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## EVIDENCES FOR WITCHCRAFT IN ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

CERTAIN descriptions of early magical practices among Germanic and Celtic tribes are often used somewhat misleadingly as a starting-point for the examination of witchcraft in Anglo-Saxon England. Caesar's remarks on the religious observances of the Gauls have been quoted so frequently for this purpose that they tend to overshadow his summary of the less interesting and less titillating customs of the Germans:

*Germani multum ab hac consuetudine differunt. Nam neque druides habent, qui rebus divinis praesint, neque sacrificiis student. Deorum numero eos solos ducunt, quos cernunt et quorum aperte opibus iuvantur, Solem et Vulcanum et Lunam, reliquos ne fama quidem acceperunt. Vita omnis in venationibus atque in studiis rei militaris consistit; ab parvulis labori ac duritiae student.*<sup>1</sup>

Two centuries later Tacitus examined these customs in greater detail and, in his attempt to identify and place varying practices, described tribes settled in areas from which men later emigrated to England. It is now generally considered unwise to accept even this more precise evidence as indicative of conditions in early Anglo-Saxon England unless corroborative evidence can be found, but one sentence in the *Germania* deserves attention:

*Inesse quin etiam sanctum aliquid et providum putant, nec aut consilia earum aspernantur aut responsa neglegunt.*<sup>2</sup>

This statement could well be used as the first link in a long chain of references testifying the important position women held in some Germanic tribes, but its relevance to the conditions of Anglo-Saxon England is questionable. Certainly there are many instances of powerful priestesses, mediators between men and the divine, among continental Germanic tribes in the first seven centuries A.D.,<sup>3</sup> yet there is neither Old English word for nor mention of such women.<sup>4</sup>

Some form of Germanic heathenism was most probably well established in England when the first Christian missionaries arrived from

<sup>1</sup> *De Bello Gallico* VI 22.

<sup>2</sup> *De Origine et Situ Germanorum* 8.

<sup>3</sup> v. L. Eckenstein *Women under Monasticism* (Cambridge Mass. 1896) p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> E. A. Phillippon *Germanisches Heidentum bei den Angelsachsen* (Leipzig 1929) p. 183.

Rome, for Æthelberht of Kent was reluctant to part too hastily from beliefs which he and the whole English nation had held for so long.<sup>5</sup> How universal and deep-seated these beliefs and customs were it is difficult to judge, as the written evidences are on the whole few and tantalizingly brief. Christianity had adopted many alien ideas in its struggles with religions of the eastern Mediterranean, a policy which Pope Gregory, realizing it would be impossible to eradicate heathen practices quickly and completely, prescribed for Augustine and his followers in England:

*... fana idolorum destrui in eadem gente minime debeant; sed ipsa, quae in eis sunt, idola destruantur; aqua benedicta fiat, in eisdem fanis aspergatur, altaria construantur, reliquiae ponantur.*<sup>6</sup>

He also suggested that Augustine should adopt some of the external forms of the local heathen religion, in particular that its days of festival should be retained with a new Christian meaning and its superstitions well flavoured with Christian names and symbols. It is therefore hardly surprising that many scholars have doubted the existence of organized heathen practices in early Anglo-Saxon England. Yet he tells us that the Anglo-Saxons had their temples and their priestly class and we find their kings being exhorted to turn aside from their belief in augury, charms and incantation;<sup>7</sup> indeed, Æthelberht took care to meet the Italian missionaries under the open sky so that, *si quid malificae artis habuissent*, ('if they were practisers of magical arts'),<sup>8</sup> they might have less power to master or deceive him—a fear with roots surely in his own religious beliefs. Modern work on English place-names has identified a large number of sites where the gods Woden, Thunor, Tiw and Frig were worshipped as well as other religious centres without any particular dedication, and, although such evidence does not do much to illustrate or expand the few hints of religious practices in literary sources, it helps to prove the strength of heathen feeling among the Anglo-Saxons.<sup>9</sup>

In the preface to his *Leechdoms* Cockayne paints a gloomy picture of the 'tyranny and terror of the poisoner and the wizard' from which Christianity delivered the Anglo-Saxons. He describes the charms as a matter of 'indigenous herbs, the worts of the fatherland, smearings and wizard chants' and, drawing his support from Scandinavian sources, suggests that the Anglo-Saxons lived in a society haunted by the fear of evil magicians.<sup>10</sup> Æthelberht's precautions against bewitchment by Augustine and his fellow missionaries are those of a man who feared powerful magicians, but such fears are only to be expected. All primitive societies allow and promote white magic and, although forbidden,

<sup>5</sup> Bede *Historia Ecclesiastica* I xxv.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.* I xxx.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* I xxii, xxvii.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* I xxv.

<sup>9</sup> v. B. Branston *The Lost Gods of England* (London 1957) pp. 28 f.; F. M. Stenton *Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford 1947) p. 92 f. *et passim*.

<sup>10</sup> O. S. Cockayne *Leechdoms, Wortcunning and Starcraft of Early England* (London 1864-6) I xxxv f.

darker rituals will inevitably be practised, for the admiration given a priest-magician may make him so vain that he will oppose the gods of his people and their accepted moral standards. Yet this body of material edited by Cockayne can scarcely be regarded as the spells and formulae of dreaded magicians, for any lingering traces of native traditional lore they contain are embedded in a Graeco-Roman medical tradition. The men who used these recipes and charms were the accepted medical practitioners of their time, and it is highly likely that they received especial training. Bede speaks of the physician Cynefrid who attended the dying Etheldreda as of a man whose opinions were respected<sup>11</sup> and, describing how Cædmon requested a bed to be prepared for him in a house set aside for the sick and the dying,<sup>12</sup> indicates that Whitby had its own infirmary. The beliefs and practices of religious leaders and charm-makers at the turn of the sixth century remain dim to us, but within less than a century the new monasteries, as well as calling in trained physicians, most probably had their own dispensaries and herbal gardens.

Native magico-religious elements can be identified in the heroic vocabulary of the Anglo-Saxon poets and, although their emotiveness has been largely explored, we are little nearer finding out their significance to the poets who used them. The eleventh-century scribe who copied:

*Sygegealdor ic begale, sigegyrd ic me wege,  
 wordsige and worcsige. Se me dege;  
 ne me mere ne gemyrre, ne me maga ne geswence,  
 ne me næfre minum feore forht ne gewurpe,  
 ac gehæle me ælmihtig and sunu and frofre gast . . .*<sup>13</sup>

‘I sing a charm of victory, I bear a rod of victory,  
 word-victory and work-victory. May they be of use to me;  
 let no nightmare hinder me, nor belly-fiend afflict me,  
 and never let fear fall upon my life;  
 but save me, Almighty, and Son and Holy Ghost . . .’

would probably be very surprised by all the meanings which modern scholars have read into such a passage. For him this was an especial litany for travellers; it is closely related to earlier lirical poems and was very likely to be said in the same spirit as the Creed or Pater Noster.

Yet certain archaic elements in the Anglo-Saxon poetic vocabulary may still have evoked a feeling of strangeness and awe, although the conservative poets who used them no longer realized their full significance. The *Beowulf* poet, seeking a word to convey the great terror felt by warriors in Heorot, selected *ealu-scerwen*.<sup>14</sup> Though the first element can be translated ‘ale’ and the compound, with ingenuity, variously interpreted

<sup>11</sup> Bede *H.E.* IV xix.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.* IV xxiv.

<sup>13</sup> *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records* VI 127, ll. 6 f.

<sup>14</sup> *Beowulf* 769.

'deprivation of ale'<sup>15</sup> or 'serving of bitter ale'<sup>16</sup> it is just as likely that *ealu-* here preserves a meaning otherwise lost in Old English, the meaning 'good luck' still found in the cognate Old Norse *gl*.<sup>17</sup> The later *Andreas* poet seems to have found the compound as puzzling as we do for he adapted it to express the panic caused by a great flood; he was so far misled by the nature of the compound that, to suit the pattern of his line, he felt himself able to substitute *meodu-* for *ealu-*.<sup>18</sup> A few other limiting elements in compound words present similar difficulties of interpretation. Some Old English poet probably misunderstood the word *regnbeard*<sup>19</sup> which the *Beowulf* poet uses to describe marvellously hard shields and identifying the first element with the everyday word *regn* 'rain', he may have constructed what seemed to him a similar compound, *scurbeard*,<sup>20</sup> which later poets adapted to their purposes. (This, however, is only one possible explanation of *scurbeard*'s etymology. Showers of weapons are found in the battle imagery of most Old Germanic poetry and prompt the translations 'strong in the storm of battle' or 'hard in giving blows', whereas a comparison of the compound with *fyrbeard* 'tempered' suggests the interpretation 'quenched'.)

The form *wælceasega* (*Exodus* 164) is so similar in its etymology to the *walcyrge* of early glossaries and later writings that scholars have often attempted to identify it with this latter word in meaning. The author of the Old English poem *Exodus* was, however, a man of surprising originality and exactitude in vocabulary, as far as can be judged from the other two early poems of the Junius manuscript, *Genesis* and *Daniel*, and we should perhaps regard this word as especially used (if not especially coined for it survives nowhere else) to describe some bird of prey hovering over battlefields. The imagery is conventional and the passage can be paralleled in *Beowulf*,<sup>21</sup> *The Battle of Brunanburh*,<sup>22</sup> *The Battle of Maldon*,<sup>23</sup> *Elene*,<sup>24</sup> *Judith*<sup>25</sup> and *The Battle of Finnesburh*.<sup>26</sup> In a similar passage in *Genesis*, the same concept is expressed by the word *nefuglas*.<sup>27</sup> We may here add a note on the first element of this compound. Cognate with Gothic *naus* and Icelandic *nár* 'corpse' this limiting word still had full substantival force for the earliest Anglo-Saxon poets who formed with it otherwise unrecorded compounds *drihtneum* 'hosts of the dead'<sup>28</sup> and *orcneas* 'corpses of hell'.<sup>29</sup> This *orcneas* is now generally recognized as a learned compound, its first element from Latin *orcus* 'Hades', and it is best interpreted as signifying the dead in Hell as ranking large among God's enemies sprung from Cain's seed. Some, reading this passage, have suggested that it proves the early Anglo-Saxons practised necromancy; at any rate the compound could be given this

<sup>15</sup> A. Brodeur *The Art of Beowulf* (California 1959) pp. 59 f.

<sup>16</sup> G. V. Smithers *English and Germanic Studies IV* (1951-2) 67 f.

<sup>17</sup> C. L. Wrenn *Beowulf* (London 1953) p. 243.

<sup>18</sup> *Andreas* 1526.

<sup>19</sup> *Beowulf* 326; v. C. L. Wrenn *Beowulf* p. 35.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.* 1033.

<sup>21</sup> ll. 3024-7.

<sup>22</sup> ll. 60-5.

<sup>23</sup> ll. 106-7.

<sup>24</sup> ll. 27-30.

<sup>25</sup> ll. 205-12.

<sup>26</sup> ll. 5-7, 34-5.

<sup>27</sup> l. 2159.

<sup>28</sup> *Exodus* 163.

<sup>29</sup> *Beowulf* 112.

connotation, for the man who borrowed the Latin *orcus* may well have met this concept in his classical reading. The highly speculative interpretation put forward by Professor Carney is interesting, especially as the passage he bases his theory upon does seem to show certain features in common with this part of *Beowulf*, but is hardly likely to gain wide acceptance.<sup>30</sup> Other English occurrences of \**ne* do not, however, present such ambiguities. The *neflugas*<sup>31</sup> of *Genesis* are carrion-birds, the *neobed*<sup>32</sup> of the phoenix is his bed of death, Lucifer is sent down to that *niobedd* 'hell',<sup>33</sup> the vainglorious man *after neosisum niper gebiged*<sup>34</sup> will be bound in hell's torments. The Old English word for 'paradise' *neorxnawong* had a long vogue, both in poetry and homiletic prose, and, though curiously parallel to the Norse idea of Valhalla, it is not out of place in the early English religious verse. The Anglo-Saxon poets, in developing a heroic vocabulary suitable for Christian tales, pictured Christ in heaven, an *eorl* surrounded by his troop, *geseted to symle*.<sup>35</sup> His champions on earth defend his *wong*<sup>36</sup> and when dead they go, not to a deathbed, but to a plain where there is a hall for the dead.

Another interesting element in the literary vocabulary is *sige* 'victory', still recognized as a separate substantive throughout the Old English period. The Anglo-Saxons used it in forming many compounds, for example, *sigegyrd* 'rod of victory',<sup>37</sup> *sigetudor* 'victorious race',<sup>38</sup> *sigetiber* 'sacrifice for victory',<sup>39</sup> already on the early Bewcastle column *sigbecn* 'sign of victory'<sup>40</sup> shows how it became an important element in Christian terminology. It has become irrevocably linked with another word in our language, *gealdor*, a word usually associated with singing for some magical purpose. They are first found joined together in the passage quoted above from an eleventh-century copy of a traveller's litany. The compound occurs in Middle English as a substantive in the *Ancrene Wisse* *sigaldren*,<sup>41</sup> *King Alisaundre* *sygaldrye*,<sup>42</sup> the *Chester Plays* *sigaldry*<sup>43</sup> and a verb, *sygaldryd* 'bewitched',<sup>44</sup> in the *Handlyng Synne*. The sense of enchantment certainly present in the post-Conquest occurrences of the word most probably stems from the force of *gealdor*, used throughout the Old English and early Middle English period for charms and enchantments in poetry, in translation, in leechbooks.

One word is at the centre of our meagre knowledge of the magical practices of the Anglo-Saxons—*run*. For them it still meant 'secret, mystery', yet no evidence remains to show that they connected the secrets of the runes with some one god, as the Norse connected theirs with Oðinn and the Irish their Oghams with Finn. The meaning of

<sup>30</sup> J. Carney *Studies in Irish Literature and History* (Dublin 1955) pp. 102 f. <sup>31</sup> *Genesis* 2158.

<sup>32</sup> *The Phoenix* 553. <sup>33</sup> *Genesis* 343. <sup>34</sup> *Vainglory* 55. <sup>35</sup> *Dream of the Rood* 141.

<sup>36</sup> *Guthlac* l. 178 and passim. <sup>37</sup> *ASPR* VI 127, l. 6. <sup>38</sup> *Guthlac* 866. <sup>39</sup> *Exodus* 402.

<sup>40</sup> H. Sweet *Oldest English Texts* (EETS OS 83) (1885) p. 124.

<sup>41</sup> *Ancrene Riwle* EETS OS 225 (1923) p. 92 (M. 208) l. 38.

<sup>42</sup> *King Alisaundre* EETS OS 227 (1952) p. 376, l. L5737.

<sup>43</sup> *Chester Plays* EETS ES 115 (1916) p. 287, l. 167.

<sup>44</sup> Robert Manning of Brunne's '*Handlyng Synne*' EETS OS 119 (1901) p. 19.

*belruman*<sup>45</sup> remains unclear; some have thought these people to be necromancers, others allow the compound to imply little more than 'such demons' in its context. Other Germanic languages show similar compounds—in Gothic there is *haljarumæ* = *magæ mulieres*,<sup>46</sup> in Old High German *belliruma* = *necromancia*<sup>47</sup>—and the Old English glosses show the word to have been no mere *ad hoc* formation in *Beowulf*. The noun seems to be used mainly of female evil beings in these glosses,<sup>48</sup> but, although its form is as evocative as *orcneas*, there is nothing to show us that the author of *Beowulf* intended us to picture women necromancers. He does, however, tell us of the practice of casting lots, a practice which most likely survived for some centuries after the Anglo-Saxons came to England. Omens are observed before *Beowulf* sails for Denmark,<sup>49</sup> and the later *Andreas* poet, knowing of such ceremonies at least from second-hand sources, lists the casting of *taan* among other heathen practices.<sup>50</sup> A collection of sheep's ankle bones, dated A.D. 500, and found at Caistor-by-Norwich,<sup>51</sup> seems again to bear out Tacitus's statement that the Germanic tribes paid especial attention to divination by casting lots. Here *astragali* are used, as they were among races living around the Mediterranean, and one bone is inscribed with runes, clearly for some magical purpose.<sup>52</sup> Other isolated early runic inscriptions on such articles as swords, knives and rings also point to the great awe in which the English held these signs, an awe which led to their use on Christian monuments at Ruthwell, Bewcastle and elsewhere. Certainly the nuns of Hackness felt runes held great power and, perhaps because the Celtic influences were strong in a house where we know the name of at least one Irish sister, they used Oghams as well as runes among the lettering on their cemetery grave-stones.<sup>53</sup>

By the ninth century, however, runes seem to have fallen generally out of use and, as employed by Cynewulf and later poets, give the feeling that a pleasant antiquarianism is being indulged in. Overgreat emphasis has been placed on the relatively late translation of Bede's *litteras solutorias* as *þa alysendlecan rune . . . 7 þa stafas awritene*,<sup>54</sup> according to one writer 'a clear testimony that the belief in the magical efficacy of runes was still very much alive':<sup>55</sup> the translator, seeking for some meaningful words to express the Latin phrase in his own language, may have

<sup>45</sup> *Beowulf* 163. <sup>46</sup> Jordanes c. 24 em. of *haliorumæ*.

<sup>47</sup> See further: J. Grimm *Deutsche Mythologie* (1844) pp. 375 f.; Forster *Archiv*. NS viii (1902) 23 f.; and Kauffmann *Beitr.* xviii (1894) 156.

<sup>48</sup> See especially Wright *A Volume of Vocabularies* (London 1857) 60<sup>10</sup>; ii 69<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>49</sup> *Beowulf* 204. <sup>50</sup> *Andreas* 1099.

<sup>51</sup> Rainbird Clark *East Anglia* (London 1959) pp. 137, 230 and Fig. 43; C. L. Wrenn *Saxons and Celts in South West Britain*, *Hon. Soc. of Cymmrodorion* (1959) p. 4.

<sup>52</sup> For astragalomancy among the ancients, see W. Smith *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities* (London 1882) s.v. *Talus*, Daremberg and Saglio *Dictionnaire des Antiquités Grecques et Romaines* s.v. *astragalus* and *talus*.

<sup>53</sup> V. G. B. Brown *The Arts in Early England* (1930) 6 pt. I p. 68; R. W. V. Elliott *Runes* (Manchester 1959) pp. 84 f. <sup>54</sup> Bede *E.H.* IV xxii. <sup>55</sup> R. W. V. Elliot, op. cit. p. 67.

sought the aid of this metaphor in much the same spirit as the carvers of the Ruthwell Cross used runes, for a fear of the power of the written word need not be confined only to the Anglo-Saxons among all European races.

The long history of *gealdor*, both in simplex and compounded forms, suggests that the use of incantatory formulæ must have disappeared only very gradually. In a horoscope translated into Old English the reader is told to beware the woman born in *mona se fifta* for she will be *yfeldæda 7 wyrtegælstre*.<sup>56</sup> The derivation of the second of these two words is puzzling. Written against the Latin *herbaria* it implies something more than mere knowledge of herbs; the second element of the compound suggests that those who worked with herbs in early Anglo-Saxon England used incantations as an integral part of their cure. Indeed, charm-singing is specifically censured in the edicts of the mid-eighth-century council of Cloveshoe. Some traces of early formulæ remain in the Anglo-Saxon charms though for the most part Christian prayers and ceremonies have taken their place and Christian priests were prepared to say masses and give blessings where before heathen divinities had been worshipped.<sup>57</sup> The manuscripts containing these charms were written mainly in the tenth and eleventh centuries, but the texts themselves point to many varied sources and periods. Although some of the formulæ have often been considered the oldest relics of English and of all Germanic literature, the evidence they provide must be sifted carefully. To recognize Christian emendations and additions is simple by comparison with the virtually impossible task of separating out the different pagan strands. Four elements have been judged to characterize Teutonic magic: the doctrines of specific venoms, of the nines, of the worm as a cause of disease and of elf-shot; yet each of these doctrines is to be found among other Indo-European societies and therefore a caveat is added:

‘. . . when we meet these four doctrines in passages of English origin without classical or Celtic elements, and especially when combined with references to Nordic gods or customs, the material may with reasonable certainty be regarded as having been brought by the Anglo-Saxon tribes from their continental home.’<sup>58</sup>

Such passages attribute all disease to the attacks of supernatural beings. *ða mihtigan wif*<sup>59</sup> against whom one exorcist waged war are probably followers of Woden, but not yet promoted to their important part in the ordering of Valhalla, and to give the translation ‘Valkyries’ is both anachronistic and misleading. The charm-maker calls the sudden stitch *isernes dæl, hægtessan geweorc* ‘piece of iron, work of hag’ and his words look back to a time when iron was an awesome metal, the legacy of the gods. The *hægtessan gescot* in the same charm refers the shot back to the *wif* who

<sup>56</sup> Cockayne *Leechcraft* III. *Prognosticus*.

<sup>57</sup> *ASPR* VI 116 l. 115.

<sup>58</sup> C. Singer *Early English Magic and Medicine* PBA ix 13.

<sup>59</sup> *ASPR* VI 128 l. 8 f.

made ready their powers earlier in the charm and again the usual translation 'shot of witch' misleads. From line 23 of the charm we have an interesting string of supernatural beings told over, beings who, according to the charm composer, may have caused his patient's pain. The list shows us a very early stage in the development of a Germanic mythology, a picture far removed from the comparatively elaborate tales of Scandinavian gods. It is interesting to note that the modern German word for lumbago, *Hexenschuss*, looks back ultimately to the beliefs of such a passage and, indeed, dictionaries of the northern dialects of modern English cite many examples of *elf* in compounds, reminiscent of the *y/lf* *gescot* of line 24.

These charm cures were practised by both men and women, and both could be suspected of using powers of bewitching. The speaker of the land remedy asks God to protect his charm:

*Nu ic bidde þone waldend, se þe þas woruld gesceop,  
þæt ne sy nan to þæs cwíðol wif ne to þæs cræftig man,  
þæt awendan ne mæge word þus gecwedene.*<sup>60</sup>

'I ask the ruler who wrought this earth, that there may be no woman eloquent enough and no man powerful enough to change the words thus spoken.'

No particular attention is directed to the *cwíðol wif* any more than to the *cræftig man*, suggesting that as yet the Anglo-Saxons were without the concept of especially evil women magicians. The speaker of the charm for settling a swarm of bees says that earth can prevail:

. . . *wið ealra wihta gehwilce  
and wið andan and wið æminde  
and wið þa micelan mannes tungan.*<sup>61</sup>

' . . . against all creatures, and against injury and against forgetfulness and against the mighty words of men.'

and goes on to address *sigewif* 'victorious women'. Earlier he has not pointed to any special evil influence of women magicians, so it is scarcely likely that he now remembers them. He addresses *sigewif*, and three explanations remain possible. The *sigewif* may be supernatural beings, like *ða mihtigan wif*, whose favour he entreats; *sigewif* may be extended to the whole swarm and therefore the speaker addresses them directly; *sigewif* may be understood as singular, thus the queen bee, and addressed with courteous plural: perhaps the second is the most satisfying explanation, as then a plural word for bees would refer back to *hi* 'they' of the directions in the previous line.

Gibbon, recognizing that King Rotharius found it necessary to protect his subjects from a popular and judicious prejudice against witchcraft, suggested that this prejudice was 'of Italian rather than barbarian extraction'.<sup>62</sup> Savage laws against sorcerers and the practice of magic

<sup>60</sup> *ASPR* VI 118 l. 64 f.

<sup>61</sup> *ibid.* VI 125 8<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>62</sup> *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (ed. 1815) VIII 153.

made by the first Christian emperors were adopted and elaborated by later ecclesiastical writers to combat a strange mixture of religions at various stages of development and decay. A clear and concise summary of some such writings preceding Theodore's time is presented by Montague Summers,<sup>63</sup> yet he fails to point out the true significance of these correspondences. He accepts without question the large section devoted to witchcraft and magic in Thorpe's edition of Theodore's penitentials,<sup>64</sup> but the amount of this material now generally attributed to Theodore is considerably smaller. Its five clauses prescribe penance for those eating food which has been sacrificed and for those following two old superstitions (putting a girl on a roof to cure fever, burning grain after death to protect the health of the living). With them is included the passage:

*Si qua mulier divinationes vel incantationes diabolicas fecerit, 1 annum poeniteat, vel 3 XLmas, XL dies, juxta qualitatem culpae poenitentis.*<sup>65</sup>

Canon 24 of the fourth-century synod of Ancyra follows, perhaps to explain a general doctrine and a punishment which seemed unduly harsh in Anglo-Saxon England.

Seventh- and eighth-century English codes of civil law detail punishment for worshipping heathen gods but significantly the evil practice of magic is not mentioned. This would suggest that the continental writings about witchcraft were still unknown in England at this time except perhaps to scholarly churchmen such as Aldhelm. The *ceorl*<sup>66</sup> who, according to Wihtrud's laws, made offerings to the devil was in reality worshipping dying heathen gods. Neither civil nor ecclesiastical law of this period forbade the use of medical and semi-magical salves.

Constant communication of Danish settlers with their homeland may have made for a far greater preservation of their customs and beliefs than there had been in the Anglo-Saxon settlements. Certainly their religion, an elaborate form of the heathenism almost dead among the Anglo-Saxons, spread with their settlements and soon seriously threatened the position of the Christian church. By the end of the ninth century scholarship had declined even in Wessex, a province relatively unaffected by Scandinavian invasion, and Alfred and his successors found it necessary to include among their laws more stringent punishments for heathen practices.

With these are linked the first laws in English civil codes against witchcraft. In Alfred's laws we read:

*. . . þa fæmnan þe gewuniaþ anfon galdorcraeft 7 scinlæcan 7 wiccan, ne læt þu þa libban.*<sup>67</sup>

<sup>63</sup> M. Summers *The Geography of Witchcraft* (London 1926) pp. 65–75.

<sup>64</sup> B. Thorpe *The Ancient Laws and Institutions of England* (London 1840) Theod. jud. poen. xxvii.

<sup>65</sup> J. T. MacNeill and H. Gamer *Medieval Handbooks of Penance* (New York 1938) p. 198.

<sup>66</sup> F. L. Attenborough *Laws of the Earliest English Kings* (Cambridge 1922) Wihtrud 12.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.* Ælfred: Prelim. 30.

‘... women who are wont to practise enchantments, and magicians and witches, do not allow them to live.’

This is an obvious elaboration of Exodus xxii 18: *Maleficos non patieris vivere*. *Wicca*, very likely a contraction of *witega* and certainly cognate with it,<sup>68</sup> occurs more frequently than the feminine form *wicce*. Although the early glossators used *wyccē* to explain *phytonyssa*<sup>69</sup> Alfred did not use it to describe Circe and, remembering this, we should perhaps regard the *wiccan* of Alfred’s law as either men or women. In the laws of Edward and Guthrum the contrasting coupling of *wiccan* and *wigleras*<sup>70</sup> is again inconclusive, for throughout the Anglo-Saxon period the word cannot be regarded as masculine or feminine, unless its gender is proven by contextual evidence.

The Anglo-Saxons supplied their own words for much of the Latin terminology of magic, but this does not constitute evidence for the existence of a similar native tradition of magic. Just as Mercury was regarded as the Latin translation of Woden (*Mercurius on life*),<sup>71</sup> so early glossarists equated *hægtis* and *striga*,<sup>72</sup> *hæhtis* and *furia*.<sup>73</sup> When the phrase *hægtessan gescot* is recalled, such occurrences would suggest that this word is used for supernatural beings in early Anglo-Saxon England. We find also *walcyrge* against *eurynis*, *uwalcyrge* against *tisifone(ph)*, *walcrigge* against *herenis* in the Corpus glossary<sup>74</sup> and a translation of a phrase describing beasts with Gorgons’ eyes runs *ða deor habbaþ wælkyrian eagan*:<sup>75</sup> these and similar examples indicate a translation such as ‘war-goddess’. Yet Alfred used neither *hægtis* nor *walcyrge* as translations for the Furies, retaining their Latin names or else calling them *metena* or *gydena*.<sup>76</sup> The tenth-century occurrence of *walcyrian* in Canute’s laws<sup>77</sup> and in a contemporary sermon by Wulfstan<sup>78</sup> cannot be explained by reference to these glosses, for the law hardly legislated against Germanic goddesses of war. The same phrase occurs again in the fourteenth-century poem *Purity* as *wyche 3 7 walkyries*<sup>79</sup> among a list of types of sorcerers, magicians and evil-doers. We should perhaps explain the retention of the phrase so late as due more to a quality of sound than of meaning, sound which first coupled these words together for rhetorical effect.

Although there is no description of magical practices in the main body of Old English heroic verse, apart from that of the taking of omens in *Beowulf*, many terms occur which are closely related to words

<sup>68</sup> W. W. Skeat *Etymological Dictionary* (Oxford 1898) s.v. ‘witch’.

<sup>69</sup> Wright *A Volume of Vocabularies* 741, 742.

<sup>70</sup> Attenborough op. cit.: Edw. & Guth. 11.

<sup>71</sup> J. M. Kemble *Solomon and Saturnus* (London 1848) p. 120 l. 70. Cf. Wulfstan’s attempts to identify Oðinn with Mercury in *De Falsis Deis* ll. 65 f. in D. Bethurum *The Homilies of Wulfstan* (Oxford 1957) p. 223.

<sup>72</sup> Sweet *Oldest English Texts* Corpus 1913 p. 99.

<sup>73</sup> *ibid.* Epinal Erfurt 913 p. 94. Cf. Leiden 128 p. 126.

<sup>74</sup> *ibid.* Corpus 771, 2017, 1018.

<sup>75</sup> O. Cockayne *Narratiunculæ Anglice Conscriptæ* (London 1861) 34<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>76</sup> W. Sedgefield *Alfred’s Boethius* (Oxford 1899) p. 102 l. 22.

<sup>77</sup> Canute Procl. 15.

<sup>78</sup> D. Whitelock *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos* (London 1939) p. 11 ll. 167 f.

<sup>79</sup> *Purity* 1157.

that, outside the poetry, deal with the performance of magical actions. Hrothgar tells us that Heorot had to be protected against demons and spectres *scuccum ond scinum*<sup>80</sup> as well as foes; *scucca* is used mainly for the devil, rarely in the plural for demons; *scinna* is more interesting for the strength of meaning it still held among the Anglo-Saxons. It has been suggested that the magic connotation of *scin* probably arose from the flickering flames of light that rotting vegetation throws up, creating the impression of dancing spirits:<sup>81</sup> the compounds it occurs in all deal with the production of delusions and phantasms. (The word for medicine or drug, *lybb*, has also a bad sense 'poison': it too is used to form compound terms descriptive of magic.) A verb, *galan* 'to chant', does not evoke any feelings of magic when Beowulf describes an old man who sings a song of sorrow, *sorbleoð galeð*, for his son. In the Riddles the same verb<sup>82</sup> is variously interpreted as 'utters an incantation'<sup>83</sup> and 'cries out':<sup>84</sup> whether this is a picture of the enchantment of a sword or merely tells of a woman's hatred for battle is disputed. Elsewhere the verb has definite magical connotation; a derivative *gealdor* has been mentioned above. More examples could be cited, but one conclusion remains, that the authors of the early heroic verse were on the whole not interested in magic. Such apparent lack of interest is all the more startling when compared on the one hand with the later Scandinavian sagas, on the other with the English laws, sermons, penitentials and charms.

Most important, this early literature gives us no picture of a strong live belief in magic such as we see in the Sagas where magicians, especially the cruel and omniscient women magicians, are dreaded and honoured. In the late fourteenth-century *Saga of Hrolf Kraki*, for example, Heith tells well-guarded secrets and makes prophecy from her high incantation stool;<sup>85</sup> many similar tales attest to the great power enjoyed by such women. The English writings which deal with magical practices reveal rather a sophisticated and learned interest fed from foreign sources. The native vocabulary is large, larger than seems necessary for the almost dead tradition of magic. Its very detail exists to translate and explain the strictures and discussions of homilist and lawmaker. There are close correspondences between pre-conquest laws later than Alfred and homiletic materials. Especially close is the relationship between a passage from one of Canute's laws and a sentence in Wulfstan's *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*—similar sentences can be found in continental writings as early as the seventh century—and their interdependence is often debated; what is important is that neither is completely original.

The Alfredian law quoted above is in itself a poor starting point for

<sup>80</sup> *Beowulf* 939.

<sup>81</sup> D. G. Storms *Anglo-Saxon Magic* (The Hague 1954) pp. 114 f.

<sup>82</sup> Riddle 20, l. 35.

<sup>83</sup> A. J. Wyatt *The Anglo-Saxon Riddles* (1912) p. 79.

<sup>84</sup> v. *ibid.* and Grein and Wülcker *Bibliothek der Angelsächsischen Poesie* III Band – 2 Hälfte p. 196.

<sup>85</sup> S. B. Mills *Saga of Hrolf Kraki* (Oxford 1933) p. 5.

the examination of legislation against witchcraft in England, as we shall see on glancing at a second version which is preserved:

... þa fæmnan þe gewuniap anfon galdorcraeftigan 7 scinlæcan 7 wiccan, ne læt þu þa libban.<sup>86</sup>

‘... the women who are wont to receive enchanters, magicians and witches, do not allow them to live.’

The difference is deceptively slight, a mere ending on the word *galdorcraeft*, but it changes the whole interpretation of the law, allowing comparison with the title of a salve (from the third of the Leechbooks) designed to protect against harm from

... ælfcynne 7 nihtgengan 7 þam mannum þe deofol mid hæmþ<sup>87</sup>

‘... elves and evil spirits of the night and women who lie with the devil.’

In both the idea of bodily association with an evil power is literally translated, the salve guarding against phantasms where the law opposes their creators. Two manuscripts support this reading of the law, the first mention of the making of a pact with an evil power in English writings. The composite nature of the leechbook, compiled in the mid-tenth century, most likely incorporating much earlier material, is widely admitted. It is tempting to suggest that originally the heading of this receipt may have read *wiþ ælfcynne*, the instructions detailing a remedy for injuries attributed to the attack of elves, and that some scribe, thinking the salve meant to shield Christians from heathen foes, added to the title other enemies he thought it would prevail against. A decree, attributed to some general council in Ancyra thought to have met in the ninth century, is perhaps to be regarded as the ultimate source for the introduction of such caveats into England:

... quædam sceleratæ mulieres retro post Satanam conversæ, dæmonum illusionibus & phantasmatis seductæ, credunt se & profitentur nocturnis horis cum Diana paganorum dea & innumera multitudine mulierum equitare super quasdam bestias, & multa terrarum spatia intempestæ noctis silentio pertransire, ejusque jussionibus velut dominæ obedire, & certis noctibus ad ejus servitium evocari.<sup>88</sup>

Certainly the Latin canon, the English law and recipe heading share a belief in the evil power the devil may assume over man’s body as well as mind.

It is significant that *7 wiccan* in this law, no matter which interpretation we choose, occurs in addition to the other terms. This indicates that the word was still separate in identity from the others, a general term for both men and women, just as the cognate verb has the simple meaning ‘to practise witchcraft’. The verb is first recorded in late tenth-century

<sup>86</sup> Liebermann *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen* (Halle 1903–16).

<sup>87</sup> Cockayne *Leechdoms, Starcraft and Wortcunning* I 342.

<sup>88</sup> *Reginonis abbatis prumiensis libri duo de ecclesiasticis disciplinis & religione Christiana* (Paris 1671) § 364 p. 345.

church canons where particular disapproval is directed against anyone who:

. . . *wiccige ymb æniges mannes lufe. 7 him on æte sylle. oþþe on drince. oþþe on æniges cynnes gealdorcræftum. þæt hyra lufu forþon þe mare beon scyle . . .*<sup>89</sup>

‘. . . practises witchcraft concerning the love of any man, or gives him in food or drink or in enchantments of any kind anything so that because of it their love may be the greater . . .’

The authenticity of the code in which these words occur is often doubted, but the picture it presents is not one of irreconcilable contradictions. Some passages refer to lingering beliefs and superstitions about trees, stones and wells, to divination *on Sunnan. 7 on Monan. 7 on steorraena rýne* (‘in sun and in moon and in the courses of stars’) and to idol worship. Herb gathering is allowed:

. . . *mid nanum galdre. buton mid Pater noster 7 mid Cre dam. oþþe mid sumon gebede. þe to Gode belimpe.*

‘. . . without any incantation, unless with Our Father and with the Creed or with some prayer that appertains to God.’

Yet these and other late collections of canon law were framed particularly for conditions in the north of England where a large section of the community was Norse and therefore less cut off in time from their heathen beliefs and customs.

Ælfric, in a sermon on auguries,<sup>90</sup> also mentions love philtres among the practices of witches. As in certain passages of this sermon his use of the word *wicca* is demonstrably feminine, we can for the first time be sure that here the material relates to women. The homilist explains the powers claimed by these women and details many of their traits. They are revealed as disciples of an elemental heathenism, teaching the worship of stones, trees and wells; they are possessed of occult knowledge which, though it may be true, is dangerous because it comes from the devil. As well as brewing love philtres they dabble in dream interpretation. Although he censures them, saying:

*Us is to secenne. gif we geswencte beoþ  
þa bote æt gode. ne æt þam gramlican wiccan.*<sup>91</sup>

‘It is for us to seek, if we are hard pressed, the cure from God, not from these grim women.’

they were important members of late tenth-century England. In many things they resemble the ‘cunning women’ of whom it was said in the sixteenth century:

‘The trade is thought to be impious. The effect and end thereof to be sometimes evill, as when thereby man or beast, grasse, trees or corne, etc.; is hurt;

<sup>89</sup> D. Wilkins *Consilia Magnæ Britannia et Hibernia* (London 1737) I 131–2.

<sup>90</sup> W. W. Skeat *Ælfric’s Lives of the Saints* (EETS 1881/1900) Sermon XVII, ll. 157 f.

<sup>91</sup> *ibid.* XVII ll 181–2.

sometimes good, as whereby sicke folkes are healed, theeves bewraied and true men come to their goods, etc. The matter and instruments, wherewith it is accomplished, are words, signes, images, characters etc.’<sup>92</sup>

According to Ælfric they seek the devil’s aid in making their prophecies.

The theme of compact with the devil in witchcraft originated in the East, but did not receive a full and widespread currency in English writings for some time. Ælfric does not record anything which would suggest that these women he paints practised the black arts. He describes *sume gewitlease wif*<sup>93</sup> who commits herself and her child to the devil *æt wega gelætum* ‘crossroads’,<sup>94</sup> but in his words there is nothing to indicate that she was a Satanist apprenticing her child to her ‘Master’. She was keeping alive, perhaps unconsciously and superstitiously, an old custom connected with the worship of Woden to whom gifts were offered at the crossroads. So too the memory of a similar custom is preserved in a few lines added to one version of the so-called ‘Canons enacted under King Edgar’. These add to prohibitions against tree and stone worship:

. . . *pone deofles cræft. þær man þa cild þurb þa eorþan tihþ.*<sup>95</sup>

‘. . . that heathen practice, where one draws children through the earth.’

Whether this also refers to the crossroads custom or to some ceremony in honour of an earth divinity it is impossible to guess, but it is again evidence of the enduring quality possessed by such lore. It seems probable that Ælfric’s *hætsan*—a word which had lost its old semantic force just as had earlier *wælcyrrian*—were wise village women who helped their neighbours with age-old charm receipts and, when these failed, with enchantments. Once they might have sought trees and wells because of their religious significance, a significance which may have regained force with the encroachments of the Norsemen.

Towards the end of the tenth century a new element enters into the English idea of witchcraft. Various church enactments had mentioned killing by witchcraft, but no hint had been given as to how this was accomplished. A few words of the Egbert penitentials:

*Gif hwa drife stacan on ænigne man. fæste preo gear . . . . . 7 gif se man for þære stacunge dead biþ . . .*<sup>96</sup>

‘If anyone should drive stakes into any man, let him fast for three years . . . . . and if the man should die on account of that staking . . .’

suggest that the practice of trying to kill a man by pricking his image may have been current. Though the origins of the material in this document and the possibility that this *stacunge* was perhaps no vicarious business make this interpretation doubtful, yet a reference to such a

<sup>92</sup> M. Summers (ed.) *Reg. Scot’s The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (London 1930) p. 274.

<sup>93</sup> Ælf. op. cit. XVII l. 148.

<sup>94</sup> Kemble *Solomon and Saturnus* p. 122 l. 77.

<sup>95</sup> Thorpe op. cit. X, version XVI.

<sup>96</sup> D. Wilkins op. cit. I 137.

crime occurs in the record of an exchange of lands in the late tenth century:

. . . 7 þæt land æt Ægeleswyrðe headde an wyduwe 7 hire sune ær forwyrht forþanþe hi drifon serne stacan on Ælsie Wulfstanes feder 7 þæt werp æreafe 7 man teh þæt morþ forþ of hire inclifan. þa nam man þæt wif 7 adrencete hi æt lundene brigce 7 hire sune ætberst 7 werð utlab 7 þæt land eode þam kyng to handa 7 se kyng hit forgeaf þa Ælfsige 7 Wulstan . . .<sup>97</sup>

‘. . . and a widow and her son had previously forfeited the land at Ailsworth because they drove iron stakes into Ælsie, Wulfstan’s father, and that was discovered and the deadly image was taken from her closet. Then the woman was taken and drowned at London bridge and her son broke loose and became outlawed and the land went into the king’s hands and the king then gave it to Ælsie and Wulfstan . . .’

This passage indicates that the ‘moppet’ was used in England by the last part of the tenth century; it also provides the earliest record of a witch-hunt in England. It is interesting to note that while the woman was instantly drowned her son had time to escape—perhaps the woman was regarded as the more culpable of the two. Property was in dispute when the accusation was made and this Ælsie and Wulfstan gained through the success of their charges. The tale lacks the sophistication of the hey-day of the witch-hunts: no confessions, no counter-accusations, no further trials.

Very different is the description of a witch who lived in Berkeley in the mid-eleventh century. For William of Malmesbury the chief interest of his narrative lay in the Byzantine-inspired struggle for the woman’s soul, a theme he declared perfectly credible to all those who were acquainted with Gregory’s Dialogues. The introductory portrait he gives is most interesting:

*Mulier in Berkeleia mansitabat, maleficiis, ut post patuit, insueta, auguriorum veterum non inscia, gulae patrona, petulantiae arbitra, flagitiis non ponens modum, quod esset adhuc citra senium, vicino licet pede pulsans senectutis aditum. Haec cum quadam die convivaretur, cornicula quam in deliciis habebat, vocalius solito, nescio quid, cornicata est . . .*<sup>98</sup>

‘There resided at Berkeley a woman addicted to witchcraft, as it afterwards appeared, and skilled in ancient augury; she was excessively gluttonous, perfectly lascivious, setting no bounds to her debaucheries, as she was not old, though treading fast towards the confines of age. On a certain day, as she was regaling, a jack-daw, which was a very great favourite, chattered something more loudly than usual . . .’

Other English writers of the twelfth century show interest in witchcraft but none gives evidence of the practice of demoniacal arts in England

<sup>97</sup> A. J. Robertson *Anglo-Saxon Charters* (Cambridge 1939) XXXVII.

<sup>98</sup> T. D. Hardy (ed.) *Willelmi Malmesburiensis Monachi Opera* (London 1840) pp. 351 f. trans. John Sharpe *The History of the Kings of England and of his own Times by William of Malmesbury* (London 1815) p. 264.

for such an early period. This woman is further described as being without Christian morals, as professing to have a power of prophecy and, like so many of the women accused of witchcraft in the later witch-hunts, she has an especial pet, a jackdaw. The tale, like so much of the evidence on this subject, is untrustworthy in detail. The story is too well put together; the immoral mother is contrasted with her pious son and daughter, a monk and nun. The heavy bombastic phrases have literary rather than factual pretensions. William of Malmesbury's audience was fond of stories of this nature and no doubt a measure of sophistication had to be added to any tale told to them. A witch may well have lived in Berkeley in the mid-eleventh century, but this elaborate story can scarcely be more true of her life than the many varying tales about Ælthryth are of that 'wicked' queen's.

Apart from this witch of Berkeley there is no evidence whatsoever to suggest that organized communities of witches existed in England before the Norman conquest, and no occurrence of Satanism is recorded earlier than the thirteenth century.<sup>99</sup> It seems hardly wise therefore to argue backwards from sixteenth-century conditions beyond this date, for the

'... catena of ordinances, both ecclesiastical and civil, extending from the seventh to the eleventh centuries . . .'<sup>100</sup>

cited by Montague Summers is suspect evidence. There is nothing to indicate that a pre-Christian Dianic cult existed in Anglo-Saxon England, for the remnants of some form of elemental paganism are not to be confused with a later learned perversion of Christianity. Miss Eckenstein has examined the chief traits of legends surrounding women saints on the continent and suggests, most convincingly, that there a tradition arose of a non-existent Christian saint in many places, to conceal and transmute memories of an earlier pagan divinity.<sup>101</sup> Although she points out that the lore surrounding English saints, at least for the period preceding the conquest, does not show similar developments—surely an indication that priestesses played little part in Anglo-Saxon paganism?—she finds it impossible to mistrust Tacitus's statement that the Germans believed women to be possessed of an element of prophecy and holiness. Unable to find specific evidence of an early worship of priestesses among the Anglo-Saxons, she is yet content to accept their existence and remarks:

'It is true that the inclination to hold women in reverence remained, and found expression in the readiness with which they revered women as saints.'

Men and women who were generous to the Church, and princes and princesses who entered monastic life, had their names generally recorded in local church calendars and were thereafter called saints, for only since

<sup>99</sup> W. Notestein *A History of Witchcraft in England* (Washington 1911) p. 4.  
<sup>100</sup> M. Summers *Geography of Witchcraft* p. 72. <sup>101</sup> *Op. cit.* pp. 28 f.

1153 has the right to create saints been Rome's alone; thus Miss Eckenstein's assumption also takes too much for granted. The medicinal charms and salves of the leechbooks, enlarged though they were from many sources, were not regarded as evil magical formulæ used especially by evil women; Old English literature knows no one comparable to Gower's Medea or the witches in Manning's *Handling Synne*; chronicles written before the Norman conquest on the whole lack the attractive embroidery provided by the later chroniclers. Later narratives and histories attach tales of witchcraft to such figures as Queen Ælthryth, inventions showing a knowledge of magical practices which could have come from a familiarity with classical literature, continental writings and troubadour romances.

This incomplete sketch of certain problems which complicate the examination of witchcraft in Anglo-Saxon England has attempted to show where some of the main hazards lie. I have not touched upon the possible influence of Celtic magic on the Anglo-Saxons, although there is much to suggest that they knew of Celtic practices and traditions. A loan word from Old Irish is the first part of one of the chief compound words the Anglo-Saxons used to designate magical practices—*drycraft*. Two short passages among the charms are demonstrably in Irish. Celtic culture has left its mark on many material objects which were used in Anglo-Saxon England, and much Old English religious thought is often more closely paralleled in Irish writings than in the earlier patristic writings and commentaries from which both stem. The whole problem of the relationship between Ireland and England in this period is one which is still to be explored.

The small amount of material I have dealt with allows me to suggest only a few conclusions. Scattered evidences show that a Germanic heathen religion, relatively simple in comparison with the beliefs held by the Scandinavians, was well established in early Anglo-Saxon England, but seemingly Christianity imposed itself upon region after region without great difficulty. In some places its advance was helped by those who had before led the worship of heathen gods, and the missionaries in their turn incorporated and adapted pagan materials among the doctrines and prayers of the church. The rune masters turned their craft to ornamenting memorial crosses, the wise men appealed to Christ above Woden in their litanies, monasteries grew apace, and kingdoms became more united, one to another. With the first settlements of the Danes lawmakers soon found it necessary to legislate severely against heathen beliefs that were gaining sway over large tracts of the country, and with these laws came the first continental-inspired prohibitions of witchcraft in English law. The main purpose of this paper, however, has been to consider whether there is in Anglo-Saxon England from the earliest period a continuing chain of events which would link its beliefs with the ideas of witchcraft which so tortured Europe in later

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centuries. The picture of the Ægeleswyrp widow who had a *morp* of Wulfstan in her closet is new and unparalleled in pre-conquest documents; though it shares features with the later tales and lore of witch-hunts, the woman is at no point definitely named a witch. The chain does not seem strong enough, and we should be at fault in breathing life over it from the anecdotes of post-conquest writers, those men who, looking back over the past, wove into history from their own experience and knowledge many legends of evil women and demonical arts, until at last mediæval historians were themselves unable to disentangle fact from fantasy, and hitherto innocent men and women of earlier generations were condemned for dabbling in black arts which they cannot have known.

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