The Magical World of the Anglo-Saxons

Tylluan Penry

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Cover Design and Illustrations by Drew Thomas

This book is dedicated with love to CEJT - great daughter, wife, mother and warrior for justice!

Other Titles by Tylluan Penry :

Staying on the Old Track, published by The Wolfenhowle Press 2012

Magic on the Breath (published by The Wolfenhowle Press, 2011)

The Essential Guide to Psychic Self Defence (published by Capall Bann 2010)

The Magical Properties of Plants - and How to Find Them (published by Capall Bann, 2009)

Seeking the Green (published by Capall Bann, 2008)

Also 'Eating With the Dead: Funeral Meal Practices' in the anthology *Memento Mori* (ed. Kim Huggens) Avalonia Books 2012

A note about references....

References are placed within the text of this book using the Harvard style of referencing, i.e. Author, Year and, where appropriate, page number. This is much neater and easier than struggling to find endnotes after each chapter. If you wish to consult the referenced work for yourself, just go to the Bibliography at the end of this book and look up the cited author; you will find the full reference set out there.

Where possible I have used Grendon's (1909) translation of the charms since this is available online so that you can access a wide range of charms, both in translation and the original Anglo-Saxon for yourself.

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About Tylluan Penry

Tylluan Penry is a solitary pagan witch, independent scholar and the author of books on magic and folklore including *Staying on the Old Track, Seeking the Green, The Magical Properties of Plants and how to find them, The Essential Guide to Psychic Self Defence* and *Magic on the Breath.*
She is a popular and regular speaker at various events including Witchfest International, The Artemis Gathering, Witchfest England and Witchfest Wales. She has also given talks for the Pagan Federation, and at independent, private events. Her articles have appeared in a variety of publications including *Witchcraft & Wicca* and *Myddle Earth* and she is regularly consulted by the media for advice in portraying witchcraft and paganism.

Tylluan has her own internet radio show, *The Magical World of Tylluan Penry* at www.oneworldradio.org.uk, and her programmes are also available as free podcasts from http://tylluanpenry.podbean.com/

Tylluan is married, has a large family, many pets, an overgrown garden and lives with Mr Penry, her love of many lifetimes, in the South Wales Rhondda Valley.

Preface

This is a book about the magical world of the Anglo-Saxons, written from the point of view of someone who believes in, and practices magic herself. So although I have included plenty of references to guide you towards further reading, the emphasis here is on the magical thinking behind what they did and thought. In other words, why and how the Anglo-Saxons believed in magic. And to understand that, we have to be aware of how they viewed the world around them.

In school if we are lucky most of us learn just the basics: that the Anglo-Saxons invaded after the Romans left, fought King Arthur and quickly converted *en masse* to Christianity. Then other invaders, the Vikings or Norsemen, rolled in and were fought by King Alfred the Great when he wasn't burning the cakes. Generally speaking though, the whole Saxon period was relegated to the Dark Ages a term that conjures up images of savages living in primitive huts, frightened of elves and ghosts, unable to read, write or do very much at all.

None of this is true. Writing this book taught me that they were clever, artistic, skilled in metalwork and poetry, fond of drinking, jokes, riddles, singing and generally enjoying themselves. I learned a great deal from them.

Above all, I learned that all knowledge is a voyage, and this book can only be a tiny part of that journey. Experiencing it requires nothing more than allowing yourself to dip into the pages on a warm summer's day in the park, or a cold winter evening by the fire. The magic is still there if only we have the courage to reach out and touch it.

Brightest Blessings

Tylluan Penry

Chapter One
Beginnings

When we begin looking for evidence for the magical world of the Anglo-Saxons, we can often feel we are chasing shadows. Even apparently simple questions, such as 'Who, what, where and when were the Anglo-Saxons?' are deceptively complex. It's vital to understand the different types of evidence available to us, and the problems inherent with each.

For example, archaeology can show us the type of houses people lived in, but cannot tell us what people thought of them, or the games played by the children who lived in them. So archaeology can provide only *some* evidence about the way people lived. Also, physical evidence tends not to be very representative of society as a whole, since so much of what has survived was only ever used by a small, elite group. An ornate jewel might tell us what the well-dressed Saxon noblewoman wore, but little about her peasant counterpart. In any society, the poor normally take their thoughts, beliefs and secrets with them to the grave.

With written (especially literary) evidence, we have a different set of problems. Pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon England was an oral based society and their traditions (including charms) were only recorded by Christian clergy. This means we rarely hear an authentic heathen Anglo-Saxon voice since literary evidence was produced by and for Christians. Nobody was really that interested in writing *for* heathens, only in converting them.

The best way for us to try and recover the magical world of the Anglo-Saxons is to work thematically, looking at topics such as charms, dragons, wyrd etc. However even then we must be careful not to go overboard. In particular we should avoid looking for parallels with modern festivals and then projecting these backwards to 'prove' the existence of an unbroken tradition from Anglo-Saxon times to the present day.

We must also be wary of assuming that beliefs from the Norse tradition somehow 'prove' there must have been something similar going on in sixth century CE Anglo-Saxon England. Too much of this results in a lumpy, pagan porridge where Celt and Saxon, pagan, heathen, medieval and Christian all merge together. In the end it is impossible to tease out the individual oat flakes, let alone see the original barley plant!

Of course, at the opposite end of the scale we should not dismiss *all* later (or, indeed, earlier) traditions out of hand. The absence of a contemporary written record for not prove that something did not happen. Sometimes traditions survive for centuries by word of mouth only. It is perfectly acceptable to speculate provided we accept that proof is going to be hard to find.

Who were the Anglo-Saxons?

Often the 'Anglo-Saxons' are referred to as though they were a single, homogenous group. In fact they were made up of a number of tribes from north-west Europe, including Angles, Saxons and Jutes, who first arrived in England c.410-450 CE. The words 'England' and 'English' probably derived from the Engle, a Germanic tribe from the South Jutland Peninsula. Translated into Latin, Engle would become the *anglii* and then 'the Angles'.

Although few of these invading tribes had lived directly under the *aegis* of Rome they probably would have had some contact with the Roman Empire. It would have been almost impossible to have lived completely separate and apart. Also, in the second century BCE, some of the *Germani* allied themselves with Celtic tribes and travelled south to threaten the Roman world. Renowned for their ferocity, Julius Caesar later described them as *feri,* meaning 'wild things.' Later, in September, 9CE, Caesar's nephew, the Emperor Augustus famously lost three legions in the Teutoburg Forest in Germania.

Britain however, had been Rome's northernmost province for several centuries. It was only abandoned by the army in the early fifth century CE, once the Empire was under threat in mainland Europe, and it was no longer cost effective to maintain such a remote province. Those

Britons left behind were a mixture of the native indigenous people, descendants of the pre-Roman inhabitants, former soldiers who had served their time and been granted land in Britain (often confiscated from the native peoples) and those who had become citizens and were thoroughly Romanised.

Although there was no single date when the Germanic tribes suddenly invaded *en masse,* once they did arrive they settled in quickly and established several kingdoms across England. Their power was only really broken in 1066 when they themselves were defeated by the Normans. Even then of course, they did not simply fade away, but learned to co-exist with their new masters.

But why did the Anglo-Saxon tribes invade? If we accept Bede's claims (*The Ecclesiastical History of the English People, (*EHEN*)* Book I, Part I), then Britain had plentiful food resources, including grain, trees, and in some areas, vines. There were also birds, cattle, beasts of burden and all sorts of fish. Mussels yielded various coloured pearls, while cockles provided a scarlet dye. The land also provided rich supplies of copper, iron, lead, and silver. If Bede's account is true, then Britain must have been an extremely tempting target.

The fact that Britain had until recently been a Roman province was also significant. Any attempts to resist invasion were severely hampered by the effects of centuries of Roman occupation. From the first century CE, Rome had forbidden Britons to make or bear arms, and these were skills that could not simply be recovered overnight.

Another disadvantage was that many young male Britons had been forcibly drafted into the Roman army for a minimum of twenty five years. Sent to distant provinces in mainland Europe, (to prevent rebellions at home), there was little chance they would ever return. It was customary for the Roman army to offer land to retiring veterans to induce them to settle in the lands they had previously occupied. This in turn had a knock-on effect on future generations.
Unable to fight back, many Britons fled westwards into Wales and Cornwall, only to subsequently suffer attacks from the Irish. By 446CE the problem had become so acute that a group of wealthy families in

southern Britain appealed unsuccessfully for help to Aetius, Supreme Commander of the Army of the Western Empire of Rome, explaining pitifully, 'The barbarians drive us to the sea and the sea drives us back to the barbarians; death comes by one means or the other; we are either slain or drowned.'(Esmonde-Cleary, 1991:137)

Unfortunately there are few contemporary sources dealing with this period of English history. The Roman author Tacitus is often cited, especially his work, *Germania.* However, it was written over three centuries *before* the Anglo-Saxon invasions, and Tacitus was describing people whose descendants *may* have invaded and settled in Britain. Relying on him to tell us about the heathen Anglo-Saxons would be rather like trying to reconstruct life in a twenty-first century city using the works of Jane Austen!

Another author often mentioned with regard to the Anglo-Saxons is the twelfth century Icelandic (and Christian) author, Snorri Sturluson. Although there may be similarities between Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon heathenism, in his Prose Edda, Sturluson is writing about a different time and place. The Poetic Edda is a slightly earlier collection of Icelandic myths and legends. Again it is often used to support theories about the Anglo-Saxons. All these texts can be useful if used with caution.

Even Anglo-Saxon texts that *have* survived, e.g. Beowulf, the Lacnunga and the Leechbook of Bald, were transcribed only when England had become more or less fully Christian, although much of the content probably derives from earlier oral traditions. It is still possible to tease out some of the original magical thought, but again we have to be aware of the pitfalls.

There is also unwitting testimony about heathen magical thought and practice. This can be found in the writings of Christian authors such as Bede, (673-735 CE), a Northumbrian monk, priest and scholar. His *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* was completed in 731 CE but may have relied on earlier sources such as Gildas' *De excidio et conquestu Britanniae* (c.540). This in turn described events of the

previous century, i.e. the 5th century CE, not long after the first invasions.

By the time the heathen Anglo-Saxons began arriving in the early fifth century CE, much of England and Wales was already Christian. There must have been considerable fusion between the various cultures, since non-Christian German, Greek, Roman and Celtic traditions often show marked similarities. This may also suggest at least some common origins, perhaps Indo-European.

After the initial invasion, the Germanic tribes seem to have arrived in England as ready-made communities, bringing their families, religious beliefs and rituals with them. This meant they had no need to make much effort to assimilate with the indigenous peoples since they already had everything they needed.

The Anglo-Saxons conversion to Christianity began around the time of the arrival of St Augustine in 597CE. Years ago it was often claimed that this was swift and relatively simple. Yet early Church authors often complained about the stubbornness of the local people which suggests the conversion was by no means straightforward.

No matter what we may have been told to the contrary, the average Anglo-Saxon was not crying out for a new religion, nor was he in any hurry to desert his old beliefs and magical practices. Despite the Church's best efforts, far more was retained than was ever intended. The clues are there – if we know where and how to start looking.