

MAGICAL HOUSE PROTECTION IN BRITAIN AND BEYOND – THE BENEFITS OF EUROPEAN COLLABORATION*

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Rezumat

În această lucrare, Brian Hoggard descrie impactul pe care colaborarea cu colegii europeni l-a avut asupra cercetării sale. Proiectul său de cercetare a început acum aproape 20 de ani prin analizarea frecvenței obiectelor ascunse în Anglia. Prin mijloace de informare scrisă și televiziune, cercetarea sa a devenit cunoscută de către oameni din străinătate și astfel s-au creat contacte cu specialiști din alte țări și s-a conștientizat faptul că practici similare sunt prezente în întreaga lume. Obiecte precum sticlute pentru vrăji, papuci ascunși, cranii de cal, pisici mumificate, descântece scrise și semne de protecție cioplite pe suprafețe se găsesc pe întreg teritoriul britanic. Pentru unele dintre aceste obiecte pot fi stabilite analogii clare în cultura europeană. Cercetarea practicilor similare aduce informații despre cum se manifestă magicul în cultură și despre modalitățile găsite de oameni pentru a se proteja de pericolele supranaturale.

Cuvinte cheie: sticlute pentru vrăji, papuci ascunși, semne de protecție, cranii de cai, pisici mumificate, descântece scrise, vraci, vrăjitorie, vatră, horn, depozit, folclor, clădiri tradiționale, cercetare europeană.

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In this paper I will outline the way that my research has expanded and improved greatly through contact with my European colleagues. The principal categories of objects will also be explored along with some notes regarding their distribution.

When I began researching the archaeology of magical house protection back in 1999 it was as a direct result of reading Ralph Merrifield's *Archaeology of Ritual and Magic* which has a chapter on early modern counter-witchcraft practices¹.

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¹ Ralph Merrifield, *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic*, London, Batsford, 1987, p. 159-183.

The book concentrates on English material and set the tone for my research project. As my work progressed it became increasingly clear that focusing solely on Britain and the English speaking world was, although very interesting, allowing linguistic and national barriers to restrict my understanding of the topic. Due to positive contacts and collaborations with many fellow researchers in Europe and elsewhere in the world, this is no longer the case.

Background to the project

My project began by contacting Museums and Archaeology units throughout the United Kingdom asking them to let me know if they had any previously concealed objects in their stores. The response was very good from many institutions and this formed the basis of my records on the topic. At that point my mind was, as a result of my upbringing and culture, broadly Anglo-centric and not really very concerned with what may be happening beyond UK shores.

My research received some considerable attention in the press which led to some exposure in the United States and Australia. As a result of that I became aware of the way that the British Empire had carried traditions around the world but I still was not thinking too carefully about all of the other European nations which contributed their culture and traditions to the USA in particular.

Having since made contact with people and read work from people involved in similar research in France, Finland, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, Italy and, of course, Romania, my thoughts about this topic have begun to be less coloured by national boundaries and far more focused on these practices as cultural phenomena which exist on a different level.

Setting the scene

Quite apart from the physical trials and tribulations of life in the past, the forces people were afraid of in the pre-modern era were what we now consider to be supernatural. They include but are not confined to: witchcraft, faeries, ghosts, demons, wizards and spirits of place. With the exception of ghosts these forces were largely unseen and were diagnosed after observed effects - such as illness or bad luck.

Sometimes people reached conclusions about what had happened to them in isolation, sometimes in consultation with their friends and

family, or they might have seen a cunning-man or wise-woman for help. Belief in these forces was so normal that they were really an intrinsic part of everyday life, not some niche or unusual experience as we in England consider them to be today. Of course, in some countries and regions beliefs such as these are still very much alive.

When people today (who, by and large, are not predisposed to fearing dark forces) find something odd within the walls of their home, their world-view can often dramatically change. Down fall the walls of cynicism and disbelief about the supernatural and in rushes a sense of vulnerability to supernatural forces. Many times people have asked me for help and advice about what to do with a shoe, a cat, or a witch-bottle which has turned up in their home during some alteration or renovation. The fear and concern they often have about it is palpable. Usually they are convinced that whatever the object is must be cared for properly and, ideally, not leave the house. I would suggest that this sense of vulnerability and awareness was perhaps a normal part of the pre-modern psyche and that magical house protection (along with a huge range of other personal charms and edible remedies) was born directly out of it.

Locations for charms

Thresholds, hearths and dead spaces were all thought of as needing protection and would have objects or even hoards of objects placed within them or marks carved onto them.

At the Fleece Inn, Bretforton, Worcestershire (England) right up until the 20th century all the gaps and cracks in the building were whitewashed, I think this was to make them visible so that dark forces were reluctant to hide in them. There were also three circles drawn in front of the fireplace to protect it (see fig. 1) – apparently circles have no corners for witches to hide in. I think this is also the most simple symbol for the sun which shines light into dark spaces.

Many of these objects I am going to discuss needed to undergo some kind of transition, including ‘death’, before they became active as counter-witchcraft devices.

Concealed Shoes

These are found all over the British Isles and indeed, all over the English speaking world. The person who first began systematically

studying concealed shoes was June Swann who was for a long time curator of the boot and shoe collection at Northampton Central Museum.

Shoes can be found singly such as an example found in the thatch of a cottage at Salford Priors, Warwickshire (fig. 2) or in large groups such as have been found at Little Morton Hall in Cheshire and in Sittingbourne in Kent. Concealed shoes are almost always well worn and 90% of them are single shoes.

Ralph Merrifield thought that there could be a connection with the unofficial English saint, John Schorne, who lived in North Marston, Buckinghamshire in the early 14th century and was reputed to have cast the devil into a boot². This legend appears to tie the function of spirit traps and shoes together, although it is thought that Schorne had some talent in curing ailments of the feet. The images related to Schorne usually show a devil being cast into a boot as in this pilgrim badge (fig. 3). The pilgrimage to John Schorne's shrine was for some 200 years the second most popular pilgrimage in Britain and as such images of him casting the devil into a boot were extremely widespread. This popularity would have made the association of shoes and protection common knowledge but did the practice come before the saint or did it start with him? Either way the practice received a huge boost for 200 years due to him.

By the time shoes were so worn they needed to be disposed of they would have been repaired several times and would have taken on the unique characteristics of the wearer's foot. Perhaps it was hoped that a spirit with evil intent entering the home via the chimney would mistake the shoe, which had strong sympathetic links with the owner, for the owner and plunge into it and become trapped? Or perhaps it just acted as a decoy and the malign force would attack it, release its spell and become spent.

Since I began my research correspondents have reported concealed shoes from all over Europe which leads me to think that his story has absorbed something of a Europe-wide tradition and, indeed, given it a boost through his popularity.

Witch-bottles

Witch-bottles first appear in the archaeological record in the middle of the 17th century, where usually the bottle chosen was a German Stoneware bottle known colloquially as a 'bellarmine'. The usual contents of these bottles are urine, iron pins or nails, human hair and in various

² *Ibidem*, p. 134-135.

bottles nail parings, thorns, fabric and small bones have been found. This example from Felmersham in Bedfordshire is typical (fig. 4).

In the last third of the 17th century several publications described recipes for boiling witch-bottles. Joseph Blagrave in his *Astrological Practice of Physick* of 1671 recommended 'stopping the victims urine in the bottle' with pins and then heating it, which would cause dreadful pain to the witch³. This sympathetic magic, whereby the witch was thought to suffer as the urine did, was clearly enhanced by the introduction of sharp pins and nails which presumably added to the suffering.

There was also Granvil's *Sadducismus Triumphatus* of the 1660s which told the story of a woman who was ailing due to suspected witchcraft. First a bottle was heated and when that proved unsuccessful, it was recommended that the bottle be buried, 'for that was sure to do the trick'⁴. The story continues that a wizard died nearby soon after and it is assumed in the story that the witch-bottle was successful in its counter-witchcraft.

The texts all talk about urine and pins and one of them says that 'anything which has a shew of torture about it' should be included. Some of the key contents of buried witch-bottles such as hair and nail parings are not mentioned in the texts regarding the boiling of witch-bottles. Contents have included bones, thorns, hair, fabric, nail parings, sharp pieces of wood, insects, and two of the bottles are thought to have contained small effigies. The pins and nails found in witch-bottles are usually deliberately bent to 'kill' them, releasing their ethereal counterparts.

Around half of all bottles were found beneath or near to the hearth. The next most common locations are beneath the floor and beneath the threshold. There is always considerable effort in the form of digging, bending nails and collecting ingredients for these bottles.

I think that people had a notion that a witch could send energy out (a spell) to come and find its victim – it would probably get into the house via the chimney so it was important to trap it there. The idea with a witch-bottle is that the energy is sniffing you out and finds a human-like bottle which smells of you, plunges into it and get impaled on the ghostly pins within.

³ Joseph Blagrave, *Astrological Practice of Physick*, London, 1671, passim.

⁴ Joseph Glanvill, *Sadducismus Triumphatus*, 1681, passim.

The tradition of concealing witch-bottles appears to have begun in the south-east, where the majority of the German stoneware bottles were imported, and fairly quickly spread west and north.

Correspondence with my European colleagues has proved useful in this case by showing that, thus far, this does appear to be a British phenomenon and is not encountered in the same way in other countries, although it is found in the USA.

Dried Cats

The example pictured in fig. 5 was discovered in the thatch of a 16th century cottage in Eckington, Worcestershire.

While it is fairly obvious that cats do crawl away to die, it is less well known that many dried cats are found with clear evidence that they have been placed intentionally in buildings. When cats have been discovered in roofs, inside chimneys and under floors, although it is possible that they did crawl there to die, wouldn't you be concerned about ridding your house of the smell? The fact is that several cats have been discovered positioned in what are considered unnatural positions and certainly in unlikely places.

Examples in England range from a cat found wired to a floor joist in Darlton, North Yorks. The skull of a cat was discovered concealed in brickwork of a chimney in Linton, Cambridgeshire. A dried cat was discovered in the roof of St Cuthberts Church, Clifton, Penrith between plaster and slates. A cat was discovered in a bricked up bread oven in Parracombe, Devon.

Speculation has, as with horse skulls, focused on the notion of foundation sacrifices for these animals. In short this is the idea that if a life is given to the building, or to the spirit of place, it will not take a life later on. The practice may be one peculiar to builders rather than the occupants of the house but more research is needed in order to clarify this.

My preferred explanation revolves around the perceived qualities of cats. They are very alert, often slipping out at night and at the same time as being beneficial in their role as vermin catchers. Perhaps it was hoped that in death the cat would be able to protect the home from more spiritual vermin such as the witches familiar. So here the cat transformed into spirit guardian by death.

Dried cats can be found throughout the UK and Ireland, examples have been found in the USA and Australia too. In Europe I have seen examples in Netherlands, France, Germany, Denmark, Finland and Italy.

Horse Skulls

Fig. 6 is my own horse skull, named Herbert. He was purchased from an antique store and was already very old when I acquired him.

Investigation into the meaning of concealed horse skulls has so far been limited to two explanations and authors have been divided over which is correct.

The main paper on concealed horse skulls concerns Sean Ó Súilleabháin's 1954 survey of traditions and beliefs concerning the practice in Ireland. Most of his respondents, having consulted in their localities, reported the belief that horse skulls were concealed under flagstones in front of the fire to make a better sound when people danced in the evenings. Ó Súilleabháin accepted that this was what was now thought but did not accept that this was the origin of the practice. He was convinced that the practice must have earlier origins and that the horse skulls were concealed as foundation sacrifices⁵.

In England many examples have been uncovered. For examples, at an Inn called the Portway at Staunton-on-Wye in Herefordshire, 24 horse skulls were found screwed to the underside of the floor, allegedly, 'to make the fiddle go better'. Many more horse skulls were also found beneath another house in the county at Peterchurch.

As far as I know, there has been little research into whether concealing horse skulls beneath the floor does actually improve the quality of sound in the room – although it is possible that it might. This theory of horse skulls improving the acoustics is widely noted and it may have a way of justifying the practice in periods when practices such as this were frowned upon – the Reformation rears its head as a possible candidate for when this happened but that is, it must be stressed, speculation.

Opposing this acoustic theory is the idea that horses were placed in houses as foundation sacrifices. Supporting this is the fact that many horse skulls are discovered in places which are not under the floor, and would not, therefore, provide any acoustic benefit. For example, in Essex a skull was found concealed by the fireplace between two walls. This could not possibly have served an acoustic function. Merrifield provides very good evidence from 1897 where workers building a chapel in Cambridgeshire required a horse's skull (acquired from a knackers yard) which they placed on a stake and poured beer over⁶.

⁵ Seán Ó Súilleabháin, 'Foundation Sacrifices', in *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, vol. 75, 1945, p. 49-50.

⁶ Ralph Merrifield, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

Again it seems likely that foundation sacrifices and the acoustic theory both play a part in explaining the practice of concealing horse skulls. As with cats, however, it is possible that the horse's benevolent role in human life may have led to it being seen as a 'protector' too.

Horse skulls have been found throughout Scandinavia and in the USA, animal remains have been found in many buildings throughout Europe but thus far the principal body of evidence is from the Northern part of Europe.

Protection Marks

Fig. 7 shows burn marks from Llancaiach Fawr Manor, Wales. These marks can be found upstairs, above the entrance porch, in a small attic space once used as a servants chamber. It has a huge number of burn marks on the main beam and door frame. There are over one hundred marks in this small space alone. The marks do not only cover the roof beams and door: there is a small draw bar which would have been used to lock the space from the inside, even the inside of the socket for this is scorched. If we consider that each of these marks was thought to be illuminating the spirit world we have here evidence of extreme fear and a veritable candelabra of protection marks.

Some of you will know that in 2014 John Dean and Nick Hill published their research into burn marks *Vernacular Architecture* Journal where they demonstrated that these burn marks are a deliberate act. To make a really deep one it is necessary to hold the flame directly against the wood for several minutes by which time a thick carbon layer has formed preventing further burning unless deliberately scraped away to allow a deeper mark to form⁷.

Having considered the issue of burn marks for roughly 18 years it is my contention that they were actually intended to be lights in the darkness, or candle lights on a magical or ghostly plane. In most of the practices I study there is an element of objects being transformed through death or ritual 'killing'. In the case of burn marks the surface of the beam is being destroyed, leaving a ghostly impression of the flame burning brightly on the other side.

There is plentiful folklore suggesting that evil likes to lurk in dark corners – these burn marks were the antidote to that. At Llancaiach

⁷ John Dean, Nick Hill, 'Burn Marks on Buildings: Accidental or Deliberate', in *Vernacular Architecture*, vol. 45, 2014, p. 1-15.

Fawr every original door frame and chimney lintel that remains is protected by at least one, though many have several.

In addition to all of these objects there were also a range of marks people could incise onto surfaces of all kinds whether it be wood, plaster or stone.

One of the most of these is the daisy wheel, also known as the hexafoil. This example is from Chelvey Court in Somerset (fig. 8). These are found quite commonly in medieval and later buildings but their origins go way back into prehistory with examples found in ancient Greece and even Pictish grave slabs. It's thought it was an ancient solar symbol which brings luck and good fortune – certainly in Romania it is still regarded in this way and is often found on gateposts and indeed, people still carve the symbol onto new buildings in some areas. They can also be integrated into a design such as on this door (fig. 9) which I was asked to look at for a television programme some years ago. This was from a farmhouse in Somerset, not far from Yeovil.

Another very commonly encountered symbol is the VV mark. Timothy Easton suggested that this symbol is thought to represent Virgo Virginum, or Virgin of Virgins⁸. It seems this mark was scratched or carved onto surfaces to invoke the protection of the Virgin Mary. This mark is probably the most likely to be found wherever you look for ritual marks. Upside down it looks like an M for 'Maria' and in this way bears close similarities with the Virgin Mary monogram found in much Christian symbolism. The example pictured (fig. 10) is from Prince Arthur's Chantry in Worcester Cathedral.

Conclusion

So, to conclude - in order to protect their homes from malign forces people would kill pins, utilise dead shoes, it appears they killed cats and horses too and made many marks in their buildings. Collaboration with my European colleagues is teaching me a great deal about how ancient and widespread these practices are and certainly helps me put the English material in its proper context.

I am always happy to learn of more examples of these practices via www.apotropaios.co.uk.

⁸ Timothy Easton, 'Ritual Marks on Historic Timber', in *Weald and Downland Open Air Museum Magazine*, Spring, 1999, p. 22-30.

ILLUSTRATIONS



Fig. 1. Circles at the Fleece, Bretforton, Worcestershire



Fig. 2. Salford Priors shoe, Warwickshire



Fig. 3. John Schorne pilgrim badge



Fig. 4. Felmersham witch-bottle, Bedfordshire

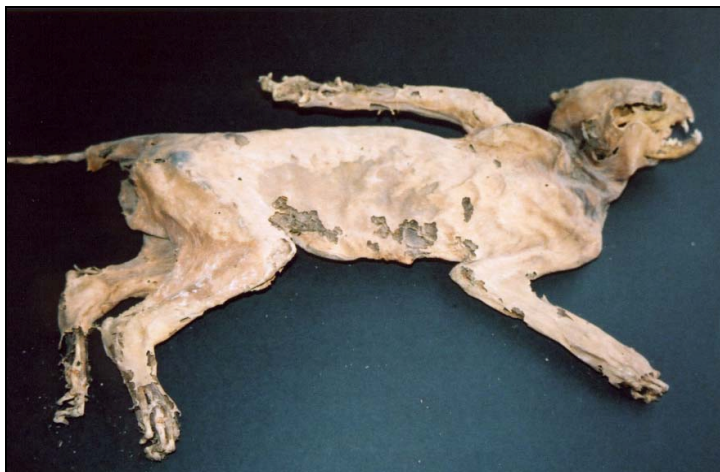


Fig. 5. Eckington cat, Worcestershire



Fig. 6. Horse skull



Fig. 7. Llancaiach Fawr Manor burn marks, South Wales

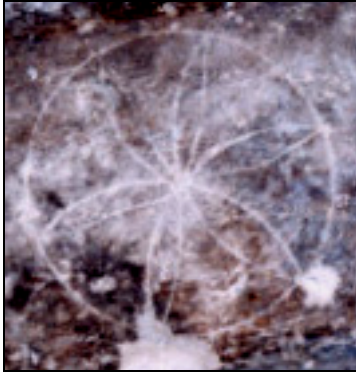


Fig. 8. Daisy wheel or hexafoil from Chelvey Court, Somerset



Fig. 9. Daisy door from near Yeovil, Somerset



Fig. 10. VV marks from Prince Arthur's Chantry, Worcester Cathedral