

The Material Culture of Post-Medieval Domestic Magic in Europe: Evidence, Comparisons, and Interpretations

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In his retirement the Deputy Director of the Museum of London and specialist on Roman London, Ralph Merrifield (1913-1995), wrote a book entitled *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic* (1987) that drew upon his note-making during some forty years in the museums services of south-eastern England. With his interest in folklore and religion, Merrifield was curious about odd finds found in odd locations, from sites dating from the Roman period through to the twentieth century, which were ignored by academic archaeologists and were a puzzle to the museums that received them. Shoes buried in walls, animal bones under hearthstones, bent coins and tokens found on the Thames foreshore, chickens found in wall cavities. Was it all rubbish? Did these stray finds have any meaning?

Merrifield had eclectic interests and by his retirement he had accumulated a large file of miscellaneous information. “Getting this into order not only revealed new complexities and some unexpected relationships, together with a number of curious survivals,” he explained, “but also made it necessary to reconsider the theoretical basis of interpretation.”² The unexpected relationships were revealed by Merrifield’s comparison of artefacts and deposition behaviour across two millennia, an approach that was highly original for the time – and remains so today. He was also in the early vanguard of archaeologists interested in the “archaeology of the mind” or cognitive archaeology, and in particular the study of *pervasive* ritual in prehistory and early history, interests he noted that potentially marked one out as within the “loony fringe” of archaeology at the time.

Yet *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic* has until recently been largely ignored by those archaeologists interested in ritual activities, except amongst a few Roman specialists drawn by the extensive Roman coverage in the book, the irony being that Merrifield singled out Romanists as being the worst of all archaeologists when it came to knee-jerk scepticism about ritual interpretations.³ Few medieval and post-medieval archaeologists have been interested in ritual full stop. Merrifield’s work has been a bit more readily appreciated by historians of magic, but even then scholarly awareness of or interest in material culture is limited. The book has inspired independent scholars, however, amongst them vernacular architecture specialists, speleologists, folklorists, archaeologists, historians, museum curators and conservators, and they have been at the forefront of the recording and study of the post-medieval material culture of magic in Britain. Recent work on the archaeology of magic in Finland, America and Australia is hopefully a sign of a new era of sustained study of ritual in post-medieval Europe and its historic diaspora communities.

¹ While known for his histories of magic, it should be noted that the author has a degree in European archaeology and worked on various prehistoric sites in England and France during the late 1980s and early 1990s, a time when ritual deposition was beginning to be hotly debated in the field.

² Merrifield 1987: *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic*, xiv.

³ For example, Henig 1995: *Religion in Roman Britain*; Fulford 2001: *Links with the Past*, esp. 199-200; Hingley 2006: *The Deposition of Iron Objects in Britain during the Later Prehistoric and Roman Periods*.

It should go without saying that different disciplines have much to learn from each other's source base, theories, and methodologies when it comes to understanding ritual activity and magic. But while there are numerous different conversations going on, they are rarely shared because of disciplinary, chronological, and geographical boundaries between scholarly communities and individuals. Due to their shared social science origins, European archaeologists have long reached out to anthropology looking for parallel rites and ritual activities in societies with superficially similar social structures across the globe, in the hope that they might unlock the mysteries of the depositions and structures they uncover. Anthropology has not reciprocated to the same degree.⁴ Few, however, have done what Merrifield did and looked at historical and archaeological evidence of ritual and belief from the recent European past to cast light on depositional activities in prehistoric, Roman and post-Roman Europe. This is not to argue that comparing practices in the same region but with a gap of several thousand years or even just a millennium is any more methodologically sound or appropriate than the global ethnographic comparative approach, only that it needs to be recognised better and is worthy of being employed more. I also hasten to add that historians, particularly medieval and post-medieval ones, have been equally guilty of ignoring the archaeological evidence on their doorsteps while seeking out global anthropological comparisons.

Morris and Jervis's recent plea in *Medieval Archaeology* that "special deposits should no longer be seen as the preserve of prehistorians" is followed by the observation that medieval archaeologists were not hampered by a long history of interpretative tradition, "in effect the canvas is relatively clean and we should take advantage of this".⁵ It is true that prehistorians were the first to take the archaeology of ritual seriously. The interpretation of enigmatic monumental earthworks, megalithic structures, landscapes of death in terms of burial mounds, and the extraordinary material evidence from wetland sites, cried out for methodologies and interpretive strategies to understand the meaning of religions and rituals that were long lost. Interest in the ritual aspects of ostensibly domestic and secular structures certainly came later, but the debate over the identification of domestic ritual depositions in the ancient Middle East, for instance, has been going on for over seventy years. Back in the 1950s domestic objects such as pottery, figurines, bronze items associated with hearths, baths and columns were described by some as having 'cultic' purposes for worship, while others argued they were simply mundane high-status debris. The debate has intensified in the ensuing decades.⁶ The study of ritual deposition in Iron Age settlement contexts only began in the 1980s though, and Richard Bradley's book *Ritual and Domestic Life in Prehistoric Europe* (2005), provided a breakthrough in taking a long range view of the evidence. It is only in the last decade or so that the issue has been raised and begun to be explored in depth with regard to Anglo-Saxon settlements and sunken-featured buildings or *grubenhäusers*.⁷

⁴ Garrow and Yarrow 2010: *Archaeology and Anthropology: Understanding Similarity, Exploring Difference*.

⁵ Morris and Jervis 2011: 'What's So Special? A Reinterpretation of Anglo-Saxon 'Special Deposits'', 78.

⁶ See, for example, Press 2011: *A Problem of Definition: 'Cultic' and 'Domestic' Contexts in Philistia*.

⁷ Wilson 1999: *Displayed or Concealed? Cross Cultural Evidence for Symbolic and Ritual Activity Depositing Iron Age Animal Bones*; Hamerow 2011: 'Special Deposits' in Anglo-Saxon Settlements; Morris and Jervis 2011.

It is telling that in a useful recent survey article on the archaeology of religious change it was stated that work on religious transmission and interaction had been “dominated by sociology, anthropology and comparative religion”.⁸ No mention of history. Since the 1970s historians of the medieval and early modern periods have shown considerable interest in the role of ritual in everyday life and popular magical practices. They have the benefit of knowing intimately the theology and practice of the dominant religions of the societies they study, and to a lesser extent how those religions influenced behaviour and thought throughout society. The Reformation, for example, is hugely important for exploring religious transmission and interaction; how different religious beliefs created different material cultures of worship and observance; how suppressed forms of Catholic worship continued to manifest themselves in parochial popular customs centuries after; and how in overseas contexts Christianity and its liturgical practices were subverted and transformed by non-Christian religions through processes defined as syncretism and creolization. To understand better the meaning and practice of religion amongst general populations as distinct from the official religion of the Churches, historians have used the term ‘popular religions’ in similar ways to the ‘little traditions’ of anthropology. Like all such terms it has been heavily critiqued and largely weathered the storm, and in relation to pervasive ritual practices, and popular conceptions of religion and magic, it is a useful analytical category. Of course, historians still face huge challenges in trying to interpret the literary sources when it comes to popular ritual practices in a world where the vast majority of people were illiterate. Evidence of the emotion and meaning of those participating in rituals and customs, and the origins and exact nature of the practices, is filtered through the often narrow or fogging lenses of ecclesiastical and secular legal records, the jaundiced pen of clergymen, and the imagination of the early antiquarians. The material collected by nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century folklorists also has to be treated with considerable caution.

The Classicist and archaeologist Robin Osborne welcomes the dialogue between archaeologists and those who work with texts to further the study of votive deposition, but believes texts, along with ethnographic accounts, are no substitute for the material evidence because they “cannot substitute for the archaeological material because they are necessarily and inevitably partial.”⁹ This is true in many respects; after all some of the post-medieval domestic protective practices have left no trace in the literary record. But the archaeological material cannot always be given primacy, because it too is partial in what it represents. Many archaeological domestic sites rarely reveal the ephemeral, the possible role of feathers, plant leaves and flowers in domestic ritual deposits. C. Riley Augé’s research on threshold magic in early modern New England, for instance, identifies a range of plants used as apotropaics to protect domestic boundaries, and in this vein Gazin-Swartz has observed that “the ritual nature of the (natural) feature is not inherent or obvious in either the material or the context.”¹⁰ I also have in mind the curious ‘witch ladder’ consisting of cock’s feathers entwined along a length of rope that was found in the attic of a Somerset house in the

⁸ Shaw 2013: *Archaeology of Religious Change: Introduction*, 1.

⁹ Osborne 2004: *Hoards, Votives, Offerings: The Archaeology of the Dedicated Object*, 6.

¹⁰ Gazin-Schwartz 2001: *Archaeology and Folklore of Material Culture, Ritual, and Everyday Life*, 273; Augé 2013: *Silent Sentinels: Archaeology, Magic, and the Gendered Control of Domestic Boundaries in New England, 1620-1725*, appendix C.

late nineteenth century. Archaeologists puzzle over bones, but what of the flesh, the use of animal hearts for example. They have been found in situ in existing structures, but are very difficult to identify in ‘below ground’ archaeology. Archaeological science can now reveal the nature of liquids kept in ancient vessels, but it is far more difficult to detect those poured over deposited objects interred in the ground at domestic sites – where archaeologists are far less likely to be looking for libations anyway. How would we know from archaeology that a horse’s head buried under the foundations of a nineteenth-century Primitive Methodist Chapel to protect it against witches had a glass of beer poured over it as part of the ritual if a folklorist had not recorded the memory?¹¹

Neither can the material evidence reveal what might have been said during the entombment of a cat, the threshold burial of a dog, or the carving of an apotropaic symbol. The historical record often does not either, but we do know from the literature that words, prayers, and charms were spoken during some domestic rituals. Consider the report of the Lincolnshire folklorist Robert Heanley in 1898. He was led into the bedroom of a boy suffering from malaria by the boy’s grandmother. She told Heanley she had a better cure than the quinine he brought. Three horseshoes were nailed to the centre of the bed’s footboard with a hammer fixed cross-wise upon them. The old woman took the hammer and tapped each horseshoe saying:

Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
Nail the devil to this post,
With this mell, I thrice do knock,
One for God,
And one for Wod,
And one for Lok.¹²

This example also illustrates the pitfalls of such oral evidence though, for Heanley was on a zealous search for survivals of Viking paganism, and mistook ‘wood’ (as in knock on wood for luck) for the god Wod (Woden), and ‘luck’ or the apostle ‘Luke’ for the god Lok (Loki).¹³ We will return to this issue shortly.

Historians, like archaeologists, are faced with absences of evidence, but this only becomes evident to them if they recognize the significance of archaeology. As historical archaeologists Tarlow and West observed in their neatly-entitled edited collection *The Familiar Past?* “if prehistoric archaeology is about making the unknown more familiar, the archaeology of historic periods is often about

¹¹ Porter 1969: *Cambridgeshire Customs and Folklore*, 181.

¹² Heanley 1898: *Lincolnshire Superstitions*, 186.

¹³ Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote to a friend of his childhood use of this night-time prayer:

‘Matthew ! Mark ! Luke and John !
God bless the bed which I lie on.
Four angels round me spread,
Two at my foot, and two at my head.

This prayer I said nightly, and most firmly believed the truth of it. Frequently have I (half-awake and half-asleep, my body diseased and fevered by my imagination), seen armies of ugly things bursting in upon me, and these four angels keeping them off.’ Coleridge 1895: *Letters*, 13.

defamiliarising what we think is the known past.”¹⁴ Although not addressed in their book, this is particularly pertinent with regard to ritual and magic. Many building deposits have ended up in builders skips due to a false assumption that such finds cannot have any significant meaning in a familiar early modern or modern context. Writing in 2005, for instance, one French investigator of concealed shoes remarked that “Generally, no interest is given in France to old shoes found in buildings”. What Rainer Atzbach has aptly described as the “archaeology on the upper storeys” is constantly ignored or under threat, even though, as he notes, “Hardly any other archaeological resource permits such an intimate look into the past.”¹⁵ An exemplary story comes from Ireland where in the 1970s a cache of objects were found secreted in a bread oven, including an iron candle snuffer, iron bar, pewter spoon, two clay pipe bowls, four bottles, animal bones and ceramics. The items were clearly deposited purposefully when the oven was bricked up in the early twentieth century. The Irish Folklore Division of the National Museum of Ireland was consulted, but could make no sense of the finds. The Museum did not want to keep them either, so they were thrown away. It was only in 2012 that the curator who originally recorded the finds realised their significance while attending a panel session entitled ‘Manifestations of Magic: The Archaeology and Material Culture of Magic and Folk Belief’ at the Society for Historical Archaeology in Baltimore, which brought together key British, Australian and American researchers in the field.¹⁶

Terminology is another challenge, and can hinder cross-disciplinary collaboration and dialogue.¹⁷ Terms such as cultic, sacrifice, votive, hoard, cache, apotropaic, numinous, sacred and profane, secular and religious, special properties, offerings, special deposits, foundation deposits, spiritual middens, foundation sacrifices, intentional deposition and structured deposition litter the literature. This is, in part, a result of the ‘long history of interpretative tradition’ in pre-medieval archaeology, with decades of debate leading to multiple definitions, and in part due to various independent disciplinary contributions to the field. The term ‘spiritual midden’, for example, was coined by Timothy Easton, an expert on East Anglian vernacular architecture, to describe the caches of seemingly worthless objects, including old shoes and animal remains, found concealed in buildings, particularly in voids near chimneys and hearths, that had been reported to him since the 1970s. These voids were not fully sealed, and depositions were added over time.¹⁸ It has become a quite widely adopted term for those working on domestic sites in the post-medieval period, albeit not always used in the specific context of long-term use identified by Easton, yet it is not used by those working on pre-medieval periods.

It is important to be sensitive to the terminology. Several Scandinavian historical archaeologists have rightly taken exception to the term ‘foundation sacrifice/offering’. For one, sacrifice is a very loaded term, implicitly or explicitly referring to offerings

¹⁴ Tarlow and West 1999: *The Familiar Past? Archaeologies of Later Historical Britain*, 1.

¹⁵ Montembault 2005: *Postmedieval Shoes Concealed in a Barn at Saint-Benoît du Sault*, 33; Atzbach 2012: *The Concealed Finds from the Mühlberg-Ensemble in Kempten (southern Germany): Post-Medieval Archaeology on the Second Floor*, 275.

¹⁶ Kelly 2012: *Trapping Witches in Wicklow*, 16-18.

¹⁷ For a good overview of terminological issues see Manning 2012: *Homemade Magic: Concealed Deposits in Architectural Contexts in the Eastern United States*; Osborne 2004, 5.

¹⁸ Easton 1997: *Spiritual Middens*.

dedicated to, supplicating or coercing deities.¹⁹ In most instances, whether prehistoric or historic, there is nothing to suggest from the evidence at domestic sites that the ritual practices are concerned with gods. Second, similar types of deposit are not just found in foundations but in other parts of buildings, near chimneys, doorways, and windows, and in the rafters, for example. The use of the term ‘special deposit’ has also been questioned recently on the basis that “depositional activity should be seen as multi-thematic rather than simply functional or ritual.”²⁰ While Osborne notes that “there is a tendency to think that classifying something as a foundation deposit is the end, rather than the beginning, of an analysis.”²¹

Can we use the same language across millennia and cultures to describe similar looking deposition behaviour? It would certainly help to get some consensus. Is the terminology used to categorise suspected ritual depositions in Iron Age roundhouses also appropriate for those found in nineteenth-century cottages? The use of ‘cult’ or ‘cultic’ behaviour is not uncommon in the literature on prehistory, and is used in historic contexts with regard to expressions of medieval popular religion, but seems entirely inappropriate with regard to post-medieval popular magical and depositional practices. We are not dealing with cults as understood in a modern historical context. The most striking difference in terminology concerns ‘magic’, which historians are habituated to and comfortable with using in generalised ways, but which pre-medieval Western and Northern European archaeologists evidently feel uncomfortable with and rarely use. The origin, concept and practice of both the term ‘magic’ and its expression in the ancient Mediterranean world and Near East has been much discussed by historians, and hence archaeologists of these regions feel comfortable with discussing magic along with religion and ritual. So Andrew T. Wilburn’s stated aim in his recent book on Roman Egypt, Cyprus and Spain, *Materia Magica* (2012), is to “locate and identify magical artifacts and then using the objects to reconstruct how magic was practised within the local environment.”²² The post-medievalist could easily adopt the same ‘magical’ mission statement but not the British Bronze Age archaeologist it would seem. The relative comfort with which medieval and early modern historians use ‘magic’ is also due to it having been extensively chewed over and debated to the point where any sensitive scholar of magic uses it knowing that others are aware of the snags, the semantic developments, and need not hedge his or her language *ad exhaustum*.²³

One reason for the sensitivity across disciplines is the legacy of the old social science three-stage division of human development into ages of magic, religion and science. This has cast a long shadow over history and anthropology in particular, but also infected archaeology. The idea that magic was an early stage of human cognition that led to the formation of religions has been amply discredited but the relationship between magic and religion remains problematic across disciplines. This is not the place to reflect deeply on this, but dichotomies of what is religion or magic slip easily into the discourse on the materiality of magic across disciplines. A lot of popular

¹⁹ Hukantaival 2007: Hare’s Feet Under a Hearth – Discussing ‘Ritual’ Deposits in Buildings, 66.

²⁰ Morris and Jervis 2011.

²¹ Osborne 2004, 7.

²² Wilburn 2012: *Materia Magica: The Archaeology of Magic in Roman Egypt, Cyprus, and Spain*, 9.

²³ For an overview see Davies 2012: *Magic: A Very Short Introduction*; Bremmer 2008: *Magic and Religion?*.

magic is religious, and one definition of popular magic is the use of religion for practical or profane rather than spiritual purposes, such as the placing of the Bible under the pillow to cure nightmares, the use of font water for curing a bewitched pig, the invocation of holy names in written charms. Compared with the totality of popular magical practice in the post-medieval period as understood from the archives, though, the material evidence in Protestant countries shows remarkably little overt religiosity. Yes, as will be discussed later, religion is central to genres of written and inscribed apotropaics, but in terms of the secretion or deposition of Bibles or pages from the Bible, or physical representations of the cross, the evidence is intriguingly limited. A copy of a miniature Bible printed in 1901 was found in a boot concealed in a Lincolnshire house, and Ian Evans' Australian research turned up a Bible lodged in joist and one in a chimney.²⁴ Why do we find so few Bible deposits considering its fundamental role, both as a source and as an object in popular magic? Why so few object crosses (as distinct from carved crosses discussed later) placed in strategic places? The notion that the Reformation did away with all Catholic popular practices has been discredited, and we know from nineteenth-century folklore sources that crosses were made and used for domestic and livestock protection.²⁵ Then again, absence of evidence may not be evidence of absence.

Amy Gazin-Schwartz, and Herva and Ylimaunu, working on Scotland and Finland respectively, have made cogent arguments for the use of folklore or folk belief in interpreting the material culture of ritual in earlier periods. 'Folk belief,' a term that encompasses popular religion and folklore but is distinct from it, defines a wide range of notions and practices at odds with elite intellectual moral and religious norms. Herva and Ylimaunu emphasise that these folk beliefs "were inextricably embedded in the local mode of perceiving and engaging with the material world in everyday life."²⁶ The exploration of folk belief for interpretive archaeological purposes requires great sensitivity though, as Gazin-Schwartz and Herva are well aware. The folklore record is inherently biased by the interests and assumptions of the collectors and the theories to which they subscribed. So cities were largely avoided because of the assumption that 'old' traditional practices and beliefs could not survive long in the urban-industrial environment.²⁷ For decades many folklorists were seduced by the theories of myth-ritualists like Max Müller, Edward Tylor and James Frazer. Popular beliefs were enthusiastically interpreted as being 'survivals' of ancient pagan religions, the last expressions of the first sun-worshipping or fertility religions at the dawn of humanity. Folklorists went looking for these vestiges amongst the rural poor and misguidedly thought they had found them in a myriad innocuous customs and beliefs. Few folklore collections are truly open-ended in terms of the information sought. The information recorded is shaped by the questions asked, and the guidance of conversations towards the information sought. The search for vestigial sacrifice is a case in point and the deliberate entombment of cats provides a useful illustration.

²⁴ Manning 2012, 154; Evans 2010: *Touching Magic: Deliberately Concealed Objects in Old Australian Houses and Buildings*.

²⁵ Hutton 1994: *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year 1400-1700*.

²⁶ Gazin-Schwartz 2001; Herva and Ylimaunu 2009: *Folk Beliefs, Special Deposits, and Engagement with the Environment in Early Modern Northern Finland*.

²⁷ In terms of material culture, this was amply disproved by the pioneering work in early twentieth-century London of Edward Lovett. See Hill 2007: *The Story of the Amulet: Locating the Enchantment of Collections*.

In 1911 an Irish folklorist noted from conversations with builders that several deliberately walled up cats, apparently entombed while alive, had been found in recesses in the walls of Dublin houses. He correctly identified them as having ritual significance, but leapt to the conclusion that they were ‘substitutes for human sacrifices.’²⁸ A systematic survey of mummified cats in Britain, with a few examples from Sweden, was published in the anthropological journal *Man* in 1951. The author, Margaret Howard, from the Institute of Archaeology, noted the idea of them being foundation sacrifices but came up with a conclusion that was intriguingly contrary to the usual pagan vestiges argument. Howard believed that for centuries after the arrival of the cat in Roman Britain it was valued in a utilitarian way as a rodent hunter, and only became an “object of superstition” during the witch trial era when it became associated with witches and the Devil. Plentiful in supply, cats were now handy “as sacrifices and offerings to their supposed master, the Devil, as the old gods had come to be called. The ancient idea of foundation sacrifice, to appease these powers of darkness, could thus, in due course, have become blended with the utilitarian conception of the cat as a vermin-scare”. The result was a new vague tradition by the seventeenth century that an entombed cat conferred luck.²⁹

Howard’s historical reflections are deeply problematic. For one, she erroneously locates the witch trials in the Middle Ages. Still, that aside, she is not the only one to ponder whether the era of the European witch trials (between 1450 and 1750) had a significant influence on the prevalence of material magic in the archaeological record. A recent German survey of mummified cats in the district of Ludwigsburg makes tentative links with protection against witchcraft at the time of the witch trials, noting though that some deposits were from the second half of the nineteenth century. Hukantaival, assessing the evidence of building deposits in Finland, poses the question of whether there any changes of pattern and frequency in building deposits dateable to the witch prosecution era. This is an interesting area for future investigation, but it is important to emphasise that the rise of witchcraft prosecutions, made possible by the institution of new laws, does not necessarily reflect increased popular fear of witches. It is quite likely levels of popular concern regarding witchcraft were not hugely different between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries. Likewise, fear of witchcraft was as pervasive in the nineteenth century as the seventeenth century. It is elite concerns over diabolic witchcraft that led to the legal judicial persecutions rather than overwhelming pressure from a groundswell of popular concern.

Back to the main theme, though, and Howard’s interpretation is clearly influenced by the theories of fellow Institute member, the Egyptologist and folklorist Margaret Murray. Murray’s body of work on the survival into the early modern period of a persecuted pagan fertility cult that worshiped a horned god, was influential within academia and particularly outside. As Merrifield was perfectly aware, by the early 1970s the Murrayite interpretation that those persecuted as witches were members of an ancient pagan witch cult was largely discredited in academic circles. Yet Merrifield’s assessment of the apparent continuity of the material evidence for ritual activity led him to suggest that, with regard to criticism of Murray’s central theory, “the pendulum may have swung too far”. Maybe some of those persecuted were

²⁸ Westropp 1911: *A Folklore Survey of County Clare* (Continued), 54-5.

²⁹ Howard 1951: *Dried Cats*.

“groups of people who still met to perpetuate a traditional paganism”.³⁰ So Merrifield was perfectly comfortable with the explanation that cat deposition was a survival of “the ancient custom of building sacrifice” and others have, by and large, followed suit.³¹

Howard, Merrifield and others were all aware of the more obvious explanation that the cats were placed there like scarecrows or the plastic owls put in vegetable plots to scare away vermin, a practice we find elsewhere. In France, owls were widely seen nailed to barn doors to chase away mice and rats, while in Belgium hawks were nailed on farm doors as a warning to other birds of prey.³² But the general tendency is to seek *religious* antiquity in such practices when it may not exist. We do not have to go back to or get sucked into the old folkloric concerns with the vestiges of sacrificial practices or ancient fertility religions as an origin. The entombment of cats like other animals in domestic contexts can simply be interpreted as acts of sympathetic protective magic not religion. So in the French Alps, as in Denmark and Sweden, custom had it that one protection from witches was to bury a live adder under the threshold. The adder, a beast to be avoided, maintained its active property after death warding off unwanted visitors more generally.³³ The buried cat likewise, particularly if entombed alive, would continue its vermin deterrent function. Those finds where cats were deliberately positioned with a rat or mouse in or near their mouths are obvious examples of imitative magic.³⁴ There are also several finds of chickens being walled in post-medieval buildings.³⁵ An offering to household spirits, as some have suggested, or sympathetic magic once again with the chickens protecting the building from grubs, beetles, flies and woodworm. Anyone who has raised chickens knows how effective they are at picking off such invertebrates that can infest houses. Dogs buried under the threshold continued to perform their guarding function against unwanted spiritual visitors and mundane thieves. In prehistoric contexts it should not be assumed that threshold dog burials are aspects of sacrifice or religion, and in post-medieval times no need to think in terms of the diminution of ancient religious ritual: both could be based on basic magical not religious principles.

Some historians, particularly those working on medieval and early modern theological and scientific texts concerning magic, ghosts and miracles, are precise in their usage of ‘supernatural’, preferring the term ‘preternatural’ in certain contexts. In the Christian theology of the periods ‘supernatural’ denoted a power beyond and above that of nature, in other words God, and all things were created by God. ‘Preternatural’ denoted an apparent unnatural state or a power unknown to human experience but which was not beyond nature. So from an early modern theological perspective the supposed powers of the Devil and witches were preternatural.³⁶ So in this context,

³⁰ Merrifield 1987, 160.

³¹ Merrifield, 1987, 131; Schad 2005: *Animal Mummies Concealed in Buildings in the District of Ludwigsburg – Remains of a Post-medieval Magic Conception ?*; Sheehan 1990: *A Seventeenth Century Dried Cat from Ennis Friary, Co. Clare*. North Munster.

³² Harou 1912 : *Le chouette sacrifiée* (en Hainaut); Seignolles 1978 : *Le folklore du Hurepoix*, 202; Notes sur les superstitions et coutumes de la province de Liège. In : *Revue des Traditions Populaires* 18 (1903), 397.

³³ Gennep 1948, 92; Seignolles 1978, 220.

³⁴ Manning 2012, 230-232.

³⁵ Merrifield 1987, 129.

³⁶ Clark 1999: *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*, 262-6.

from a theological point of view (not necessarily that of the actors) seventeenth-century Scottish farmers who made a protective building deposit to supplicate the fairies who shared their domestic space, were engaging in a preternatural not a supernatural act. In modern popular language such distinctions are completely lost and meant nothing to most people in the past of course. So should the prehistorian make such terminological distinctions when interpreting non-Christian ritual deposits, particularly with regard to the frequently invoked interpretation of religion as ancestor worship? It is generally not helpful to get too obsessed with the terminology in the search for answers - or at least interpretations of past behaviour, yet an expressed awareness of how different disciplines have different terminological concerns and definitions is a valuable step forward in uncovering the meaning of material magic.

Much of the deep discussion over terminology in the European archaeological and anthropological world has concerned the use and meaning of 'ritual' and the attempt to distinguish ritual deposition from 'mere' rubbish. This has led to questioning other either/or definitions such as 'domestic or ritual structures'. In her much cited 1999 article 'Ritual and Rationality' Joanna Brück concluded that archaeologists should stop using the term ritual altogether and instead focus on rationality. Ritual as used by archaeologist and anthropologists, she argued, was a post-Enlightenment construct based on the false certainty that secularity is functional and rational while ritual is the opposite. There is a lot of truth in this view about how history shapes modern interpretive paradigms about the distant past to the detriment of our understanding. We have moved away from talk of 'primitive' and 'savage' that so infused the work of the early social sciences but more subtle legacies remain. Yet Brück chucks the baby out with the bathwater. Bradley and others came to a more nuanced resolution of the 'ritual' problem, arguing that we should consider domestic space as a ritual space, and that in essence there should be no distinction between ritual and profane.³⁷ As Kuijpers has pointed out in his study of Dutch Bronze Age artefacts, though, rejecting the term 'ritual' or adopting the Bradley approach simply shifts the problem of archaeological interpretation. "The problem does not lay in the *term* "ritual" but in the recognition and interpretation of it."³⁸

One need only research sixteenth-century European cultures to see that the secular as well as the religious environment was suffused with ritual in Protestant as well as Catholic societies, and to recognize that that there is a continuum of ritual behaviour from official spiritual centre to home and to workplace – just as we find in antiquity. Because ritual "permeated all fields of life" does not make it a redundant tool for analysing behaviour; for trying to understand how religion, cultural belief and ritual were expressed differently in formal and informal spaces, in different social and cultural spheres, and over time. When exploring domestic ritual and magic we should not be guided entirely by a "coefficient of weirdness" - to borrow Malinowski's phrase to describe the references, grammar, and structures that defined magical speech in his ethnographic research – when trying to determine the purpose of material domestic remains. As early modern historians of witchcraft accept, sometimes we must throw away modern intuition and language, and our

³⁷ Brück 1999: *Ritual and Rationality: Some Problems of Interpretation in European Archaeology*; Bradley 2005. The history of the 'ritual turn' is discussed in Bremmer 1998. For recent examinations of the ritual issue see Insoll 2011: *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of Ritual and Religion*.

³⁸ Kuijpers 2008: *Bronze Age Metalworking in the Netherlands (C. 2000-800BC)*, 28.

preconceptions of what is logical or rational, when studying past beliefs. Terms such as ‘witch craze’ or ‘witch hysteria’ are inappropriately modern psychiatric terms that accentuate the ‘them and us’ view of what is rational. Interpret the evidence sensitively and witchcraft makes perfect sense intellectually, theologically, environmentally, and socially in early modern terms. Beliefs and practices in the past should never be categorised as ‘weird’ or ‘bizarre’. Unfamiliar maybe, but that should lead to attempts to understand and not to dismiss or summarily categorize. In archaeological terms there is nothing intrinsically wrong with the standard practice of eliminating the possibly mundane or profane purpose of deposits before considering ritual, but inexplicability should not lead inexorably to ritual interpretation - and vice versa. Let us accept frankly the whole range of possibilities when things *seem* either obvious or inexplicable. Historic sources show that the ordinary can be magical and the magical appear ordinary. Rubbish such as a worn out shoe, a broken implement, an old horseshoe, some animal bones, can be as profound in their meaning, purpose, and use as any votive objects meticulously crafted for obvious ritual, religious or magical purposes.

A classic ‘ritual or profane’ argument in a modern historical context concerns the placement of horse skulls under floorboards and thresholds. Ethnographic work conducted in mid-twentieth century Ireland and Scandinavia revealed divergent theories. In Sweden, Albert Sandklef reported the practice of placing skulls under threshing floors to enhance the acoustics to create a more pleasing sound that aided the rhythmic syncopation of a flailing team. The desire for better acoustics was also behind many of the Irish instances reported a few years earlier by Sean O’Súilleabháin though these related to floors used for dancing in domestic settings and in churches to enhance the audibility of the priest. Still, O’Súilleabháin concluded that the acoustic explanation was a rationalisation of a long forgotten foundation sacrifice. Sandklef rebutted this interpretation in 1949 claiming there was no evidence of horses’ heads being buried for domestic protection, although the burial of other animals, snakes in particular, coins, and prehistoric axes was widespread; so the horse head deposits were mundane. The year after, O’Súilleabháin wrote in the *Varbergs Museum Årsbok* (edited by Sandklef) that on reflection he agreed with Sandklef’s secular interpretation. Then Brita Egardt, whose thesis was on the ethnography of horse slaughtering, weighed in with a swinging critique of Sandklef’s research methods, simplification of evidence and conclusions.³⁹ For Egardt there was ample ethnographic evidence of the burial of horse skulls as a domestic apotropaic (and for protecting bridges) in Scandinavia and elsewhere in Europe. She cited evidence from a questionnaire about house building organized by the Swedish Nordic Museum. There was an account from Västmanland, for instance, concerning the mortaring of a horse’s head into a fireplace wall to protect the house from fire. Egardt was cautious, though, about making any broad statements regarding the practice being the vestige of some horse worshipping pagan past dedicated to fertility rites. Merrifield, apparently unaware of the Swedish language publications, weighed up O’Súilleabháin and Sandklef’s initial findings and tended towards the former’s ritual interpretation, further suggesting that the Scandinavian threshing floor acoustic skulls might still have had some deeper ‘magico-religious purpose’ in origin.⁴⁰ The issue rumbles on

³⁹ Varbergs museum årsbok 1950, 52; Egardt 1950: Problem kring hästskallar.

⁴⁰ Sandklef 1949: Singing Flails: A Study in Threshing-Floor Constructions, Flail Threshing Traditions and the Magic Guarding of the House; O’Súilleabháin 1945: Foundation Sacrifices.

today. Hukantaival's recent Finnish study provides ethnographic evidence for the ritual practice there as well as in Lithuania and Latvia. As with the Swedish and Danish evidence, however, there is more literary evidence than archaeological evidence for the practice. Only one skull has been found in a possible apotropaic context in post-medieval Finland, though two cases of complete horses being buried under hearths have been recorded. Hukantaival accepts the possibility, albeit not fully convinced, that the practice was "an extension" of Iron Age horse cult practices, with the meaning having changed over the millennia.⁴¹

The concept of object biographies provides a useful methodology for enabling and opening up cross-disciplinary, long durée approaches to the materiality of magic. Artefacts, as well as those who used or deposited them, have life histories that need to be considered and contextualised in order to understand better their meaning, and the societies that employed them, at any point in time. The study of material culture, which has emerged as a distinct scholarly field in the last couple of decades, is about the interaction between things and people in historical, archaeological, sociological and anthropological contexts, each being shaped and given new meaning in the process. As Dinah Eastop, an expert on the conservation of garments concealed in buildings, puts it, "Things matter because people use them and give them meaning in action and in language so material culture is concerned with why things matter."⁴² This requires raising a whole series of questions about the changing meaning of an object over time before beginning to categorize or label it. In terms of domestic magic we need to think in terms of why, at certain moments, magical and/or ritual meaning was given to everyday domestic objects such as pots, shoes and garments; in what contexts iron and silver were thought to have active apotropaic properties – by what conceptual processes did a broken piece of ploughshare rusting in the corner of a barn become valuable when placed in a chimney cavity?

The widespread use of Neolithic and Bronze Age stone tools in ritual domestic practices from the Iron Age to the twentieth century is a good case in point.⁴³ We know from literary sources that since the medieval period stone axes were considered to be thunderbolts from the heavens and possessed magical properties for healing and protection. They were kept in houses to ward off lightning and fire. Ethnographic sources reveal they were placed on shelves and in draws, under the stairs, and immured in walls, under thresholds and in the sill and eaves.⁴⁴ It has been argued that the notion of the magical potency of such axes developed in the last few centuries BCE because their location in archaeological contexts of that period suggests ritual

⁴¹ Hukantaival 2009: *Horse Skulls and 'Alder Horse': The Horse as a Depositional Sacrifice in Buildings*. See also Carlie 2004: *Forntida byggnadskult: Tradition och regionalitet I södra Skandinavien*.

⁴² Eastop 2009: *The Conservation of Garments Concealed in Buildings as Material Culture in Action*, 145. For neat examples of this approach see Stensköld 2006: *Flying Daggers, Horse Whisperers and a Midwinter Sacrifice: Creating the Past During the Viking Age and Early Middle Ages*; Wingfield 2010: *A Case Re-Opened: The Science and Folklore of a 'Witch Ladder'*.

⁴³ Adkins and Adkins 1985: *Neolithic Axes from Roman Sites in Britain*; Eckhardt and Williams 2003: *Objects without a Past? The Use of Roman Objects in Early Anglo-Saxon Graves*.

⁴⁴ Carelli 1997: *Thunder and lightning, magical miracles. On the popular myth of thunderbolts and the presence of Stone Age artefacts in medieval deposits*; Johanson 2006: *The Contribution of Stray Finds for Studying Everyday Practices – the Example of Stone Axes*; Johanson 2009: *The Changing Meaning of 'Thunderbolts'*; Vasks 2003: *The Symbolism of Stone Work-Axes (Based on Material from the Daugava Basin)*.

deposition. The belief in them as thunderbolts for protection was clearly widespread in later periods so perhaps the same beliefs held when the objects first became magical. Then again, the thunderbolt notion could have been a medieval development. The later biography of stone axes also has implications for understanding the much earlier period in which they were fabricated. The field archaeologist cannot assume that where a stone axe is found is where it was last placed, discarded or lost. The debate over the extent of Neolithic activity in the Black Forest has, for example, rested considerably on the presence and distribution of stone axes, with it being argued by some that the medieval and early modern trade in thunderstones for fire protection makes any attempt to extrapolate from stray finds worthless for understanding Neolithic settlement and economy in the region.⁴⁵

Here is an object biography scenario that illustrates the issues. A flint axe made 5000 years ago is left where it was discarded at a woodland site by its first possessor. Nearly three millennia later, it is found and placed under the threshold of an Iron Age roundhouse. Then it is picked up by a farmer's wife a century later in Roman Britain. She travels several miles to a Romano-Celtic temple one day and leaves it as a votive offering to the gods. A millennium passes and it is turned up by a ploughman and placed in the thatch of a barn to protect it from fire. A late nineteenth-century antiquarian comes across it when looking at old vernacular buildings. He purchases it from the farmer and puts it in his collection, and then decades later his collection is given to a local museum. Here it is put on display and labelled as a Neolithic axe from the area. Its original mundane purpose has been resurrected, its millennia as a ritual and magical object in different locations with different social and religious functions forgotten. Ceri Houlbrook's recent study of two English caches of concealed shoes dating to the nineteenth century adopts this object biography approach and takes their study in interesting new interpretive directions. She coins the term 'ritual recycling' to describe the process whereby during the shoes' existence they move from one category of meaning to another, changing value in the process of recontextualisation. The shoes can only be classified as 'objects' or 'subjects', 'profane' or 'numinous' at certain moments through its existence. A single classification cannot be imposed upon them.⁴⁶

Of course, object biographies do not tell the whole story. The buildings in which they were placed also have their own complex life histories. Places gave meaning to objects and vice versa. Herva, for instance, has explored how "converting trees into wood signifies a new phase in the cultural biography of trees", with timber houses assuming some of the influences that trees had on human cognition and belief.⁴⁷ The notion of the embodied home is another related way of understanding the different spiritual and magical meaning of its constituent parts and the rituals conducted with and within it. The house-body metaphor can be explored through life cycles from birth, through the vicissitudes of daily life, to decay and erasure. In his study of the metaphors of place and space in colonial New England, Robert Blair St. George

⁴⁵ Kienlin and Valde-Nowak 2004: Neolithic Transhumance in the Black Forest Mountains, SW Germany.

⁴⁶ Houlbrook 2013: Ritual, Recycling and Recontextualization: Putting the Concealed Shoe into Context.

⁴⁷ Herva 2010: Buildings as Persons: Relationality and the Life of Buildings in a Northern Periphery of Early Modern Sweden.

explored the personification of the house in terms of the threats it faced, ascribing the properties of the heart to the hearth, the breast to the chimney, the roof to the head, the windows to the eyes, and the front door to the mouth. Devils and witches afflicted the home as they did the body, possessing it, attacking the vulnerable spots, the openings – the door (mouth), window (eyes) and hearth (heart). So these were the places that needed protecting most from external threats.⁴⁸ But like the body the home was also riddled with parasites and constantly eroded, scratched and dirtied by minor irritants, rats, mice, beetles, birds and bats. Protection of the home as well as the body was only partly about spiritual attack. Popular magic was concerned as much with fleas as fairies, warts as witches.

The idea of the home and its inhabitants sharing the same body leads to the possibility of sharing emotions, merging identities.⁴⁹ In Bulgarian folk belief buildings are guarded or given strength by a spirit named the *talasûm*. A building acquires a *talasûm* by imbuing its structure with human life by capturing the shadow of a living person or his or her footsteps in the structure. This person is thought to die within forty days and becomes the *talasûm*.⁵⁰ We could interpret the concealment of shoes and garments in buildings as another expression of this encapsulation of life, a ritual that gives identity and strength to the structure through the sharing of personal identities, materials of intimacy.⁵¹

With regard to the ritual life cycles of buildings archaeologists have focussed principally on the start and end of a structure's existence, on the evidence of foundation and termination deposition. The former has received the most attention. Prevention is better than cure, so it made good sense to build protective devices into or around a domestic structure from the start of its life, with a particular focus on its boundaries, post-holes, wall ditches, and thresholds. In the medieval period ecclesiastical cornerstone rituals are a good example. The cornerstone was symbolic of Christ the foundation of all foundations, and therefore its placement was at the centre of a ceremony that involved the exorcism and purification of the land on which the edifice was to be built, followed by the laying of the stone and placement of a cross on top.⁵² The identification and meaning of domestic termination or abandonment rituals has attracted less concerted attention. Merrifield's material was consequently thin in this respect.⁵³ Bradley provides some striking prehistoric examples, and Hamerow's reading of the Anglo-Saxon evidence suggests that domestic foundation deposits were rare whereas domestic termination deposits of animal and human bone, and to a lesser degree ceramics, were quite widespread with regard to sunken featured buildings, though Morris and Jervis have recently contested her emphasis on termination deposition.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ St. George 1998: *Conversing by Signs: Poetics of Implication in Colonial New England Culture*, 188-95.

⁴⁹ Tilley 1999: *Metaphor and Material Culture*, 268.

⁵⁰ MacDermott 1998: *Bulgarian Folk Customs*, 66.

⁵¹ Swann 1996: *Shoes Concealed in Buildings*; Eastop 2006: *Outside In: Making Sense of the Deliberate Concealment of Garments Within Buildings*; Herva 2012: *Spirituality and the Material World in Post-Medieval Europe*.

⁵² Iogna-Prat 2009: *The Consecration of Church Space*, 97.

⁵³ Merrifield 1987, 48-50.

⁵⁴ Bradley 2005, 52-54; Hamerow 2006, 27; Morris and Jervis 2011, 67-68.

What could be described as closure rituals can also be found in post-medieval contexts. The excavation of several seventeenth-century Yorkshire limekilns has revealed the careful placement of horse bones and horse skulls at the bottom of redundant limekilns before being backfilled.⁵⁵ The closure deposits in an Irish oven have already been mentioned, and a dried cat, sardine tin, jam jar and a horseshoe were placed in an iron bread oven at a house in north Devon before it was bricked up sometime towards the end of the nineteenth century.⁵⁶ The early medieval evidence along with the few post-medieval examples suggest that termination rituals may have been associated particularly with domestic industry. The placement of spindlewhorls and loomweights in Anglo-Saxon backfill has been particularly noted for example.⁵⁷ At the early medieval Irish Deer Park Farms site a wooden oak trough suited for kneading was deliberately left with a shoe last placed within it before the wattle walls and posts of the existing building were pushed over it and flattened, with a new building being built on the same spot on a foundation layer of clay and stones. Quernstones, whole and in pieces, have also been found near thresholds in ritual abandonment contexts at a number of Irish sites.⁵⁸ For the prehistoric period Bradley has also associated quernstones with both the creation and abandonment of dwellings.⁵⁹

Once again the evidence raises the issue of the relationship between terminology and original purpose. Were these depositions really about abandonment, the ‘death’ of a house or building? Closure could also have been an act of rebirth. Once again, global ethnographic examples have been used to make sense of the evidence.⁶⁰ Rituals associated with abandonment could have resulted from several motives. Some may have aimed to appease spirits that were thought to have plagued the dwelling, or to contain the spirits of deceased inhabitants. Perhaps some were to prevent re-use of a site. Maybe rituals were about memorialisation of a private space, about laying a claim to that space for perpetuity. The interpretation of purpose may depend on the nature of the deposited material but also on whether abandonment was followed by re-building on the same site (continuity) or avoidance of the footprint of the structure. The depositions in ovens may simply concern warding off vermin and spirits from taking residence in voids. The post-medieval evidence provides few clues, partly because we are usually dealing with finds in ‘living’, lived-in buildings. There certainly were rituals associated with demolition and rebuilding, though, such as the twentieth-century Yorkshire mason who reported that it was an old custom to keep a piece of the old building in a newly re-built house, principally the fireplace, “to give proof of the Common rights of the householder” – the rights to graze livestock, take peat, stones and plants in the vicinity.⁶¹ Compare this with Bradley’s evidence for re-use of elements of domestic structures in re-building, including the re-use of stone-lined hearths in Neolithic Orkney, “as if to emphasise the continuity between each

⁵⁵ Johnson 2007: Lime-kilns, ‘improvement’, and superstition.

⁵⁶ Hoggard: *The Archaeology of Counter-Witchcraft and Popular Magic*, 176.

⁵⁷ Hamerow 2006, 18; Gibson and Murray: *An Anglo-Saxon settlement at Godmanchester*, Cambridgeshire, 210–11.

⁵⁸ O’Sullivan et al: *Early Medieval Dwellings and Settlements in Ireland, AD 400-1100*, 46-8.

⁵⁹ Bradley 2005, 54.

⁶⁰ See, for example, LaMotta and Schiffer 1999: *Formation Processes of House Floor Assemblages*, esp. 205.

⁶¹ Nattress 1958: *Witch Posts and Early Dwellings in Cleveland*, 138.

building and its successor".⁶² There is obviously no continuity of practice, but perhaps a continuity of concepts regarding the transition and transmission of domestic identity.

Much of the post-medieval evidence is concerned neither with foundation nor termination, but with the main period of a building's life cycle. Some of the ritual activities concerning below-ground deposition in this phase can be mistaken for foundation activity though. Burials under hearthstones could take place at any time dependent on need during a domestic crisis. So in central France to stop bovine miscarriages caused by disease or witchcraft a still-born calf was buried under the threshold of the byre.⁶³ Witch bottles buried under hearths provided protection at the point at which someone was afflicted with witchcraft. Written charms were concealed above doors as a similar response. A late fifteenth century Welsh example written on vellum, for the protection of all the oxen, cows and beasts of one David ap Res ap Jankyn, began with the familiar "In nomine Dei + patris + et filii + et spiritus sancti", followed by the various names and titles of the Trinity in Latin and other languages, and was endorsed with the words "Supra ostium" indicating that it was required to be concealed 'over the door' where the farm animals were sheltered. The practice of plugging, that is drilling a hole into building timbers, placing written charms and/or hair within, and then sealing with a plug of wood, is another such example.⁶⁴

Concealment of objects in lived-in buildings was not always concerned with openings and voids. The burial of horse skulls under post-medieval buildings was sometimes associated with the corners of rooms. When the drawing room of a house in Ennis, Ireland, (built c. 1795-1810) was taken up early in the twentieth century four horse skulls were found, one in each corner. Two skulls found in 1965 under the floorboards during the renovation of a substantial seventeenth-century Flintshire farmhouse were located in a corner, while another example from the Isle of Man had been built into the north corner of a wall during the construction of an eighteenth-century rectory. The same association with corners is found in Scandinavia, where horse skulls were found in the four corners of a timber-framed house in Skåne demolished in the mid-nineteenth century.⁶⁵ The placement of shoe and clothing concealments suggests ritual practice related to major building alterations and the juncture between old and new features.⁶⁶ C Riley Augé's work on early New England suggests we need to consider the significance of left and right associations with regard to both objects and positioning.⁶⁷

The importance of *concealment* can be over-emphasised in the study of domestic ritual and magic. *Display* was equally significant. The once widespread practice of placing a horseshoe above the front door is an obvious example, the combined apotropaic properties of iron, horse associations and the crescent proving an excellent, overt deterrent against witches and evil spirits. The suspension of naturally perforated

⁶² Bradley 2005, 53.

⁶³ Gennep 1948, 92; Seignolles 1978, 220.

⁶⁴ Davies 2013: *America Bewitched: The Story of Witchcraft after Salem*, 110-111.

⁶⁵ Westropp 1911, 54; Brown 1966: *Buried Horse Skulls in a Welsh Home*; Hayhurst: *A Recent Find of a Horse Skull in a House at Ballaugh, Isle of Man*.

⁶⁶ Swann 1996, 59; Eastop 2006.

⁶⁷ Augé 2013, 122-123.

stones, known as ‘witch stones’ or ‘hag stones’ by some in England, in public view is a similar tradition.⁶⁸

From antiquity there are numerous examples of the writing or carving of apotropaic symbols and texts on doorposts and lintels, just as they are to be found on entrances to tombs. According to the Old Testament the Israelites smeared the blood of the Passover lamb on their doorposts and lintels of their houses to ward off pestilence and evil. In ancient Egypt spells were written in mud on doorposts, and early Christians made the sign of the cross.⁶⁹ In western and northern Europe, survival of above ground wooden domestic structures in prehistoric and early medieval archaeology is extremely rare so we know little of whether such ritual carving or painting on domestic doorposts was widespread. The evidence for later medieval and post-medieval apotropaic building marks is growing, though, thanks in particular to the fieldwork of Tim Easton and others since the 1970s.

What may seem like mere decoration to us perhaps had more mixed or different meaning to the inhabitants in the past. It has been suggested, for instance, that the winged cherubs depicted above several entrances to colonial era New England and South Carolina properties served not only to demonstrate piety but also a domestic protective function.⁷⁰ The decorative apotropaic is explicit in the custom in Alpine Germany and Switzerland of painting or carving protective pious words and images above the main door. An example recorded in the nineteenth century from a village near Bozen, had a painted eye below which ran the sentence “Pray for us, holy Florian, that Fire may not harm our building”.⁷¹ The hexagram or Seal of Solomon carved into the stonework of thresholds and chimneys in Morbihan, Brittany, likewise express dual or multiple intentions regarding public or semi-public expressions of piety, protection and social standing.⁷²

Since the late medieval period and the rise of brick buildings in northern and western Europe, over-burned bricks have been used to mark out patterns in external facing walls, and we find crosses, hexagrams, hearts, St Andrew’s crosses, and butterfly crosses (these consist of two triangles touching point to point like an egg-timer).⁷³ Questions as to the extent to which these originally had apotropaic functions also applies to the construction device of wall anchor plates and tie rods that reinforced the integrity of walls by binding them to the internal structure. Made of iron (note the significance) their over-riding principal purpose was undeniably functional, but the exposed anchor plate offered ornamental possibilities to send social, religious and magical messages.⁷⁴ So across the European and European-American architectural world we find anchor plates that had mundane functions spelling out dates and the initials of the owners, but also pentagrams and various cross designs, that might have originally had, or at least subsequently accrued, apotropaic purpose. The English chronicler of rural life and customs George Ewart Evans was convinced that the S and

⁶⁸ Duffin: Herbert Toms (1874-1940), *Witch Stones, and Porosphaera Beads*.

⁶⁹ MacMullen: *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries*, 240.

⁷⁰ Nelson 1998: *The Beauty of Holiness: Anglicanism and Architecture in Colonial South Carolina*, 159-60.

⁷¹ Lawrence 1898: *The Magic of the Horse Shoe With Other Folk-Lore Notes*, 101-2.

⁷² Camus 2001: *La sorcellerie en France aujourd’hui*, 52, 63.

⁷³ Robben 2013: *Magical Signs in Masonry*.

⁷⁴ Reynolds 2008: *Transmission and Recall: The Use of Short Wall Anchors in the Wide World*.

double S anchor plate designs found in old East Anglian houses served to protect houses from lightning.⁷⁵

Moving inside, and into semi-private spaces, we find several distinctive, regional wood carving traditions that were thought to ward off evil, such as the custom in parts of Wales of carving large (30-60 cm) paired phallic or hermaphroditic figures on either side of the main door. The most well-known example is the seventeenth and early eighteenth century ‘witch post’ tradition in Yorkshire (there is also one example in Lancashire). So-called witch posts are usually cited as having an apotropaic purpose, but this interpretation is riddled with problems.⁷⁶ For one, there is no mention of ‘witch posts’ in the rich nineteenth-century account of domestic life, buildings, culture, and magic in the area by the Rev Thomas Atkinson, published in 1891, or in any other nineteenth-century Yorkshire folklore collection. Indeed, in the second edition of Atkinson’s book he described a likely witch post in an account of a ruined longhouse in Danby parish, but makes no reference at all to its apotropaic functions or association with witches, merely noting ‘some rather rough ornamental carving on its inner face’. A couple of years later Atkinson donated to the Pitt Rivers in Oxford what he described in a letter as

the (assumed) witch post, which I think is worth taking care of ... so far there is no actual evidence of its original intention, over and above the testimony of the old lady at Egton touching the character of the like article in her own domicile. I have almost no doubt on the subject, but am disappointed that I get no confirmation from any of my correspondents.⁷⁷

The term ‘witch post’ began to be used widely only from the 1930s onwards and the tradition began to accrue unsubstantiated folkloric embellishments. It has been widely reported, for instance, that the posts were made of rowan (a tree well-known for warding off fairies and witches) though this has not been substantiated, and where properly identified rather than assumed, oak was used in keeping with other supporting timbers. The symbols carved in to the posts vary, though standard is the St Andrew’s cross followed by horizontal bars. There is nothing obviously apotropaic about either in the context of the corpus of magical symbols and signs. The most overt evidence for a magical function concerns a post from Scarborough donated to the Pitt Rivers years before Atkinson’s Danby example arrived. In the four triangles created by the cross four hearts have been carved and one of them appears to have thirteen pin pricks that could represent the common practice of piercing animal hearts as a counter-witchcraft spell. Then again it could be a representation of the ‘immaculate heart of Mary’, which was often represented by a heart with multiple wounds (usually seven). It is quite possible that the origins of the witch post carvings were ornamental and, over time, accrued a magical significance – a reverse horseshoe effect. Below the original carved symbols of the Scarborough post are a series of more crude and lightly

⁷⁵ Evans 1966: *The Pattern Under the Plough*.

⁷⁶ William 1978: *The Protection of the House: Some Iconographic Evidence from Wales*; Hayes and Rutter 1972: *Cruck-framed Buildings in Ryedale & Eskdale*, 87-95; Price 2004: *Contextualising the ‘Witch Posts’ of the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford: Cultural Isolation (?) A Study of Magic and Vernacular Architecture in the North Riding of Yorkshire*; Nattrass 1958; Walker 2011: *Witch Posts*.

⁷⁷ <http://england.prm.ox.ac.uk/prmap/mapresults/danbynorthyorkshire.html> (2013-10-11)

carved Xs and a square divided into segments. These may have more ritual significance than the original carving.

The process of accrued apotropaic powers is evident from the history of the famous Pennsylvania Dutch hex signs painted on barns. The original purpose of these colourful social statements in the landscape was primarily as expressions of spirituality, ethnic identity and prosperity. It was only from the early twentieth century that a predominantly apotropaic function was ascribed to the various geometric signs, rosettes, hearts and stars by folklorists – giving birth to the modern ‘hex sign’ industry.⁷⁸ The daisy wheel or hexafoil pattern, made with a compass, that is found carved on domestic door lintels and other parts, and is frequently found in church stonework, also requires cautious interpretation. It is highly unlikely that all the examples were protective in purpose. It was a common decorative symbol, and while it has possible geometrical planning functions, it was more likely the product of artistic doodling with a craftsman’s compass than a practical device. It has been suggested sensibly that while some seventeenth-century daisy wheels had a magical purpose, many later examples were copied for purely decorative purposes, the original meaning having been lost.⁷⁹ Then again the argument could be turned the other way round.

Look carefully at old timber buildings and there are numerous other signs and symbols. In parts of medieval and early modern Northern Europe housemarks were inscribed above doors to denote the owner’s lands and possessions. Sometimes symbols of the trade or craft of inhabitants were similarly recorded above doors or on the façade, with the same motifs being found on gravestones (and also occasionally on anchor plates).⁸⁰ Most marks, though, were the result of timber preparation and construction. A survey of the timber construction of a Manchester warehouse, built in 1830 as part of the Liverpool to Manchester railway, found more than 650 sets of timber marks. Carpenters had their systems of assembly marks when pre-fabricating sections of timber-framed buildings and furniture. While these included obvious Roman numerals there are various other obscure marks that could easily be interpreted as having ‘occult’ purposes - if they were not clearly an aspect of the construction planning. Plumb and levelling marks consisting of intersecting lines are also distinctive once you know what they are and where they are usually located. Hewing marks, used to signify logs to be used for timber baulks, and which can appear in the middle of a beam, are similar, such as the use of the butterfly cross symbol. This is a shape that Easton has interpreted as also having an apotropaic significance. Likewise, three lines intersecting to form a star shape, which is a symbol that can also be found amongst the medley of symbols on written charms produced by cunning-folk.

⁷⁸ Davies 2013, 116-117.

⁷⁹ Meeson 2005: *Ritual Marks and Graffiti: Curiosities or Meaningful Symbols?*, 45-47; <http://www.medievalgraffitisurrey.org/circles.html> (2013-10-11)

⁸⁰ Williams 1858: *On the Land of Ditmarsh and the Mark Confederation*; Garrioch 1994: *House Names, Shop Signs and Social Organization in Western European Cities, 1500-1900*; Christison 1902: *The Carvings and Inscriptions on the Kirkyard Monuments of the Scottish Lowlands; Particularly in Perth, Fife, Angus, Mearns and Lothian*; Dean 1997.

Then there are brack marks, which are letters and signs drawn or scored with a scribing iron by Baltic quality officials known as brackers on pine and oak timber imported from the Baltic to denote its provenance. Oak timber was being imported from the Baltic since the medieval period and Baltic pine was used, for instance, in the repair of Ely and Lincoln cathedrals in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The brack marks in English baulks were made back in the main Baltic ports such as Gdansk, where a language of brack marks was already developed by the fifteenth century, posing another problem with regard to identifying timber marks, particularly as it would seem each port had its own range of brack symbols. Joshua Oddy, writing in the early nineteenth century, described the marks made by Danzig brackers, which included Xs, double Bs, Ks, and double slanted lines.⁸¹ Some beams in the Manchester warehouse have brack marks all along their length, including an interlocking V scored to make a W, and AM, which, as discussed below, are interpreted in some other contexts as apotropaic.⁸²

As with below ground ritual deposits, assessing location, date, and wood provenance is crucial to determining purpose. Assembly marks are found in pairs on either side of a joint. Even if they look strange, any paired marks in this location are likely to have no apotropaic meaning; strange looking symbols with no decorative aesthetics near entrances, such as on the middle of a lintel beam or window are something else. Still, the reuse of timbers with assembly marks could lead to mundane marks appearing in such tell-tale places. So bearing in mind all these caveats and provisos what do possible apotropaic symbols look like? Easton identified several that he believes to be based on initials denoting the protection of the Virgin Mary. So intersecting Vs stand for Virgo Virginum (Virgin of Virgins); VMV stands for Virgo Maria Virginum (To Mary, Virgin of Virgins); the letter M for Mary and MR for Maria Regina; AMR means Ave Maria Regina; and AMB means 'Ave Maria Beata (Hail Blessed Mary). Some have suggested that they might have been inspired by illicit Catholic devotion, but they are more likely to represent continuance of received Catholic expressions in popular religion.⁸³ Then there are Xs and other variant crosses. As well as the aforementioned daisywheel and equally ambiguous interlinking compass circles. There are also more abstract markings such as hashed lines, ladders, 'egg-timer' shapes, and zig-zag lines.

It is worth noting that such symbols have also been found in high status buildings as well as houses, barns and cowsheds. Evidence of these has been seized upon by marketeers with Stirling Castle Palace (youthful home of James V/VI of England) and Kew Palace advertising 'witch marks' as part of their attractions. At Stirling a marigold or hexafoil design incised on the inner face of a closet door of the King James era has been 'formally' interpreted as an apotropaic sign due primarily to its location. The great outer door of the palace has a conjoined 'AMV' (Ave Maria

⁸¹ Oddy 1807: *European Commerce, Shewing New and Secure Channels of Trade with the Continent of Europe*, Vol. 1, 251-252.

⁸² Higgins 2004: *First Thoughts on Carpenters' Marks*; Miles and Russell: *Plumb and Level Marks*; Sharpe 2011: *Historic English Churches: A Guide to their Construction, Design and Features*, 108; Greene 1995: *The 1830 Warehouse and the Nineteenth Century Trade in Timber*; Engqvist 1989: *Timber numberings and other forms of marking used on half-timbering and roofings in secular buildings*.

⁸³ Lowe 2004: 53 *George Street, Whithorn: The Late Medieval Priory Gatehouse*, 107; Meeson 2005, 47.

Virginus) inscribed upon it. In 2003 several marks were found in the roof timbers of Kew Palace, which was built in the 1630s. One is a double V mark and another M R (Maria Regina).⁸⁴

At some sites possible apotropaic marks are jumbled up with a range of others. A series of marks were recently found on stone door jambs and a fireplace surround and lintel during the excavation of a sixteenth- to-seventeenth-century building in Brora, Scotland, for instance. Some were clearly builders' marks, some likely graffiti inscribed during its habitation or shortly after abandonment. Several, in positions unusual for builders' marks, bear resemblances to possible apotropaic marks found at another site in Scotland and in timber buildings in Norfolk and Suffolk buildings.⁸⁵ Such accretions present an interpretive problem and yet they are also an opportunity to contextualise and refine our diagnostics. More systematic cataloguing work needs to be done on the range of historic construction marks, brack marks and the like, whether there are regional differences, or changes of signs over time, to clarify better the identity of apotropaic marks. If the same symbols crop up on other surfaces then one can eliminate carpenters' and masons' marks, brack marks or timber marks. This is well illustrated by the speleological investigations of C.J. Binding and L.J. Wilson in several caves in Somerset, England. They have found incised marks carved into the rock, probably dating from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. They include numerous examples of the interlocking V, including interlocking Vs conjoined with a P (which Easton has also found on timbers from the same period) and butterfly crosses in contexts that cannot serve any construction or building function.⁸⁶

While abstruse, abstract symbols with no apparent astrological or alchemical meaning are no stranger to other literary forms of magic, the curious thing is that the Marian British apotropaic marks have no direct parallels in the British literary charm tradition. Neither does the hexafoil. The variant Marian initial strings are not prominent at all as magical letter combinations in the written charms found in domestic deposits, or in the manuscript and print grimoires we know were used for the benefit of popular protection. This does not invalidate the interpretation. Indeed, the point about the textual sometimes being secondary to the material has already been made with regard to antiquity. The interpretation of the V and M marks as variant Marian protective devotions certainly makes sense. The carving of 'Mary' and 'Ave' on domestic items such as food and drink vessels and spindlewhorls, along with crosses and pentagrams, was a common practice in medieval Scandinavia.⁸⁷ We find documentary evidence for the use of the initials of other Biblical characters in early and later literary magic. The most obvious is the Christ monogram IHS, the first three letters of Jesus in Greek, which was widely used in protective charms, as was the acronym INRI (Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews). The names of the three wise kings (though not named in the New Testament) [K]Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar were used in written charms in the medieval and early modern period to protect

⁸⁴ Gallagher and Ewart n.d.: *Stirling Castle Palace: Archaeological and Historical Research 2004-2008*, 65.

⁸⁵ Brora Back Beach, Sutherland Data Structure Report, 11, 23; Darwood and Sherriff 2003: *Apotropaic markings and spiritual middens found in a house at 21 Shore Street, Anstruther, Fife*; Easton 1999: *Ritual Marks on Historic Buildings*; Dean 1997.

⁸⁶ Binding and Wilson 2004: *Ritual Protection Marks in Goatchurch Cavern, Burrington Combe, North Somerset*; Binding and Wilson: *Ritual Protection Marks in Wookey Hole and Long Hole, Somerset*.

⁸⁷ MacLeod and Mees 2006: *Runic Amulets and Magic Objects*, 198.

against epilepsy and fevers, and amulets with their initials were quite common. It was noted in the nineteenth century that in parts of Catholic Germany and Austria three crosses were painted on house doors along with 'KMB' to protect households. The CMB was usually chalked on doors on the 6 January (Christmas Day under the old calendar), though Catholic German-Canadians continued a variant of the tradition, making a cross on the door and the initials CMB on the last day of April to keep witches at bay.⁸⁸

As well as the puzzle over the existence of popular Marian symbolism well into the early modern and modern periods, it is strange that other common magical formulae are apparently absent in the corpus of British apotropaic marks discovered to date. I would expect, for instance, that the IHS monogram would be prominent. A good example of this, including the name of the builder, is found carved in stone over the front door of an old house in Morbihan, Brittany.⁸⁹ Why do we not find other common powerful magical words such as tetragrammaton, abracadabra, and AGLA, as part of the portfolio? Why so few hexagrams or pentagrams in Britain even though they are found on timbers and stonework in other parts of Europe?⁹⁰ In Britain the ancient and enduring sator-arepo acrostic charm has been found carved on Roman pottery, incorporated into written charms from the medieval and post-medieval period, carved on a wooden panel dated 1614 in the Parish Church of St Michael, Great Gidding, Cambridgeshire, and on a stone in Rivington Church, Lancashire. Yet, so far, we do not find examples carved in stone or wood in domestic settings. Practical reasons may, of course, have prevented anything more than several straight-line initials and symbols being carved into stone and wood in most modest domestic buildings. But one key to the disjuncture between literary and building apotropaic traditions lies in considering *who* was making material magic, at any period in the past, in different domestic and social contexts.

In the post-medieval period there were three main groups of people creating and providing apotropaics, and each drew upon different but overlapping pools of knowledge. Cunning-folk were key sources of magical knowledge but placed considerable emphasis on their literary resources – their books of magic. From these they cobbled together written charms to be placed in buildings.⁹¹ It is almost certain that all the extant written charms found in British buildings were provided by cunning-folk. The candle smoke symbols written on ceilings in East Anglia, researched by Timothy Easton, were also almost certainly the work of cunning-folk as they mirror the bricolage of magical symbolism found in written charms.⁹² We also know from trial records that cunning-folk often provided the information that led to the creation and interment of witch bottles, the burial of animals under thresholds, and the placement of pierced animal hearts up chimneys. It is important to consider that cunning-folk were an inventive lot. We may seek great meaning and evidence of venerable tradition in some puzzling domestic magic deposit, mark, or charm, when

⁸⁸ Skemer 2006: *Binding Words: Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages*, 62; Veenstra 1998: *Magic and Divination at the Courts of Burgundy and France: Texts and Context*, 304, n. 269; *Chambers Journal* (1878), 784; Wintemberg 1950: *Folk-Lore of Waterloo County*, 4.

⁸⁹ Camus 2001, 64.

⁹⁰ Sandklef 1949, 55-61.

⁹¹ Davies 2003: *Cunning-Folk: Popular Magic in English History*, chapters 5 and 6; Davies 2009: *Grimoires: A History of Magic Books*.

⁹² T. Easton pers comm.; Easton 2011: *Candle Powers*, 56-60.

in fact a cunning-person has simply made something up and invented a formulae or practice that is reflective of his or her imagination and has no ‘deep time’ cultural significance. The concept may be the same at bottom but the material expression of it was unique to the practitioner.

The second group concerns carpenters and masons, who were undoubtedly primarily responsible for the apotropaic marks on timbers and masonry, and quite a few of the concealment traditions, particularly those relating to shoes and garments. The issue of freemasonry, and its occult traditions, is bound to be raised in this context, but as Ian Evans has concluded from his extensive research there is no evidence of these practices being an aspect of organised masonic tradition.⁹³ The implication from the evidence is that there was a pervasive, unrecorded, professional building tradition in the post-medieval period that was particularly concerned with Marian references and the re-interpretation or eliding of mundane and apotropaic symbolism. We are in the realm of conjecture here, of course, and much more concerted work needs to be done in a European context.

Finally there are what can be described as self-service magic resources based on knowledge and practices handed down orally at a family and community level. Examples include the use of horseshoes, stone axes and perforated stones, the pinning of owls to doors in France, the burial of animals under thresholds, and the planting and hanging of certain apotropaic plants such as rowan. We know that cunning-folk advised on these practices but they were so pervasive in the past that they were clearly not dependent on professional advice. As Augé has begun to explore, self-service magic raises the important issue of gender in the generation of material magic. In early modern and modern England roughly a third of cunning-folk were woman, but when it came to household protection then it is likely that women were the principal agents in securing the well-being of the family and domestic industries such as dairying, spinning, and bread-making – all activities that relied heavily on magical protection for security.

The study of post-medieval material magic is not only important for exploring past cultures of belief and practice, it has the potential to provide valuable ethnographic insights regarding contemporary popular emotions towards the past and the home. In 2010, for instance, the author was contacted by the owners of a property being renovated in northern France. On raising a door lintel the builder found a ball of straw deep inside the wall. Inside the ball was an old hand-stitched child’s glove and a small bottle containing a feather, which had evidently also contained when concealed. It is clearly an apotropaic device dating to the eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries. The find is fascinating in itself, but the owners’ reaction to and relationship with the find is equally interesting. They were conscientious about maintaining the protective tradition and planned to place the find back in the wall above the new lintel.⁹⁴ The couple mentioned earlier who found horses skulls under the floorboards of their

⁹³ Evans 2010, 83.

⁹⁴ Pers Comm. Danny Rippon.

Flintshire home in 1965 were conscientious in placing them back under the new floorboards.

One element of this response to finding domestic apotropaics is clearly the same as that which inspires people to conceal time capsules.⁹⁵ So a friend of my French correspondent suggested laminating an explanatory note and photograph of the house taken during the renovation and secreting them with the straw ball, in other words creating a time capsule “for someone to discover in another 250 years’ time”. The presidential White House provides an excellent if exceptional example of this ongoing re-depositional practice. During renovations in the 1940s a small marble box was found under an entrance. Its contents, newspaper clippings of Theodore Roosevelt’s State of the Union address, a whisky bottle label, and seven Indian head one-cent coins, revealed that it had been placed there during refurbishments in 1902. The time capsule was reinterred in the foundations of another part of the White House with President Truman adding some further newspapers to this legacy midden.⁹⁶

But when such finds are recognized by home owners as having some historic ritual, protective purpose then we seem to move beyond broad sentiments regarding continuity, legacy and customary duty, to a less well-defined sense of the need to maintain an emotional relationship with the identity of the house and its purpose to protect the latest of its custodians. Not to re-deposit the apotropaic objects would be to disturb the spiritual or emotional balance that creates that vague, intangible sense of a happy home.

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⁹⁵ Jarvis 2003: *Time Capsules: A Cultural History*; Yablon 2011, *Encapsulating the Present: Material Decay, Labor Unrest, and the Prehistory of the Time Capsule, 1876–1914*.

⁹⁶ Jarvis 2003, 101.

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