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# The Materiality of Magic

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# The Materiality of Magic

*An artefactual investigation into  
ritual practices and popular beliefs*

edited by

Ceri Houlbrook & Natalie Armitage

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# Domestic magic and the walking dead in medieval England: A diachronic approach

*Stephen Gordon*

## **Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to explore the ways in which the medieval household was protected against supernatural agents, specifically the walking dead ('revenants'). The fear that the dead could rise and wreak havoc on the living was by no means a minority concern in the High and Late Middle Ages (Caciola 1996). Documentary sources, such as William of Newburgh's *Historia Rerum Anglicarum* (c. 1198), provide tangible evidence for the belief in corporeal ghosts. William's statement 'were I to write down all the instances of this kind which I have ascertained to have befallen in our times, the undertaking would be beyond measure laborious and troublesome' is certainly suggestive of the local *mentalité* concerning the walking dead (Book V, chapter 24 [hereafter written as V.24]). Archaeological studies into 'bad' death and the fear of the corpse have mostly focused on apotropaic strategies that occurred at the grave-site, such as staking, the weighting of the body, cremation, and decapitation (Gilchrist and Sloane 2005; Murphy 2008; Reynolds 2009; Gordon 2014). However, it is important to note that a great many revenant encounters occurred at home or in the village streets. The aim of this chapter, then, is to show that techniques for allaying the dead can also be discerned in *domestic* contexts, and that apotropaic devices were an integral (though often overlooked) component of the medieval house. Evidence for household protection in this period is often obscured by the scarcity of data from deserted medieval villages. The source material is, at first glance, limited. However, adhering to the methodological standpoint that effective strategies could circulate in the local worldview until such time habitual changes made the practice impossible, I will explore whether Early Modern devices, such as witch-posts and threshold deposits, can be used to identify similar patterns of protection in the High and Late Middle Ages. An investigation into the archaeology of domestic magic can yield much information about how eschatological concerns and social traumas – made manifest in the form of the revenant – affected the rhythms of daily life in this period.

The first part of this investigation will chart some of the more overt documentary examples of the infiltration of the household by the walking dead, with a specific focus

on the *Chronicle of Lanercost* (c. 1340s), and the collection of ghost stories transcribed in c. 1400 by an anonymous monk from Byland Abbey (Maxwell 1913; Grant 1924). Following a brief outline of my methodology and the benefits of conducting interdisciplinary, diachronic research, the chapter will culminate in a review of the practices that, I contend, belong to the same cultural ‘text’ – the same pool of habits and beliefs – as the written sources and later archaeological evidence (Stock 1990). Hitherto ambiguous residues from Nevern Castle (Pembrokeshire) and the villages of West Hartburn (Northumberland), Gombledon (Wiltshire), Upton (Gloucestershire), and Thuxton (Norfolk) will be re-analysed using this wider contextual information. Excavation reports from deserted medieval villages provide much more abundant datasets than those from civic sites and, as such, this paper will necessarily operate as an example-led survey of rural case studies (Beresford and Hurst 1971). An examination of the use of protective magic in urban contexts is beyond the remit of the current investigation. I will conclude by discussing how the placement of apotropaic devices in the liminal (‘between’) space of the household was a long-lived habitual response to the threat of malign, supernatural agents, and that the base ‘rhetoric’ for such practices finds expression in the more archaeologically attestable evidence from the 16th and 17th centuries.

### **Revenants and the household: the documentary evidence**

Evidence for the belief in the walking dead is spread thinly across the extant documentary sources. Although authorial intention necessarily effects how and why the tales of revenant activity were transcribed, saints’ lives (*vita*), histories, confessionals and preachers’ manuals each contain references to the havoc wrought by ambulatory corpses and the strategies used to keep them under control (Caciola 1996; Watkins 2007, 185–193). The *Chronicle of Lanercost* is one of the most evocative sources where the danger posed to the architecture of the household is concerned. The *Chronicle* – an interpolation of a Franciscan chronicle by an anonymous canon from Lanercost Priory, Cumbria – describes events that occurred in northern England and Scotland between 1201 and 1346 (Little 1916). One *exemplum* describes how, in 1296 in Paisley, west Scotland, a Benedictine monk was excommunicated on account of ‘certain acts of sacrilege committed in his own monastery.’ The monk died not long after. However, after death, his corpse took to rising from the grave, and started attacking the household of a local Knight, Sir Duncan de Insula. It was said that the revenant used to wander the streets of the village, and ‘settle on the highest parts of the dwellings and store houses’. Whenever the townsfolk tried to stab or shoot the monk’s corpse, the swords and arrows that were thrust into its body immediately turned to ashes. Equally, those who tried to physically restrain it as it roamed the streets were beaten to a bloody pulp. One evening,

when Sir Duncan was sitting with his household around the hearth, the dead monk suddenly appeared and started attacking Duncan and his family. The knight's son tried to fight off the revenant, but he was killed by the creature. As befitting the moralistic function of medieval historiography, the *exemplum* concludes with the statement that this was a just demise for someone who was rumoured to have been complicit in the monk's sins (Maxwell 1913, 118–119; Bynum 1997, 22). The interior space of the household was unable to provide protection.

The 12 Byland Abbey ghost stories, meanwhile, were transcribed on blank leaves in a 12th-century manuscript (BL Royal 15 A. XX) in the years following the death of Richard II. The manuscript contained several works of Cicero and a collection of theological tracts. The codicological placement of the stories indicates that they were not used for preaching or pedagogical purposes. The lack of any overt didacticism and the fact that the majority of the encounters occur within the vicinity of Byland suggests that the monk was recording local gossip. As the monk himself stated, '*dictur, referent aliqui*' (Schmitt 1998, 142–143). The third tale, which describes the post-mortem wanderings of a man named Robert from the village of Kilburn, North Yorkshire, paints an especially vivid picture of the domestic context of revenant encounters. According to the monk, 'Robert the younger died and was buried in a churchyard, but he had a habit of leaving his grave by night and disturbing and frightening the villagers. And the dogs of the village used to follow him and bark loudly.' One night, whilst Robert wandered through the village and attempted to gain entry to houses via windows and doorways, a group of young men decided that they needed to put an end to his unwanted visitations. They confronted the corpse in the churchyard, where, after a fierce struggle, a certain Robert Foxton pinned it to a 'kirkstile' and called for the assistance of a priest. Once conjured, the revenant confessed to having taken part in a number of 'offences'. After gaining absolution for his sins, Robert walked no more (Grant 1925, 369–370).

The 12th-century sources provide further evidence that the restless dead were compelled to return to the places they had known in life. As with the *Chronicle of Lanercost* extract, these narratives served a moralistic or critical function (Bartlett 2002, 199; Otter 1996, 103). Geoffrey of Burton's *Life and Miracles of St Modwenna* (c. 1140s) notes that the corpses of two peasants who had died in sin wandered through streets of Drakelow Burton-upon-Trent, 'bang[ing] on the walls of the houses and shouting, "Move, quickly, move! Get going! Come!"', after which the inhabitants of the targeted homes succumbed to illness and death (Bartlett 2002, 196–197). Similarly, the 'Berwick Ghost' narrative from William of Newburgh's *Historia Rerum Anglicarum* describes how the eponymous corpse was 'borne hither and thither through the town's streets', corrupting the atmosphere as it went (V.23). Disease was not the only weapon in the revenant's arsenal. The *Historia* contains an account of a corpse that 'entered the bed where his [widow] was reposing; he not only terrified her on awaking, but nearly crushed

her by the insupportable weight of his body' (V.22). A similar story was reported by a young woman from Melrose who, William says, was plagued by nightly visits from her deceased paramour – a priest (V.24). Finally, Walter Map's satire on courtly life, the *De Nugis Curialium* (c. 1182), refers to a knight from Northumberland who, fearing the machinations of the devil, prevented the corpse of his recently-deceased father ('clad in a foul burial shroud') from crossing over the main threshold of his house (James 1983, 115).

These narratives reveal quite a lot of incidental details about the local conception of the walking dead (Caciola 1996, 10). Revenant belief was not restricted to a particular geographical area. Secondly, it is noticeable that domestic architecture – the hearth, the bedroom, the doorway, the rooftop – features just as prominently as the gravesite in narratives of this type. Thirdly, it is intriguing to note how, in the Byland narrative, the revenant of Robert Kilburn seems to have been prevented from crossing certain thresholds, whereas the Benedictine monk (*Lancercost*) and the Buckingham Ghost (*Historia*) were able to gain access to the house's interior. If, as William of Newburgh notes, revenant attacks 'had often befallen in England' (V.22), and if domestic buildings could be the focus of an evil agent's wrath, then it is feasible that permanent (or semi-permanent) amuletic devices were incorporated into the architecture of the house itself. However, the dearth of material evidence, and the propensity to record anomalous objects as infill, has obscured previous attempts to define the archaeology of domestic ghost/revenant belief (Gilchrist 2008, 124). To extract meaning from the data requires an analysis of the context of the find, and an understanding of how the object was used – and *perceived* – in different social arenas. If the remains of medieval houses betray anything of the beliefs mentioned in the written texts, it is through a close reading of the material that a protective device can be distinguished from mere detritus. How, then, do we do this?

## Methodology

To build upon the tenets of practice theory, I believe that the strategies used to allay malign agents in the Early Modern period (where the evidence for household protection is a lot more abundant) can provide a pattern for understanding how revenants were assuaged in the Middle Ages. The nature, or name, of the intruder may have changed, but the practice, the apotropaic response, was able to persevere until such time the witch, revenant, ghost or demon was no longer seen as an everyday, tangible threat. This is not to suggest that *exact* meanings were maintained over time, only that the incorporation of protective devices into the household was an act which, due to architectural and cognitive constraints, could generate only a limited number of practical outcomes (De Certeau 1984; Stones 2005). The deeply-held association between dangerous liminal



spaces (thresholds) and dangerous liminal agents (the supernatural entity) structured the dialogues that the social actor – the householder – shared with his or her environs (Van Gennep 1960; Turner 1967). Although it is true that doctrinal changes following the Reformation (for example, the rejection of purgatory and relic culture) may have influenced the form and function of popular piety, it has been argued that the incremental nature of the 16th-century reform led to less provocative practices, such as informal, private custom, being tacitly ignored by the Church and state (Duffy, 1992; Hutton 1995, 113–114; Marshall 2003, 56). Similarly, a sermon from 1645, written during Puritanical efforts to regulate such practices, illustrates the difficulty of imposing new social structures onto traditional modes of living, with the declaration that ‘it is indeed a very hard thing to take men off from their religious usages [...] people will be astonished if an old custom be denied them’ (Durstun 1996, 233). Phenomena dating to the 16th century, such as witch-posts, ritual marks, and special deposits are variations of the same need to bind the evil agent (Natrass 1956; Meeson 2005; Eastop 2006). Substitute the term ‘witch’ for ‘ghost’; ‘demon’ for ‘revenant’, and the social logic for the deposition of items in walls, or the carving of symbols on doors, is just as apparent. The need to fortify liminal spaces against outside agents was a universal concern. Practices could persevere, even if the specific meanings behind the actions did not. In short, these later phenomena did not emerge in a vacuum; the ‘rhetoric’ of household protection can be traced back across the (arbitrary) divide between the post-medieval and medieval periods, where there existed similar fears about infiltration. As James Simpson notes, the tendency of the discipline of Medieval Studies to demark and categorise history neglects the value of examining the diachronic – ‘across time’ – connections between similar datasets (Simpson 2007).

It is unfortunate, therefore, that excavation reports for deserted medieval settlements pay scant attention to the possible apotropaic elements in peasant or knightly households (Beresford and Hurst 1971). Scholarship on the subject has tended to focus on roof construction, the division of internal space and the economics of domestic life, neglecting to investigate whether local religious belief was ever made manifest in the structure of the building itself (Chapelot and Fossier 1985; Dyer 1986; Wrathmell 1989; Grenville 1997). Admittedly, this discrepancy may have something to do with the lack of available evidence: organic material is perishable; small items may be lost; evidence for the ritual inscription of timber frames is difficult to determine if the archaeologist is confronted with little more than a padstone foundation. The logistical issues involved in the excavation of deserted medieval villages also contribute to the paucity of evidence, with earthwork analysis proving a more cost-effective form of investigation (Wrathmell 1994, 187). Similar difficulties arise when surveying the remains of urban households: centuries of habitation and renovation have obscured, or even destroyed, the evidence for domestic magic. However, with reference to oral history, written texts, and the artefactual

evidence from the Early Modern period, it may indeed be possible to extrapolate the methods by which medieval communities fortified their houses against the undead.

### **The medieval longhouse: some considerations**

Before an attempt can be made to define the location of apotropaic devices in medieval households, the characteristics of the house itself must first be given mention. Defining the form, function and permanency of domestic buildings in the High and Late Middle Ages has been the subject of much debate in recent years (Grenville 1997, 120–156). Examples of the most common type of dwelling, the ‘longhouse’, can be found across the British Isles, the basic design of which persisted into the Early Modern period and beyond. In general, a longhouse can be defined as a rectangular building subdivided by a cross-passage into a series of domestic and non-domestic spaces (Austin 1985, 76). Although the number of bays varied with regard to the prosperity, size or function of the household, longhouses generally adhered to a tripartite formula, with the non-domestic space (the ‘lower’ end) being used for storage, low-level industry, or the accommodation of livestock (Hanawalt 1986, 32–35). A smaller, private chamber, which may have functioned as a bedroom, was often subdivided from the communal living area, itself identifiable by the presence of cooking pits, charcoal, and hearth stones. The pattern of internal postholes suggests a loft or solar was sometimes constructed above the ‘inner’ room in order to provide space for an extended family.

Access to the household’s interior was provided by doorways on opposite sides of the central cross-passage, allowing for direct entrance to the domestic and non-domestic spaces from the outside. The ‘lower’ end of the longhouse was often used as a byre, something which can be archaeologically attested by the presence of tethering rings, animal waste, and a drainage system along the longitudinal axis. The conversion of the longhouse into a fully domestic space (farmhouse) and the separation of the byre (barn) into a separate building, often at a perpendicular angle to the farmhouse, began to occur in the 13th and 14th centuries; a reflection of the increased socio-economic status of certain peasant households. House 3 from Gomeldon, Wiltshire, and Building 1 from Thuxton, Norfolk, are notable examples of prosperous family units that converted their longhouses into farmsteads (Musty 1986; Butler and Wade-Martins 1989).

The layout of the medieval house may have undergone changes over time and differed from region to region, village to village, but the schema for constructing a dwelling which had private, public and industrial spaces could be made manifest in only a few essential forms. Prevailing social structures, traditions of construction, environmental and economic constraints, issues of space, and the type of material at a builder’s disposal mitigated the possibilities for household design. The width of the bays in jointed-cruck houses (that is, houses constructed from curved oak timbers that connected at the apex)

was dictated by the size of the tree from which the frames were carved. For post-truss and base-cruck superstructures, the properties of the oak timbers meant that there were only a few effective techniques for solving the problem of compression while ensuring that the living space was not impeded by load-bearing posts. As Frederick Charles suggests, local building traditions were incredibly long-lasting. Methods of construction did not fall into disuse unless changing social or economic factors necessitated a reconsideration of a household's 'grammar' (Charles 1967, 4). New building techniques, such as the development of dwarf walls and padstones, made less economical practices, such as earthfast foundations, redundant (Wrathmell 1989, 252). The possibilities afforded by constructing a house from stone instead of timber frames led to innovations in the use of internal space. The 'great rebuilding' of the 16th century is illustrative of this point (Johnson 1993). The villages of West Hartburn (Northumberland), Upton (Gloucestershire) and Thuxton (Norfolk) may well have been separated by considerable geographical distances, but the socio-economic situation of the inhabitants and the skill-sets of the local carpenters were almost identical. It is unsurprising to find that rural peasant houses were so similar in terms of size, shape and method of construction. Such similarities may also relate to the location – and type – of apotropaic devices used by the inhabitants.

Certain conclusions can be made: the peasant house contained two major thresholds (the doorways) and a number of minor thresholds (the vent for the hearth smoke and the partitions between the byre and the living areas); inner chambers were often segregated from the main domestic space; stone was seldom used as a building material, save for padstones and dwarf walls. As the cases reports from the Eyre and coroners' rolls indicate, doorways, windows and the wattle/daub cladding were vulnerable to attack by thieves and murderers (see Gross 1896, 10, 24; Hunnisett 1961, 116). Domestic thresholds, then, represented a series of crisis points – liminal spaces that were at the mercy of forces beyond the ability of the householders to control. These 'forces' need not only refer to human agents: revenant attacks, nightmares and hexes provided metaphysical analogues to the threats presented by a discontented neighbour. Whether corporeal or incorporeal, ghosts existed on the very edge of natural law and could act in ways that were beyond the capabilities of an everyday felon. The propensity of the Clydesdale revenant to 'settle on the highest part of dwellings' and its sudden appearance 'in the midst' of Sir Duncan's household suggests that the hearth and smoke vents were especially vulnerable to infiltration; nocturnal assaults could occur even if the doors and windows were locked (Maxwell 1913, 119).

Indeed, as the extracts at the beginning of this chapter illustrate, the major and minor thresholds were the main focus of the revenant's wrath. Although doors may have afforded some level of protection (see the Robert of Kilburn narrative, for instance), this was in no way guaranteed. Very rarely did a revenant's pestilence respect the physical

boundary of the house, as the *Chronicle of Lanercost* and *Life of St Modwenna exempla* can attest (Bartlett 2002, 197). Other forms of protection were needed. With the ‘great rebuilding’ of the late 16th and early 17th centuries leading to drastic, and permanent, changes to the grammar of the household (to be discussed in more detail, below), it is not surprising that the extant evidence for threshold magic dates mainly to the Early Modern period (Hoskins 1953; Johnson 1993). As stated above, this evidence will be used as a template – a ‘pattern’ – for understanding how the fear of supernatural invasion was articulated in earlier iterations of the house. The remaining part of this chapter will be devoted to an evaluation of two of the most overt and long-lasting types of apotropaic object to be discovered in insular contexts: ritual marks and threshold deposits.

### **Medieval revenants and the household: the archaeological evidence**

#### ***Ritual marks: from ‘cross-stone’ to ‘witch-post’?***

A ‘witch-post’ is a colloquial name for an architectural device that can be discerned in a number of post-medieval households. Found primarily in the Northumberland area, these posts comprise of rowan or ash timbers incised with saltire crosses and cross-etched designs. The posts were usually placed under load-bearing cross-beams and used to defend the chimney from witches lest, by crossing over the hearth, they ‘gain[ed] power over the house’ (Natrass 1956, 138). A witch-post from East End Cottage, Egton, currently archived in Whitby Museum, shows how the saltire was typically incised in the upper part of the timber (Fig. 4.1). An example in its original context can be found at Stagend longhouse in Danby, North Yorkshire (*c.* 1600), where a saltire-incised support post was used to demark and protect the main living area (Natrass 1956, 139). A related practice, the incision of ritual marks directly into rafters, lintels, fireplaces and door frames, seems to have had a similar function. Interlaced ‘M’ and ‘R’ designs (symbolising ‘Mary’ and ‘Regina’), conjoined ‘Vs’ (meaning the ‘Virgin of Virgins’), ‘daisy wheels’, and the ‘chi-ro’ (representing the first and second letters of Christ’s name in Greek) are among the many symbols found in Early Modern cottages that can be distinguished from the utilitarian ‘plumb and level’ marks used in the erection of the building (Easton 1999; Meeson 2005). Indeed, the presence of conjoined ‘V’ symbols in the entrance to Goatchurch Cavern, Somerset (*c.* 1500) suggests that apotropaic habits could transfer from one context (wood) to another (stone), and that such symbols were used specifically to fortify thresholds (Binding and Wilson 2004, 120; Fig. 4.1).

The nature of the evidence from deserted medieval villages is such that the probability of discovering incised timbers is remote. Nonetheless, if habits of belief prevail over time, and if the external conditions of village life allowed for the circulation of traditional ‘ways of doing’ within the mental schemas of the community, then the ‘rhetoric’ of

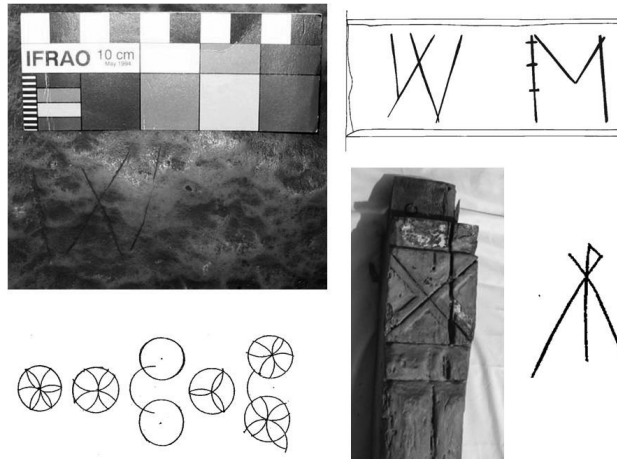


Fig. 4.1. *Top left*: conjoined 'V' from Goatchurch Cavern, Somerset, c. 1500s (from Binding and Wilson 2004); *top right*: conjoined 'V' and Marion symbol from 69 Bridge Street, Chester, c. 1600s (from Meeson 2005 © Maney Publishing, used with permission); *middle*: witch-post from East End Cottage, Egton, c. 1600–1700s (Source: Whitby Museum, used with permission); *mid-right*: 'chi-ro' from Mill Farm, Worlingworth, c. late 1600s (Source: Weald and Downland Open Air Museum, used with permission); *bottom left*: a selection of 'daisy wheels' from Suffolk, c. 1700 (Source: Weald and Downland Open Air Museum, used with permission)

protecting the household from supernatural agents – be it a devil, revenant or witch – can be expected to persevere, in whatever amended form (Meeson 2005, 45). Although Alan Pallister and Stuart Wrathmell are correct to note that 'the traditions exemplified by the [witch-posts] in these houses could well have carried through from earlier centuries, from which time no houses now remain', this is not to deny the possibility of finding expressions of this practice in different media and contexts (Pallister and Wrathmell 1990, 67). Indeed, the presence of conjoined 'V' inscriptions in Goatchurch Cavern, mentioned above, suggests that the carving of ritual marks in stone was not an unknown practice. The use of stone in this manner is not restricted to the later Middle Ages: masons' marks relating to the construction of Lanercost Priory (c. 1200) can still be discerned in the north transept, Lady Chapel, and presbytery. The presence of a pentangle on the inner wall of the refectory undercroft is a strong indicator that some of the marks were designed to be affective (Whitworth 1998, 142).

And yet, prevailing scholarship suggests that the suppression of Catholicism during the Reformation led to *material* expressions of devotion being transferred to the private sphere, with the intimation that ritual marks were a 16th-century innovation borne out of changing social and religious structures. Although it is not the remit of this paper to discuss the history of popular piety and domestic magic (see, for example, Flint 1991; Fanger 1999; Kieckhefer 2000), it should be stressed that cultic objects, such as those used in the veneration of the Virgin Mary, had been circulating in the British Isles since

at least the Anglo-Saxon period, with an upsurge in devotion becoming particularly apparent during the 12th century. Bernard of Clairvaux's famous sermon, in which he stresses that 'if in danger [...] call upon Mary [...] if she protects you, you need not fear', provides an illustration of the 12th-century belief in the efficacy of prayer (Graef 1964, 235–237). For sermons to be effective they needed to engage the expectations of the audience who, it can be inferred, were well aware of the physical and metaphysical benefits of divine protection. The prevalence of relics, charms, amulets and shrines dating to the 12th and 13th centuries confirms that material expressions of saints' cults – and affective devices in general – were widespread in the High Middle Ages. Medical miscellanies from the era contain numerous examples of the use of magical objects, material prayers and spoken incantations to cure and 'bind' diseases, the ultimate cause of which was the devil (Olsan 2003). Prayer (whether orally performed or materially manifested), physical wellbeing and spiritual fortification were inextricably linked (Gordon 2014).

Thus, the recently discovered slates from Nevern Castle, Pembrokeshire, dating to around 1180, are not anomalous, but localised, unsophisticated iterations of the pervading cultural text (Stock 1990; Caple 2012). These slates were discovered under the threshold of the southern gatehouse and are inscribed with saltires, daisy wheels, chi-ros, and conjoined 'M' and 'V' motifs. Given that these designs served no utilitarian purpose, were located in liminal space, and had been hidden from view, Chris Caple's theory that they were inscribed by workmen in order to 'ward off evil from the castle' is feasible (Caple, pers. comm.). The masons who made these inscriptions were neither clergy nor gentry, suggesting that the knowledge (and use) of protective magic extended to all levels of medieval society. The consensus that ritual marks were an Early Modern phenomenon thus needs to be reassessed. Bob Meeson is perhaps correct in inferring that ritual marks represent a 'palimpsest', a habitual practice, upon which new, innovative meanings (structured by the identity of the attacking agent) were inscribed (Meeson 2005, 42). It is plausible that the incisions found on 17th-century timbers represented some of the 'old customs' that rural communities were reluctant to dismiss, a 'rhetoric' for protecting the threshold that had circulated in the local worldview since at least the 1180s (Durston 1996, 233). An example of the use of such devices in domestic contexts can be found in House D from the medieval village of West Hartburn, Northumberland.

Measuring 14.7 m in length and 4.3 m in width, House D was a typical longhouse, with the interior divided crossways into a domestic and non-domestic space (Fig. 4.2). During the final phase of occupation the north doorway was sealed and the south doorway extended to allow for easier access to the industrial area/byre (Pallister and Wrathmell 1990, 64). Excavations on the domestic side of the house revealed a 'cross-stone' which, in light of the contextual and morphological similarities that it shares with the 17th-century witch-post and Nevern Castle slates, suggests that it may also have



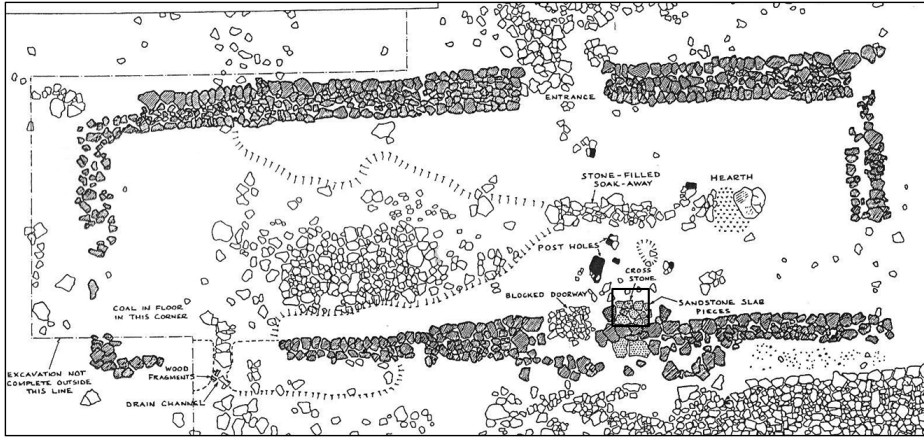


Fig. 4.2. Plan of West Hartburn House D (Source: Architectural and Archaeological Society of Durham and Northumberland, used with permission)

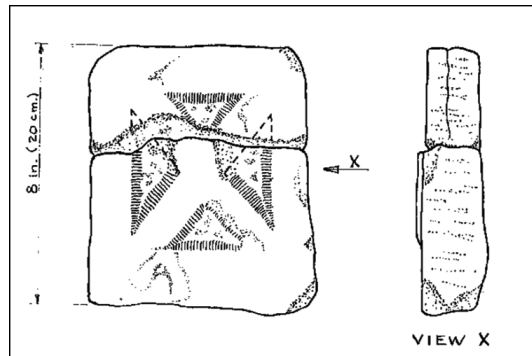


Fig. 4.3. Detail of 'cross stone' (Source: Architectural and Archaeological Society of Durham and Northumberland, used with permission)

functioned as a bind for supernatural agents (Fig. 4.3). The sandstone slab, measuring 20 cm across and inscribed with a saltire, was discovered against the north wall on the longitudinal axis and was incorporated into the door-jamb of the blocked northern threshold. With the reorganisation of the interior space occurring sometime before the 16th century – when the house was finally abandoned – the cross-stone would seem to date to an earlier period of occupation (*c.* 1150–1350). As mentioned above, it was suggested by the excavators that the stone was an early manifestation of a witch-post (Pallister and Wrathmell 1990, 67). However, it can be argued that its function (and, indeed, that of the Nevern Castle slates) was to protect the household from a different kind of intruder. As Gillian Bennett demonstrates, the identity of the ghost, demon and witch became altogether conflated following the rejection of Purgatory (Bennett 1986).

Witches did not inspire the same level of fear in the High Middle Ages as they did in later centuries when, following the gradual demonisation of folk magic, their role as agents of evil became more defined (Bailey 2001, 986; Jones and Zell 2005, 49). The malefic characteristics of the 16th- and 17th-century ‘witch’ were, in part, previously embodied by the revenant. What we now know as a ‘witch-post’ may have been used to curtail the advance of violent and wayward corpses. In this way a narrative can be constructed whereby Robert of Kilburn’s corpse was prevented from entering certain houses due to the presence of *material prayers* (that is, cross-stones or cross-stone analogues) in the threshold. The village of Kilburn is in close enough proximity to Northumberland (the location of the witch-posts and West Hartburn) to suggest that this was a long-lived, Northern practice.

### **Threshold deposits**

As previously discussed, the 17th century witnessed the ‘great rebuilding’ of peasant houses. Due to an increase in prosperity, home owners were able to refurbish their homes using more expensive and durable materials. Wattle and daub superstructures and hearth vents were gradually replaced by stone walls and chimney stacks, leading to more sophisticated – and segregated – use of the internal spaces. Indeed, William Harrison’s *Descriptions of England* (c. 1577) notes that houses ‘such as be lately builded are commonly of either brick or hard stone or both’ and that a ‘multitude of chimneys’ had arisen in even the humblest of villages (Harrison 1968 [1577], 200–201). The relocation of the byre to a secondary building, and the ability to provide upper floors, basements and attic space, meant an increase in the number of thresholds through which a supernatural agent could enter. A ‘spiritual midden’ is the term employed by modern scholarship to denote objects that were placed in these vulnerable locations. Clothing, shoes and, indeed, the corpses of house cats, are just some of the objects found beneath floorboards or in chimney stacks (Howard 1951, 149; Eastop 2006, 241). One such device, the ‘witch-bottle’, contained numerous items – including urine, nails, pins, cloth and broken glass – and was usually placed under the main threshold of the house (Merrifield 1955). The aim of the bottle was to bind and protect the household from ‘languishment’ brought on by a witch.

The following extract from Joseph Glanvill’s *Saducismus Triumphatus* (1681) records the earliest extant account of the apotropaic use of witch-bottles. An ostensible retelling of an event that occurred c. 1620–1640, the narrative details the plight of the wife of a Suffolk landlord, who was being afflicted by ‘a dead spright [...] in the shape of a bird [that would not let her enjoy] her natural rest.’ A cunning man told the couple that the hex could be broken if a bottle containing nails, pins and the wife’s urine was placed on an open fire. When this action failed to break the spell, the landlord was advised to:



Take your wife's urine as before, and cork it in a bottle with nails, pins and needles, and bury it in the earth. The man did accordingly. And his wife began to mend sensibly, and in a competent time was finely well recovered. But [a woman from a nearby village] claimed that they had killed her husband. They understood by her that the husband was a wizard and had bewitched this man's wife, and that this counter-practice prescribed by the old man, which saved the man's wife from languishment, was the death of that wizard that had bewitched her. (205–208).

Given the aims and intentions of *Sadducisimus Triumphatus* (that is, as a means of refuting Atheism and reinforcing the belief in the divine), it is unlikely that the tale, as recounted by Glanvill, is an accurate reflection of what truly happened to the landlord and his wife (Bath and Newton 2006, 5). As Bennett notes, 'Glanvill's group would neither be offered nor accept material that did not fit their preconceptions. [The stories] may not have been representative of the "folk" at large' (Bennett 1986, 11). However, this is not to suggest that evidence for popular belief cannot be extrapolated from some of the incidental details in the passage (Caciola 1996, 10). Firstly, it is noticeable that the symptoms of the hex – the lack of natural rest and 'languishment' – are somatically similar to a nocturnal assault by a revenant (V.22; Barber 1988, 12). Secondly, recourse to the knowledge of a 'cunning man' confirms that, on occasion, low-level preventative measures such as witch-posts were unable to quell the supernatural agent and that more sophisticated devices were needed. The techniques at the cunning man's disposal were certainly efficacious and, given that the Reformist doctrine was ill-equipped to deal with the practical fallout of *maleficarum*, may have circulated in the body of oral knowledge for generations (Thomas 1991, 304–305). Thirdly, the belief that nails and needles could inhibit the agency of the witch may bear some relation to their function in deviant burials as 'stakes' (Barber 1988, 52). The witch-bottle unearthed from the threshold of the *Plough Inn* in King's Street, King's Lynn (c. 1620s), for example, contained a felt heart that had been 'punctured' by pins, something which may account for the strands of decayed cloth found in less well preserved examples (Merrifield 1955, 201; Fig. 4.4). Medieval and post-medieval revenant narratives are explicit on the need to puncture the heart – the seat of vitality in the body – as a means of preventing the corpse from rising (Barber 1988, 5). William of Newburgh's *Historia*, for example, recounts how two brothers from the town of Anantis [Alnwick] had to cut and remove the revenant's heart with a spade before they could burn the corpse (V.24). Similarly, the *Life and Miracles of St. Modwenna* describes how:

[The townsfolk] cut off the men's heads and placed them in the grave between their legs, tore out their hearts from their corpses, and covered the bodies with earth again. They brought the hearts to the place called *Dodecrosseforal/Dodefreseford* and there burned them from morning until evening. (Bartlett 2002, 197)

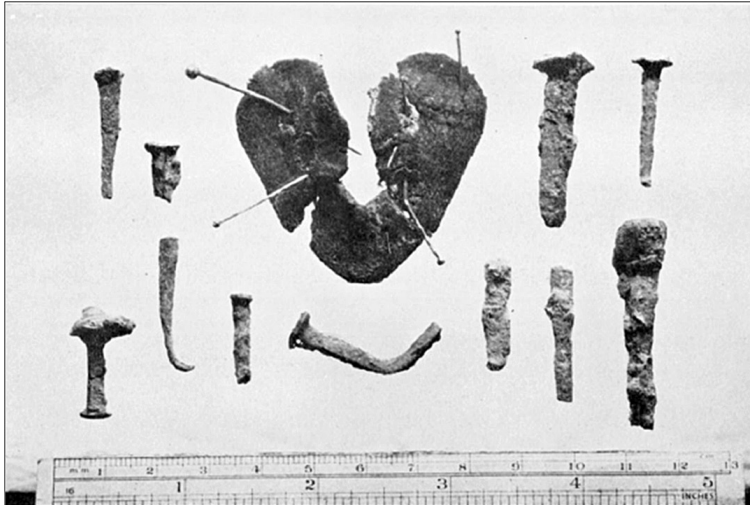


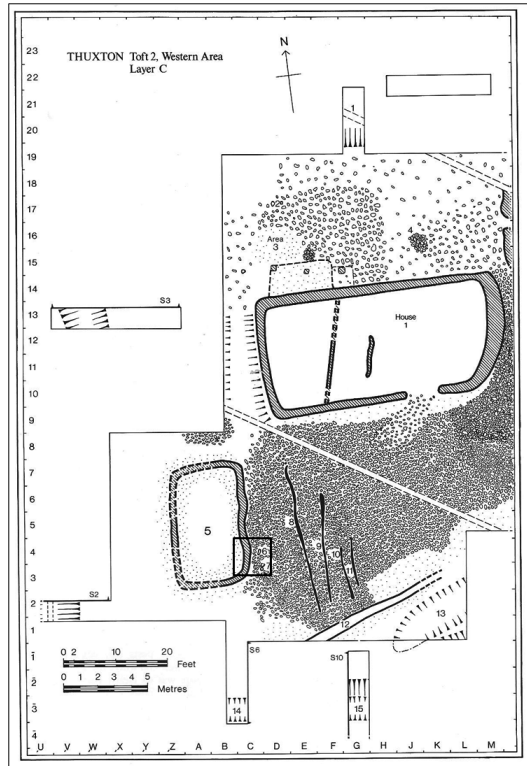
Fig. 4.4. Contents of witch bottle from *Plough Inn*, King's Lynn, c. 1620s (from Merrifield 1955, by permission of The Folklore Society)

In Glanvill's narrative, the habit of using sharp implements to assuage supernatural assailants seems to have transferred from one context (the grave) to another (the witch-bottle), an innovation of practice which survived the ambiguation of the intruder. The cunning man's declaration that the evil agent was a 'dead spright' invites the possibility that the fear of *maleficarum*, witchcraft, had synthesised with the underlying cultural belief in the restless dead. Changes to religious doctrine and the grammar of the household may well have impacted on the 'rhetoric' of deposition over time, but the mental pattern that decided the response (the threshold deposit) to the cause (the supernatural attack) can be traced back to earlier periods in history.

With this in mind, an example of medieval threshold magic can perhaps be discerned in house AA-AC from the village of Upton, Gloucestershire (c. 1100s–1300s). Originating as a longhouse, the dwelling appears to have undergone significant alterations in the 13th century, with the separation of the farmhouse (AC) from the animal enclosure (AA) and the creation of an intervening courtyard (AB). A canine burial and vertically-indented knife were discovered in the vicinity of house AC's eastern doorway (Hilton and Rahtz 1966, 103). The fact that the burial was situated almost exactly on the threshold, and that care had been taken to imbed the knife *vertically* into the ground – perhaps as an iteration of 'staking' – suggests that it was an intentional, rather than expedient, deposit.

A 14th-century farmstead from the deserted village of Thuxton, Norfolk, may also reveal evidence of protective threshold magic (Butler and Wade-Martins 1989). Building 5 from period III (c. 1380s) was poorly preserved, with little evidence for internal partitioning, drainage systems or foundations. Its proximity to the domestic

Fig. 4.5. Horse skulls from the threshold of Thuxton building 5 (Source: Historic Environment Service, Norfolk, used with permission)



spaces of Buildings 1 and 2, and the presence of cart tracks along the main courtyard, suggests that it functioned as a shed or stable. Four horse skulls of varying age and sex were deposited at the shed's south-east corner, just beyond the presumed location of the threshold (Butler and Wade-Martins 1989, 32; Fig. 4.5). The use of foundation burials to protect the dwelling and 'bind' malign influences is a long established tradition. 'Special deposits' of dog, human, cattle, and horse bone are a common occurrence in Anglo-Saxon settlements (Hamerow 2006, Hope-Taylor 1977, 69). Indeed, the 'rhetoric' of domestic human burial may even have persevered into the High Middle Ages. Building 7B from the deserted village of Gomeldon in Salisbury, for example, contained a full-term infant burial in its foundations. A scatter of infant bones (late 1100s) was also uncovered from the post-holes of a nearby structure that had been converted into a yard in the 13th century (Musty 1986, 151). Similarly, in Upton, the body of an infant (3–6 months old) was excavated from the south-west corner of the industrial end of longhouse AD-AF (Rahtz 1969, 87). It is unclear whether these assemblages possessed an apotropaic function or if they were still-births covered-up by the occupants. However, the pointed inclusion of a spindle-whorl and whelk shell in the Upton burial-matrix suggests that this latter deposition, like the threshold assemblage

of house AA–AC, was intentional. The ultimate purpose of the assemblage – whether as a ‘device’ to protect the household, restrain the restless corpse, or to express familial bonds – is still open to debate (Rahtz 1969, 123–124; Gilchrist 2008, 145; 2011, 168).

The horse skulls at Thuxton are much less ambiguous than the human remains at Gomeldon and Upton. Indeed, the Early Modern and folkloric sources state that caches of horse skulls were often used as amulets to repel the advances of a ‘mare’ or witch (Radford and Radford 1961, 194; Evans 1966, 198; Lloyd 1969–70, 133; Hoggard 2004, 178). However, in a worldview where the physical return of the dead was a tangible, everyday threat, a revenant was just as likely a cause of an animal’s ‘languishment’ as a witch’s hex. The ‘Buckingham Ghost’ narrative from William of Newburgh’s *Historia* is explicit on the terror that the undead could inflict on livestock:

He [the revenant] appeared, notwithstanding, as if with the hope of surprising [his brothers] should they be overcome with drowsiness; but being repelled by the carefulness and valour of the watchers, *he rioted among the animals, both indoors and outdoors*, as their wildness and unwonted movements testified. (V.22)

William’s comment that the revenant ‘rioted among the animals, both indoors and outdoors’ is ambiguous, but would seem to refer to attacks that occurred *inside* the byre. Threshold deposits of animal/human bone and vertically-indented knives were employed to ‘bind’ the errant corpse and prevent this from happening.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has acted as an overview of the techniques that may have been used to protect the medieval household from the walking dead and, perhaps, evil agents in general. The dearth of evidence, exacerbated by the tendency of excavators to ignore the possibility of deliberate deposition, has limited previous attempts to analyse the archaeology of domestic magic in this era. Very rarely do permanent, material expressions of apotropaic practices survive the destruction and/or rebuilding of the peasant house. And yet, recourse to the Early Modern material, folklore, and written medieval sources has allowed for the creation of a schema which, I contend, can be mapped onto the extant domestic material.

‘Bad’ death happened all the time. The uncertain post-mortem status of those who had died unshriven was a pressing concern for the local community. Sinners, as the written sources attest, did not stay in their graves for long. Ritual markings and ephemeral deposits were part of an ongoing proactive strategy to bind/divert the attention of the troublesome dead. Eamon Duffy and Peter Marshall are correct to note that although the undermining of habitual Catholicism in the 16th century led to changes in the

articulations of popular piety, there was an unwillingness to forgo the efficacious practices of a now outlawed religion: people still suffered from night terrors, cattle still fell ill, strange entities were still seen wandering around the village (Duffy 1992, 478; Marshall 2002, 246). Supernatural agents, whether they were perceived as revenants, evil spirits or demonic familiars, needed to be prevented from crossing the threshold at all costs. Infiltration led to languishment and death. As such, the explicit nature of the Early Modern evidence can provide a base structure for interpreting the function of domestic medieval residues. These intertextual connections can be extended to include the unsaid aspects of the narrative sources. The residents of Clydesdale may have been relieved to find that the ghost of the irreligious monk ‘settle[d] on the highest parts of dwellings and storehouses’ (Maxwell 1913, 118). It demonstrated the efficacy of their ritual deposits. Being ‘savagely felled and batted’ outside the household was much less terrifying than being ‘crushed by the insupportable weight of [a revenant’s] body’ from within (V.22).

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