

*Seeking the Green Pathways*

AN INTRODUCTION TO ANGLO-  
SAXON MAGIC AND WITCHCRAFT

By

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# AN INTRODUCTION TO ANGLO-SAXON MAGIC AND WITCHCRAFT

It is not easy to discover exactly what the Anglo-Saxons thought about magic and witchcraft before the coming of the Christian missionaries especially in a small booklet such as this, nor how it was practised. My purpose is to clarify some of the more confusing aspects in order to make it easier for the Reader to pursue further studies in the subject.

England had been Christian for some time before the boatloads of Angles, Jutes, Saxons and others arrived in the early fifth century. Later missionaries sent from the Continent claimed the conversion was complete by the mid seventh century. Strictly speaking, heathen Anglo-Saxon England covered a period of barely two and a half centuries.

It might seem therefore that we are looking for a tiny needle in a very crowded haystack, made all the more difficult because the heathen Anglo-Saxons never wrote anything down and the songs and stories they memorised and recited in the mead halls have not survived. However, there *is* information if we know where to look. Often it is hidden in the work of authors such as Bede, the Northumbrian monk whose works, especially *The Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation* (EHEN) and *De Temporum Ratione* tell us something of the beliefs and practices of the Anglo-Saxons, both before, during and after they converted to Christianity.

There is even evidence to be found in the dictionary. For example, we know the Anglo-Saxons recognised the existence of Witchcraft and Magic because they had so many words and phrases covering a wide range of magical practices. From *lybcræft* meaning magic, *lybblac* meaning witchcraft, *begalan* meaning to enchant (often by means of sung charms) to the dreaded *morþ weorc*, which meant using poison or witchcraft (and sometimes both) to kill someone, the language was rich and full with magical meaning. They must – at least during the Christian period – have feared *deofol-cræaft*, and the word *dry* meant a

magician, therefore *dry-craft* meant magical work. This suggests that magic and witchcraft were not exactly the same as each other.

We also know that magical practices were hard to eradicate since many Christian kings passed laws against it, something they would surely not have had to do had people completely turned their backs on their old practices and traditions once they were baptised. Although on the surface beliefs had changed, many seem to have clung doggedly to their old rituals, celebrations and practices.

Some of these edicts against magic were surprisingly late, and show how persistent these old ways must have been. For example, in the early eleventh century, King Cnut passed a law forbidding ‘... all heathen practices. Namely the worship of idols, heathen gods, and the sun or the moon, fire or water, springs or stones or any kind of forest trees, or indulgence in *wicecraeft* or *morfneorc*, that is the compassing of death in any way, either by sacrifice or by divination...’

Of course it would be wrong to assume that most English people were doing all these things in the early eleventh century. *Some* may have been, but sometimes kings needed to be seen to ‘do something’, making these clauses more or less obligatory, i.e. the sort of thing that was included whether or not they were actually needed. Unfortunately, we do not know how far this was true in eleventh century England.

However we *do* know the Anglo-Saxons must have placed great faith in various portents, since a number of them have survived. For example, ‘To receive a ring in dreams betokens freedom from care... to accept new cheese betokens gain’ (Cockayne 1961 iii, 200ff). We also know that many people believed in ghosts due to the number of words that mean phantoms, from the shining spectre *scin*, to the more frightening *eges-grima* meaning a horrible spectre.

Up until about 1950, many people still believed that the heathen Anglo-Saxon centuries really were barbaric. I remember one of my old teachers saying it was called the Dark Ages because the light of Christianity went out and everything was utterly ruined when the Romans left! Yet one look at their glorious metal-work and jewellery

shows that whatever else they may have been, the heathen Anglo-Saxons were skilled and civilised. Unfortunately they were a non-literate society which had implications for how they were portrayed by the later, literate clerics and clergy.

Although all the surviving Anglo-Saxon literature was transcribed after England became Christian, much of it had been composed orally then memorised and passed down by word of mouth for centuries. Of course, by the time the Christian scribes (almost all clergy) wrote everything down, they were in a position to erase most of the obviously heathen references – if they could find them. This may sound a little strange, but the Anglo-Saxons were very keen on jokes, riddles and verbal games which we find they incorporated into much of the surviving literature. Hiding heathen references would have been child's play for bards and poets with such an agile sense of fun!

It is important therefore not to allow ourselves to be too easily persuaded that evidence regarding the heathen Anglo-Saxons has gone for good. It has not. Even sober, impeccably Christian authors such as Bede (writing in the eighth century) can unwittingly tell us a great deal once we know how to look.

For example, when Pope Gregory I sent Augustine (later known as Saint Augustine of Canterbury) to convert the English, he recommended incorporating as much of the old heathen beliefs as possible (*EHEN I, 30*). In particular he advised Augustine to take over heathen feast days but turn them into Christian celebrations, and even to acquire heathen temples and altars, consecrating them instead to the Christian God. Everything heathen should as far as possible, the pope said, be retained but overlaid with Christian symbolism and meaning. We refer to this process as Christianisation. Of course, some heathen traditions proved resistant, and when this happened we see an abrupt change in Church policy. The old beliefs and practices were then denounced as being in league with the devil. This is called demonization and is easy to spot once we know what to look for.

Bede occasionally gives us a glimpse of the heathen point of view, too. For example, when Augustine and his fellow missionaries landed in

England in 597 CE, King Æthelbert insisted on meeting them in the open, in case they tried to enchant him (*EHEN I*, 25). This is a curious statement, suggesting he believed that magic was somehow more dangerous or more likely to occur indoors and has some interesting implications when we look at elves later on.

Although we do not know exactly what magical mysteries the missionaries encountered when they arrived in England, the Anglo-Saxon language is rich with words associated with what we would now translate as witchcraft or magic. However we must remember that the meanings we attach to such words are not necessarily the same as the meanings given to them fourteen hundred years ago.

For example, nowadays the word Wicca is given to a very specific pagan path, founded (or rediscovered, depending on one's point of view) by Gerald Gardner in the late 1940's – early 1950's. Yet *wicca* (with no capital letter) was a name given to male magicians, sorcerers and wizards, while *wicce* meant a female witch or sorceress. Both changed to *wiccan* in the plural form, whereas nowadays, to be Wiccan means to follow the path of Wicca. Modern Wicca is regarded as a religious path, but we have no way of knowing how the heathen Anglo-Saxons regarded their *wiccan*.

Words that show people who specialised in magic tell us that this must have been a well established practice. *Wiccian* meant to practice witchcraft, while *wiccecraft* and *wiccedóm* both meant magic or witchcraft. Of course, whether we view magic as a good or bad thing depends very much on how it is used. To have great power and use it for good is a wonderful thing, whereas to use it to harm others tends to frighten the living daylights out of us. This does not only apply to magic, of course. Much the same can be said of people who drive an ambulance quickly but safely to the local hospital in an emergency, compared to the maniac who drives a Ferrari at 100mph in a built up area!

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