b), have taken us a long way towards a belief that we can recognise examples of reified cult and even the ethos and theocracy implied. The arguments hinge on the observation of the non-functional, of strangeness, of exaggeration: ceremonial geography, repeated symbols, unnecessary slaughter, and conspicuous waste. For this reason, barrows and henges must signify cult. But there is also a feeling that we need to situate such findings in belief systems, as opposed to mindless megalomania: to avoid the conclusion that people were just bad or mad. Religion may be irrational but at least it gives a reason for its irrationality. In historic periods (and by extension, in prehistoric periods too) we can justify the alignment of religion with strangeness, because we have behavioural analogies recorded in texts (Carver 1993). However, we are also bound to admit that, if we went hunting for our analogies in a different place, virtually all the physical trappings ascribed to religion – special dress, the staff of office, feasting, sacrifice, portentous buildings, fatuous ornamentation – can be ascribed to power-mad earthly leaders too. Who is to say whether the witnesses to a hanging are muttering "receive, O Woden, this gift of thy people" or "that'll teach him a lesson".

It is certainly possible that people communed with the supernatural in their own invented way, but *ipso facto*, archaeology will find it hard to recognise verifiable examples. Tim Insoll (2004, 8) makes a division between 'primal' and 'world' religions, where the world religions always subsume the primal. He also explains the territory to which archaeology is confined by its dependence of material culture, using a Yoruba case study. Here "shrine" is a place imbued with multiple and overlapping references of sight, sound and smell. The shrine of Ogunladin, the blacksmith of Oduduna in the ruler's palace of Ife is a place where "complex chains of meaning are created between iron and Ogun, and between Ogun and his role as circumciser, scarifier, carver, excisor and body decoration for example………. Ogun creates order by transforming, by

means of iron tools, the forest into farms and cities. Ogun links can be further extended into the domain of colour symbolism; he is linked with white and red, the extremes through which the iron goes in being created from iron ore. Moreover, Ogun is fiery; he is cooled by snail fluid [which heals scars], but also through the sacrifice of dogs, the dog being a carnivorous animal" (Insoll 2004, 118, citing Pemberton 1997, 130 and Drewal 1997, 255). These symbolic chains (as Insoll calls them) do leave archaeological traces, and Howard Williams shows here how they may have operated in Anglo-Saxon cemeteries; but we have no guide or explanation of where the chains lead.

That intellectual destination can be inferred by analogy. Analogy, however, often reassigns the past into the narrow, over-classified boxes provided by the present. The thinkers of the past, at least at certain periods, and the early middle ages was one of them, could be pluralist and inventive. Religious specialists, if not otherwise constrained by secular forces, will follow their ideas and imaginations and compose their own prescriptions for the supernatural. Note that this is not a question of labelling a religious practice as "syncretic", a word which carries the opprobrium of confusion or contamination. As Insoll points out, syncretism is an inadequate area of interpretation because it is assumed that two 'givens' are being blended to make a third (2004, 131–4). Thus in our period the players are assumed to be pagans and Christians, even though neither the components nor their product are homogenous. Paganism is itself a rich blend of prehistoric and imported ideas that varies with the landscape, and arguably within the landscape.

In Africa, terms such as *paganism*, *animism* and *magic* have been abandoned and replaced with "African traditional religion" (Insoll 2004, 139). In early medieval Europe we should think of new terminology too, but neither "traditional" nor "religion" seems appropriate to me. "Traditional" is inappropriate, since in the 5th–8th century we are patently investigating a world of new ideas; "religion" suggests common practice, but we are starting from an observation of inventive variety. Moreover, in the early middle ages we are probably well on in the process whereby the world of the gods has become part of the local, national or universal power base. By narrowing the study of paganism to high investment sites and objects, we inevitably align it with the exercise of power. For this reason, I assume that what we mainly infer from archaeological evidence is not religion, or even belief, but politics, and its intellectual substrate, ideology. I do not believe we can see religion, so I fear I cannot contribute to the topic of "paganism". The stalemate in the recognition of religion in archaeological evidence, well chronicled by Content and Williams (this vol.), was caused by the belief that all the evidence must converge on a normative set of beliefs that could be defined as Pagan or Christian. We can change the agenda simply by assuming that no such normative behaviour existed, and that the monumentality of the 5th–8th century is not convergent but divergent.

It might be possible to distinguish, within the ideological programme that drives monumentality, some of the sense of the non-human that we could label spirituality. Perhaps more safely, the way people chose to make a monument or design a burial should be owed to a dominant or consensual intellect: that is, the way the occupants of Anglo-Saxon England thought in that place, in that context, at that moment of history. We may study this by deconstructing the monument into the many 'references' that it makes. We will find that they are numerous and eclectic and the emphasis is always

different. In this lies the originality of each one, and it explains our dissatisfaction with the labels of historiographical tradition. With this focus, I want to try shedding the baggage of decades.

A programme for investigating Anglo-Saxon spirituality

Studying early medieval sites in the field, first Sutton Hoo, in a pagan hinterland, and then Portmahomack, in a Christian one, has been like climbing two different sides of the same mountain. In each case, there were highly developed paradigms, intricate lines of reasoning but contained within a narrow field of view. Paganism v. Christianity has been maintained as a persistent dichotomy, as immovable structuralist opposites. At the summit, one can easily see how restricted the vision was of each team of climbers, roped together and struggling up their particular slopes. Each type of archaeology, the 'pagan' and the 'Christian,' is studied in England by a different exclusive group of scholars and excavators, and each has maintained a resolute ignorance of the other. And those other factions of the modern archaeology department, the prehistorians and the early medieval archaeologists have also managed to *get al*ong fine without benefit of mutual discourse. I would suggest that if we are to make progress in understanding of the early Anglo-Saxon mind we should exercise three principles: first we must study the period as a continuum with prehistory, since there is little doubt the Anglo-Saxons could see prehistory all about them; second we should adopt the premise that monumentality was the result of agency – showing us what local people were thinking and where their allegiance lay; and thirdly, perhaps most important, we are never entitled to assume, in the 5th–8th century, that this monumentality refers to an institutionalised religion, either pagan or Christian in persuasion, since we have no reliable evidence that there was one. A profitable approach may therefore be to listen to the variety of thinking that is implied by the monuments and to treasure its originality.

With these terms and conditions, caveats and abridgements in mind, we could go on a short voyage of exploration to see where such a programme of inquiry might lead. Since I view the terms "pagan" and "Christian" as imprecise and anachronistic generalisations, I shall try not to use them, but where I do so in a particular discussion, it is because they were already embedded there. In seeking the materiality of otherness, I shall focus on burials and mounds in particular, and temples and churches – places of assembly. In the new perspective we shall be concerned less with what things meant to worshippers, or even which gods and goddesses were being hailed. We are engaged instead with the changing contexts of belief – why that, why there, why then; and as a consequence, the shifts in the intellectual map of NW Europe that these changes imply.

Burial

The territory to be explored is the Northern seas, but just like any other voyage we cannot go everywhere, so will pick and choose. It is axiomatic to the study that people crossed these waters regularly in the early Middle Ages, allowing us to assume that there was an ideological discourse from coast to coast. This means that people in

England or Scotland or Scandinavia did not need to wait for a particular idea to arrive; the monuments rather report the moment that an idea was chosen, adapted and reified by the local community concerned. Distribution maps raise a whole lot of interesting questions in this regard, long before we get to our first barrow. For example, the distribution of pottery imported from the Mediterranean in the 5–6th century (*A ware*) and from south-west France in the 6–7th century (*D, E ware*) is extremely eccentric. It is focused on an expanding territory centred on the Irish Sea. While it would not have been hard for sailors who had made it through the Bay of Biscay to do the extra few leagues to London or York, nevertheless, apparently they did not; this pottery did not arrive in Kent or Northumbria, even when the latter became nominally Christian. Similarly, claw beakers and reticella glass, made in Kent, are finding their way to east Scandinavia, but not to Scotland – why not? Something irrational, or at least non-economical, is controlling voyages and structuring the seaways.

In the late 6th century, people were building burial mounds over cremations at Gamla Uppsala, boat burials at Slusegård on Bornholm, symbol stones on Gotland, square-ditched barrows (also with symbol stones) in Pictland, stone churches with *porticus* in Kent, Type 1 megalithic churches in SW Ireland and new kinds of "monastic" settlements on Iona and in the NE Scottish firthlands. This is not intellectual anarchy, it has regional integrity; the pattern has structure but is the structure of a debate, in which the participants experience shifting viewpoints. Böhme's mapping of princely graves and founder churches in the Rhineland, shows that the churches follow the graves up the Rhine between the 5th century and the 8th. This does not look like migration or a change in social structure. It can, however, be equated with a response to a political movement which travels from the area of the Rhinemouth up in to the Swiss Alps. If this is so, then the first response is to build burial mounds, and the second to build a church. Monumentality here is therefore subject to a kind of "bow-wave effect" in which monument-building responds to forces that are approaching but have yet to arrive (Carver 2001 for references).

I employed this model in the interpretation of the burial mounds constructed at Sutton Hoo and elsewhere (1986, 1992) calling them "reactive" and citing them as examples of "defiant paganism". The idea was later enthusiastically taken up by Robert van de Noort, who published a map of early medieval barrows in North West Europe, and interpreted their appearance as responses to Christianity (van de Noort 1993; see also Lutovsky 1996 for inclusion of the Slavic examples). I still think the idea of reactive monumentality has some value, but it cannot always imply reaction to the same threat. For example, Mound 2 at Högom in Medelpad is a splendid monument commemorating a warrior lying on a bed, but dated to the 5th century – not a period that the northern Baltic would be likely to feel itself under much pressure from Christian missionaries (Ramqvist 1992).

Thus if burial mounds relate to belief, the belief belongs to a historical context: a unique expression constructed from a common vocabulary. Listing grave goods, like making dictionaries, does not tell us what people were thinking; we have to listen to every grave. For example, Mads Ravn (2003, 134) identifies a group of young men dedicated to board games, drinking, horses and hairdressing; but such objects are found all over Europe and do not require a religious gloss. Nor do they support his

conclusion that "Germanic society from AD 200 to 600 was a small-scale rural society which developed with the family and the farmstead as the centre of the universe" (*ibid.* 136). The references being made are at least as wide as NW Europe, and arguably stretch back in time to at least the early Iron Age. In his chapter below, Howard Williams reminds us that the opportunities for making references to the intellectual repertoire were not confined to the preparation of the burial tableau: the funeral was a drama in several acts, each of which could make the mourners glad or sad or to provoke a resigned recognition of the human dilemma, which, while it might not itself be a religion or a cosmology, comes close to its agenda.

The kind of space-time referential framework more likely to be operating has been sketched for burial in boats. Ship-settings, rock carvings of ships and some boat burials are known around the north sea in the Bronze Age. The idea reappears in the form of boats containing people and buried in pits; in the 1st century AD on Bornholm, in the 5th century in Frisia, in the 6th century in Uppland Sweden, in the 7th century in East Anglia, in the 9th century in Norway, Denmark and Schleswig Holstein and in the 10th century on Orkney (Müller-Wille 1995; Carver 1995; 2005, 301–306). If these were Christian symbols, we would suppose them to plot the locus of a missionary activity. But no-one is even suggesting that boat-burial is a religious sect – l*et al*one that missionaries recruited people to its ethos. It is difficult to draw satisfactory equations with Freyr or any other god (Carver 1995), and references to heavenly voyages, and so on, are facile. Instead I have proposed a model of the reification of ideas drawn eclectically from a common northern European cosmology. The ship was a player in the theatre of shared knowledge, its symbolism modified from place to place and time to time like any other hard-worked metaphor. But there came a particular moment when the ship was a symbol necessary to a particular burial, so an actual ship was procured and buried. The distribution of ship burial is thus not religious or ethnic, but a distribution of a shared poetic mood or rather of the moments when that mood was evoked and reified (Carver 2000). It is not excluded that the ship, as a metaphor, has allusions to Egyptian burial ships, as burial mounds may have to pyramids. Sutton Hoo ship 1 contained textiles from Syria, and buried nearby was a bronze bucket, perhaps from North Africa, or at least referring to Nubia. There is no need to cite diffusion: the southern world was already known to the northerners and vice versa. The interest for us lies in what they chose to incorporate in their view of this world (and the next), and why. In this context it can be seen that Christianity can also arrive, not as a package, but as chunks of imported metaphor. Appreciation of the popular stories of King David and Daniel does not require belief in Christ, the Trinity or the Virgin birth. In trying to understand what is intended by the term 'conversion' we need to draw a distinction on the one hand between the selective adoption of Christian notions, and on the other the imposition of a Christian organisational infrastructure. These are two quite different realities and we had better be sure which we mean.

It is also important for the ideology of burial mounds to remember that by the 5th century the landscape had plenty of them. As Richard Bradley (1993), Howard Williams (1997), Andrew Reynolds (forthcoming) and Sarah Semple (this vol.) have shown, people manipulated the face of the land and left mental maps for those that came later. These were maps that later people could read, and perhaps indicated more

to them than simply former cultural territories; for the Anglo-Saxons, the prehistoric landscape of east Britain can be seen as a non-literate text as deep the Bible was to become. Each generation of "burial experts" had the pre-existing landscape to reckon with; and this, if nothing else, should encourage us to expect a strong local flavour to both burial and belief. In his recent study of *kurgans*, the huge burial mounds of Eastern Eurasia, Bryan Hanks (2001) found that, at a given place, later mounds made reference to earlier ones. The giant 10th century BC mound at Arzhan was 120m across and covered 70 timber rooms as well as the central chamber with its log coffins. 160 horses and 7 servants were sacrificed and laid in the rooms. This mound also signalled the first appearance of Scytho-Siberian animal art. So, the great monument marks one of those historical moments of ideological rebirth, leaving a long trail for others to follow. There was evidence for feasting around this mound, and not just at the time of the funeral: the place attracted festivals of horse racing and feasting up to historic times.

Assembly

If burial can be explained as a kind of poetic utterance, it can be expected to make references to fate, and the hereafter, and the four last things, ideas that beset all humans whether they profess any religious belief or not. It thus remains possible that burial was focused on celebrating humans rather than gods and its theological content may be in doubt. If so, we are still searching for other sites where the focus was on the supernatural. Did Anglo-Saxons go in for communal worship? And if so, did it need a building or any space we can recognise? The discussion above leaves us with the expectation that there will have been spiritual specialists in early Medieval Britain, as in Viking Scandinavia, and that their activities need not have been confined to private consultations given to eminent persons. We should expect the manifestations of belief to be imprinted in the landscape, in settlements, buildings and on objects – all areas of research that will be explored in the chapters that follow.

For many years scholars have resisted the idea that northern religions had or needed temples (eg Olsen 1966; Hutton 1991, 270; Welindar 2003). For some, worshippers stood in sacred groves or beside dark tarns, occasionally killing something, or someone, to propitiate the unknown and dreaded. Others felt that communal acts of worship were indistinguishable from acts of secular control: the religious space was the hall, where drink was dispensed and decisions made: the ideological was also the social (Herschend 1997). Others again felt that while temples were not endemic to northern belief, the northerners acquired them when they saw the Christians coming: defence by imitation. All this has now been put back into the melting pot by the discoveries at Gudme, Borg and Uppåkra, and the thesis of Leszek Słupecki (below).

In Britain, recent studies have identified "shrines" in the form of simple rectangular post settings and deduced from them a quasi-independent development for Anglo-Saxon ritual centres (Wilson 1992, Blair 1995, Meaney 1995). Perhaps the term shrine (Lat *scrinium*, box) is a bit distracting, since it suggests containers for relics rather than places for gathering. It is used in this sense in Ireland, where "shrines" are generally portable boxes (reliquaries), but may also be large and static as in the rectangular gabled

slab-shrines or corner-post slab-shrines (O'Carragain 2003, 143–4), or the square pile of stone slabs (*leacht*) that perhaps functioned as an altar or as the plinth of a cross, or both (Edwards 2000, 116–119). Square settings of posts, with or without ditches are known as burial enclosures in Pictland (Ashmore 1980) and in south Wales (James 1992), as well as at Yeavering (Hope-Taylor 1977, 108–116). Thus the role of the 'Anglo-Saxon shrine' is unclear: given its rather unassertive survival, we may be dealing with burial (as at Yeavering), the enclosure of an idol or with the isolated room of a priest (as in a Roman-Celtic temple). Indeed, the small square enclosure has been cited as a sign of "British" continuity (Blair 1995), which is surprising in view of its ubiquity in Scandinavia and continental Europe (see, for example, Audouze and Büchsenschutz 1989, 63, 128 (granary), 68, 108, 120 (houses)). Obviously houses can also be ritual, but being square is neither a necessary nor a sufficient attribute of religious use.

A better place to hunt might be in the continental *Viereckschanzen*, regular four-sided enclosures with wells and putative temples. At Gounay-sur-Agonde on the same site as and developed from an Iron Age timber prototype of the 3rd century BC, it is inside a wide-ditched enclosure 40m square, in which were laid broken weapons and sacrificed animals and people (*ibid.*, 150). In Britain, at one of the most comprehensive and best excavated ritual sequences of the Roman and post-Roman periods, Uley in Gloucestershire, the authors track a ritual development through a square post-hole building of the 1st century AD, to a Roman temple (100–400 AD), a polygonal alcove possibly for a statue (Structure III) that served the temple, and a 6th century church (Woodward and Leach 1993). At Whithorn, Peter Hill applies the term 'shrine' to roughly circular places in a cemetery respected by and devoid of burials (1997, 91–6). He remarks that "the three successive 'shrines' do not seem to have close parallels" (*ibid.*, 34), but proposes links with circular foci, real or implied, in other cemeteries. Like the rectangular post-settings, this does not get us very far, since circular spaces are also ubiquitous in prehistory and in Europe north, south, east and west. I thus offer the obvious comment that the shape of a structure in plan may not, of itself, be diagnostic of the ritual activity of a particular people, even if one collected examples from the much broader cosmological zone I am advocating. We are looking for more specific indicators, and it is discoveries from the Baltic area that suggest we could soon know how to recognise them.

In his 1996 book, Leczek Słupecki challenged the idea that early Medieval Slavs had no temples; or that, if they did, they were only built in response to Christian interference (*i.e.* 'defiant paganism' as above). He draws a great deal of his evidence from later commentators and especially Saxo Grammaticus, so to some extent we are still in a literary landscape of uncertain date. On this basis he uses archaeological evidence to define two kinds of buildings he would like us to see as sacred. The first are temples, where a hall-like building has particular attributes which appear to set it apart. An example is the timber building at Gross Raden which was surrounded by a paling fence with anthropomorphic posts and which contained six horse skulls, an ox skull and a pottery cup. Another was defined at Parchim, which stood between the fortified settlement and Lake Loddig-See and gave rise to the idea of a cult beach. Słupecki offers, as another attribute of these temples, their orientation towards the four quarters of the world (1996, 101).

His second type of site is unrelated to either burials or halls, although it clearly refers to prehistoric practice. At Perynia, the name of which relates to the god Perun, a circular ditch with a large post hole at the centre was excavated by Syedov in 1951. The ditch was 'scalloped' into petal-shaped areas, all but one of which contained hearths. Słupecki imagined the central post to have supported a wooden effigy of Perun, documented as having been being destroyed in 988. At Khodosoviche, a large post had stood in a similar situation, this time surrounded by a fence and an interrupted ditched enclosure. His star example was the supposed sanctuary sited at a nodal point of the hill-fort on Bogit Mountain. Here a ring of pits has been excavated, at the centre of which was a socket lined with packing stones. It was in this socket, according to Ukrainian archaeologists Timoshuk and Rusanova, that the famous pillar known as the *Sviatovid* originally stood (1996, 182). This remarkable pillar was recovered from the nearby River Zbruch and is now at Cracow. It is carved out of soft limestone, stood originally 2.57m in height and has a figurative scheme on each side. At the top is a head with one hat and four faces, two thought to be male and two female; a horse and other human figures follow lower down. Among the interpretations that academic commentators have seen are a sun god, a spring goddess, a god of the underworld and a giant phallus, which, as Słupecki wryly remarks, is somewhat inconsistent with its square cross-section.

Whether any such equations with mythology are yet possible is less urgent a problem than the obvious echoes that such objects make with the repertoire further west. If the Sutton Hoo sceptre springs to mind, so does the Bewcastle Cross. I am not trying to say that these things influenced each other (the Sviatovid post-dates the other two by some centuries) or refer to each other directly, and certainly not that these echoes have to refer to Christianity or to Rome – all of which have been suggested in each case. For me they say only that the North of Europe, then as now, is a zone of shared ideas, where imitation and rejection are part of the dialogue of peer polities.

Słupecki's examples are good evidence for some kind of formal religious structure among the Slavs, but his thesis that it developed long before Christian pressure began to build is less secure, because the dating is less secure. His sites are dated 10–11th century from pottery, where it occurs, although this might refer to the date of the site's destruction. However, recent discoveries at Gudme and Uppåkra provide examples every bit as evocative, much better dated and up to a millennium earlier. At Gudme (lit. God's home), on Fyn, attention was drawn to the site by finds of large numbers of *guldgubbar* found in the fields surrounding a filled-in lake. These small gold plaques acquired their nickname, roughly equivalent to 'gold-gaffers', because stamped upon them were small figures resembling old men. But some of the figures depicted are clearly women and couples apparently kissing; whence theories that they represent gods or fertility charms. Although the finds at Gudme focus on a lake or tarn, this is no outdoor nature worship but a managed and prominent ritual centre of some kind, as suggested by the large halls that have now been excavated (Nielsen *et al.* 1997).

The site of Uppåkra, in SE Sweden, has been known since 1930s when the construction of a barn near the round barrow brought to light some *guldgubbar*; but the more recent investigations there were prompted by the revelations at Gudme. Surveys by phosphate and metal detector mapped a distribution of 20,000 finds of gold, silver and bronze

with an area of dense occupation at its centre, which was excavated leading to the discovery of a short hall with bowed walls (Larssen 2007; Walker this volume). On its south side was found a crystal goblet from the Black Sea area; while at the E end were 115 *guldgubbar*. The *guldgubbar*, which are clearly associated with the building, have been published by Margrethe Watt. She notes figures of men, women and couples, closely paralleled at Gudme and Sorte Muld, and argues that they are "temple money", symbolic votive offerings, with the figures representing Woden and other members of the pantheon. Like Karl Hauck she subscribes to a pagan priesthood enduring at least 500 years up to the 11th century. Among the Uppåkra *guldgubbar* are several featuring a man biting his thumb, attributed to Odin and others carrying a staff, which may indicate the office of shaman (Watt 2004, 210).

These specialist ritual centres have thrown back into conjecture the idea that halls doubled as ritual centres. But it is not always so clear. The giant hall excavated at Borg in Lofoten, NW Norway was also notable for the finding of *guldgubbar*. At its maximum size the hall was 80m long and 7.5–9m in width (*i.e.* slightly bowed). On the basis of the distribution of the objects, or their absence, excavators divided it into 5 rooms, designated "Living room", "Entrance room", "hall", "room" and "byre" (Munch *et al* 2003, 93; Walker this volume). The objects included farm implements such as sickles and arrowheads, pins, fishhooks, pottery, glass vessels, glass beads and *guldgubbar*. The special objects, the beads and plaques, focussed on the room named as the "hall" (Room C). At this site, the interpretation of the ritual plaques follows the study of Steinsland (1991): although the imagery relates to the sacred marriage, and thus fertility, it depicts a union at divine level (*e.g.* Odin and the giantess Skade), and is actually being used as a metaphor for the union of a leader with his land (Munch 2003, 259). In this case, therefore, the finds do not imply a temple but a "chieftain's farm".

In the future we can expect Scandinavian excavators to bring new questions to these sites: for example, what areas do they serve? Could the hall – especially a hall the size of a farmstead like Borg – have incorporated the ritual space within its rooms, a space which in some settlement contexts (Uppåkra) demands a stand-alone building to fulfil its social function, and in others (Gudme) is a central destination providing ritual and ideological functions for a whole island? From these three great excavations alone we can suppose a variety of ritual provision every bit as sophisticated as the secular, parochial, monastic and episcopal structures of Christianity. The northern regions were well equipped with high investment centres exhibiting strong and varied ideological administration. The minds of such people do not offer a blank slate on which missionaries may write.

Christian variants

Returning from our trip to Scandinavia, it is difficult to believe that Early Anglo-Saxon England, which betrays so many other affinities, did *not* have votive deposits, shrines, ritual gold plaques, standing timber and stone idols, and a range of temple structures, and it seems reasonable to suppose that they will eventually turn up, if displaying differences of emphasis. The trick will be to detach this inquiry – the archaeology of early medieval ideology, its regionalism, its multiple references and its asymmetric

change over northern Europe – from the old historical agenda of "the Conversion". In his magisterial review of the conversion of Europe, Richard Fletcher comments: "resistance to Christianity is not a topic about which we should expect much information to have survived" (Fletcher 1997, 285). But only if you mean historical information; the information that has survived is enormous, but it is all archaeological; and what is being resisted, as we have seen, is not Christian ideas, which are welcome to join the party, but Christian political dominance.

This is trying not to be a chapter about early Christianity, and I have presented perverse views on the subject quite enough elsewhere (Carver 1998, 2001, 2003, 2008 ch. 10). In my thesis, paganism and Christianity do not, in this period, describe homogenous intellectual positions or canons of practice. Pagan ideas and material vocabulary were drawn from a wide reservoir of cosmology and were recomposed as local statements with their own geographical and chronological context. I believe that the same kind of evidence, the evidence of monumentality, provokes us to a similar judgment of Christianity. Christianity and paganism were two hands of the same *persona*, and there was considerable interdigitation between the two. Some local practices merely continued under new management. David Stocker and Paul Everson (2003) found votive deposition on the River Witham, from before the 8th century when the Witham pins were thrown in, up till the 14th century when this spiritual resource had been absorbed, without apparent stress, into the stewardship of the monastery. It may be that the use of rivers (as opposed to bogs) is what has inhibited the discovery of Anglo-Saxon period votive offerings (see Lund, this volume).

Other apparently new attributes of early Christianity may have been drawn from local prehistoric sources, rather than being members of the imported package. For example, Ann Woodward (1993) has shown that a cult of relics was active in the Neolithic of southern England, body parts being reserved, presumably for exchange or display. The shrines already mentioned, whether in Britain or Ireland, all have prehistoric roots. Even the stone-lined graves of eastern Scotland, long associated with the Christian conversion, are equivocal in the references they make. Perhaps they do recollect and proclaim the early Christian mortuary sequence of north Italy (*cf.* Carver 1983); but they can also be located in the use of stone slabs in Bronze Age and Iron Age graves (*cf.* Close-Brooks 1984).

Carved stone monuments, as collected in the *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture* vary from simple slabs with incised names in Latin characters or runes (as at Hartlepool), to tall pillars with complex iconographical schemes involving people and animals in niches (as at Ruthwell and Bewcastle). As already mentioned such schemes may have been commandeered for the pagan pillars of the Baltic (as the *Sviatovid*); or, given the previous exemplars of idols cited by Słupecki, both suites of stone carving may have derived from long periods of experimentation in timber. Two other sequences raise the possibility of more plural origins: the Gotlandic and the Pictish carved stones. Interestingly, both seem to undergo the same kind of evolutionary change, beginning with a basic stone slab that carries a symbol, to a shaped monolith with iconographical pictures, to a more literary finale of the symbol-free cross slabs in Pictland and the runestones in Gotland, both by this time (11th century) overtly declaring a Christian alignment (Nylen and Lamm 1988; Henderson and Henderson 2004). A case has been

made for the origins of the Pictish sequence as imitations of slabs on the Antonine or Hadrian's wall, or as a recognition of Christian grave markers, but an association has also been claimed with barrows, and the square ditched barrows in particular (Ashmore 1980). The competition to assign the affiliation of this sculpture to a pagan or Christian source can have no satisfactory result. Such sources are a figment of our time, not theirs. Picts and Gotlanders could not have known that they were on a trajectory towards ever-increasing ideological control, which would be claimed retrospectively as Christian in character and intent. It therefore behoves us to treat each monumental experiment as a product of its own logic, not as an inept prototype of what we know was to come.

Since ostensibly Christian monumentality varies, it seems to me inherently likely that what we recognise on the ground as Christian would also belong to a varied set of experiments. In some cases, it seemed politically unacceptable to swallow the package whole, since an episcopate would demand the creation of an infrastructure that a local leader could not or would not deliver. Thus the attraction of fiscal solutions such as privately funded churches, or the establishment of monasteries by endowment that did not require taxation, in the way that a full-blown episcopal and parochial system would (Carver 1998). The Christian infrastructure is subservient to the political realities. The variety we encounter in the early centuries means that just as there was no "Anglo-Saxon paganism" there was no "Anglo-Saxon church" either, at least not before there was a united Anglo-Saxon kingdom. The ideologies of Britain's regions were making their own statements and proclaiming their own alignments as the decades passed.

These things need repeating because some historians and prehistorians seem to be still stuck in a past structured by kings and their religious affiliations. Several years after the Sutton Hoo project had been completed, it was disconcerting to find the same old half dead horses being flogged at Prittlewell: which king was buried here? Was he a Pagan or a Christian? (MoLAS 2004, 39–42). These are non-questions: burials cannot distinguish kings, even if we knew what a king was in the 7th century (contra Parker Pearson *et al*. 1993). We can only be sure it was something quite different from a king in the 9th, 13th or 18th century. Similarly it is quite inappropriate and anachronistic to be opposing Christian to pagan in the 7th century. If a journalist asked whether the Prittlewell prince was Christian or pagan, one hopes he would sit bolt upright, and say "I trust I am neither, and let's pray we never get to the point that we are obliged to declare such a crude choice of allegiance. My burial proclaims the intellectual autonomy of my family, its history, my record as a soldier and estate owner, my broad knowledge of prehistory, my taste, my pride in my people, our inheritance, the current preoccupations of our intellectual arena, our political aspirations and fears." The prince would be disappointed at what was to happen. The dark curtain of Christianity was about to close round Europe, inhibiting original thought about the supernatural there for the next 1000 years.

Conclusion

The administration of dreams is a fundamental human tendency, and the spiritual specialist is likely to have been a player in every human community. In early medieval

Europe, the range of monumentality, and thus the implied variety of ritual behaviour and religious thinking, is prodigious. The references made are to a wide cosmological inheritance from prehistory, from Rome, from continental Europe and from the Mediterranean. Historical terms such as "Christianity", "paganism" and indeed "Anglo-Saxon" do no justice to the intellect and agency of the people living in eastern Britain at the time. The people of Anglo-Saxon regions drew on a broad repertoire of ideas, particularly from Scandinavia, that we have failed to appreciate because it is only recently that archaeology has had the confidence to claim its discovery.

The 5–8th century was a time of ideological experiment and inventive thinking, for the very good reason that no single power had sufficient might or authority to control it. There was no single orthodox pagan community, and no single orthodox Christian authority. Intellectual positions were adapted to local conditions, in particular the structure of society and the political agendas of the communities. They were worked out – negotiated – between the communities across the seas and across the land, and expressed in monuments, burial practice and other kinds of investment that we have been fortunate enough to inherit. Women were prominent in these investments and thus probably prominent in the administration of the varied belief systems.

But from the time of Charlemagne, authority was achieved over larger and larger territories and with it greater expertise in social and spiritual control. With increasing spiritual control came orthodoxy and the intellectual honeymoon was over. These are trends that I believe we can deduce from the archaeological evidence. Paganism in this period – if it has a useful meaning – refers to the broad repertoire of ideas of enormous time depth on which the inventive thinkers of the day could draw.

The new approaches to Anglo-Saxon paganism, epitomised by the new generation of scholars using this book as a platform, will be multi-disciplinary and will assume no underlying orthodoxies. They search for signs of the spirit in the open air, in the hall, at the grave side and in art, and assemble a synthesis of the Anglo-Saxon soul. In the reflections that follow, the object of our study is the originality of the pre-Christian, non-Christian, mind as a different, not a lesser, way of thinking. Valued for its own sake, it will also be seen to have values that have endured to the present day.

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