

# Physical Evidence for Ritual Acts, Sorcery and Witchcraft in Christian Britain

Ronald Hutton

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A Feeling for Magic



*Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic*

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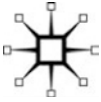
# Physical Evidence for Ritual Acts, Sorcery and Witchcraft in Christian Britain

A Feeling for Magic

Edited by

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*Frontispiece:* Ralph Merrifield in 1989 next to the hall fireplace at Cutchey's Farm, Suffolk. Photographed by Timothy Easton

# 1

## Introduction

*Ronald Hutton*

This book is affectionately dedicated to the memory of Ralph Merrifield, an archaeologist and museum curator who specialised mainly in the study of Roman London. In 1987, when he was in retirement, he published a book entitled *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic*,<sup>1</sup> which surveyed the evidence for ritual deposits of material in the historic period, mostly in England but with material drawn from all over Britain with comparative examples from Ireland and Continental Europe. More than half of its contents were concerned with the pagan Roman and Anglo-Saxon period, but what made the work remarkable was that it continued to consider deposits from the succeeding, Christian centuries, and to treat them in much the same way. It found evidence for the continuation of the ritual placement of the same kinds of object – animals (whole or represented by parts or single bones), pottery, garments and metal artefacts – in much the same contexts as in ancient times and seemingly in much the same manner. Merrifield did not suggest that the accompanying belief system had remained unchanged: indeed he acknowledged that it would have altered dramatically between different periods. Nonetheless, the basic form of rite seemed to him to have been essentially unaltered, even if acts which in pre-Christian cultures would have been part of an overarching religious system had turned into what usually seemed to have been simple acts of symbolic protection against misfortune or magical attack – Merrifield defining magic in this context as the attempted manipulation of uncanny power by human beings, for their own purposes. He was expert in the medieval and early modern texts of high ritual magic, and understood its symbolic code of astrological correspondences and Hebrew divine names, so that he was well equipped to spot references to this code when they occurred on material objects. The result was a major pioneering study, designed explicitly to alert archaeologists, and scholars in other disciplines, to the importance of recognising, preserving and studying what seemed to be ritual deposits from any period, and of making linkages between those from different ages.



Ralph Merrifield died in 1995, and this was his last book. A quarter of a century after its publication, in 2012, one of the most distinguished archaeologists to specialise in British medieval material, Roberta Gilchrist, reviewed its message with the comment that ‘there has been a stubborn reluctance to address this phenomenon in relation to later medieval archaeology’: in this context the later Middle Ages can be taken as commencing in about the year 1000.<sup>2</sup> Her observation is even more true of early modern and modern archaeology, while historians, even now often reluctant to engage with material evidence at all, have been yet more inclined to ignore the implications of Merrifield’s work. Nonetheless, when a top-ranking scholar like Gilchrist expresses concern about an issue, that is a sign in itself that it is emerging into greater prominence. Gilchrist also paid due tribute to the importance of the work of researchers in the field who operated outside mainstream academic disciplines. Moreover, in the remainder of her book, she made full use of the existing archaeological data for magical acts in England during the later medieval period. In particular she drew attention to the presence of objects in graves which seemed to represent wands and amulets, believed to have a protective significance; to the placement of rings, pieces of glass, stones, crystals, pots and brooches in post holes and floors, possibly as foundation deposits; and to the burial of disused fonts and paternoster beads in a church floor. She also performed a considerable service to other researchers by providing a complete catalogue of materials found in buildings which seemed to have been placed there to repel harm and attract good fortune.<sup>3</sup>

Disciplinary tradition, however, dies hard. Specialists in the archaeology of ancient Europe, from the Old Stone Age to the conversion to Christianity, have always been accustomed to the idea that its peoples made deposits of objects in earth, water, or human structures for symbolic reasons. There seems, however, to have been an inherent assumption that Christians did not, and also that magical practices during the Christian period, though there was an acknowledgement that they had existed, would not normally leave identifiable physical remains. During the past forty years there has been a tremendous increase in interest among professionals in the history of magic in medieval and early modern Europe. The early modern trials for witchcraft, defined there as the presumed use of magical means by some human beings to injure others, usually as part of an adopted allegiance to Satan and with demonic assistance, have become one of the biggest growth areas for study by cultural historians, in Britain as elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> Medieval European magic of the learned, ceremonial sort, while not attracting as much attention, has still recently blossomed as a focus of increasing academic interest, and again, this includes Britain.<sup>5</sup> This work, however, has been carried out by historians working in the conventional manner, from texts, and with little reference to material evidence. Conversely, historians of late medieval and early modern English religion have now come to pay

a great deal of attention to physical remains from the period as sources for patterns of piety, but have shown little or no interest in magic.<sup>6</sup> Popular magic in Britain during the medieval and early modern centuries has been given some treatment, of good quality, but again, this has focused on texts.<sup>7</sup> Unsurprisingly, in view of all this, when solid objects have been studied in relation to magic, they tend to be those with a textual component. Into that category would fall Don Skemer's fine monograph on the use of written words to bless and protect people and places in Western Europe during the later Middle Ages, and the work of Mindy McLeod and Bernard Mees on the use of German and Scandinavian runes for that purpose.<sup>8</sup>

Despite all this, individual pieces of archaeology have sometimes impinged on the history of ritual acts in Christian Britain and have thus attracted a significant amount of attention. One of these was the study made by David Stocker and Paul Everson, published in 2003, of depositions in water in the central Witham Valley of Lincolnshire.<sup>9</sup> Ralph Merrifield had drawn attention to the number of weapons, spanning between them the whole medieval period, found in the Thames at London, and noted that these objects were also dedicated at saints' shrines at the same time. He therefore suggested that they may have been ritually deposited in the river, a treatment given to weaponry in watery contexts in Britain from the Bronze Age until the pagan Viking settlements.<sup>10</sup> Stocker and Everson found that causeways had led from ten medieval monasteries towards the River Witham, which were probably constructed originally in ancient times as prehistoric and Roman finds were common along them. What was really significant, and surprising, was that deposition had continued near most of them throughout the Middle Ages, especially of swords, daggers, and the heads of axes and spears, which were either laid upriver of the causeways or in pools nearby. In three of these cases the medieval finds outnumbered the prehistoric, and generally those left between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries were more numerous than those of the Anglo-Saxon period.

The two archaeologists remarked that, as the river crossings were controlled by the monks and the deposits had peaked with the power and influence of the monasteries, the depositions clearly took place in a Christian context, but there was no textual evidence whatever to explain how. Pilgrims, liturgical processions and funeral corteges would all have passed these points, going to and from the religious houses, and it is likely that the placement of the objects in the water was associated with such events. In particular, Stocker and Everson pointed out that the deposition of weapons had declined when the custom of hanging military equipment around tombs became fashionable. In that case, it would have been the weaponry of dead lords which was cast into the water as their bodies were taken for burial at the monasteries. Such a hypothesis has obvious implications for the interpretation of one of the most famous moments in late medieval literature, when Sir Bedivere throws the sword of the dying King Arthur into the lake. It is possible that

this episode reflects the fact that swords (and other weapons), often of great beauty, were deposited in watery contexts in late prehistory, with some frequency, and would have been discovered at points in the Middle Ages. It would have possessed far greater symbolic resonance, however, if it had reflected an actual funerary custom of the period, and that preceding it; but seemingly thus far no expert in medieval literature has taken notice of this possibility.

Another recent archaeological development which focused attention on unorthodox ritual practices in Christian Britain was the excavation between 2001 and 2008 of a total of 35 pits in a valley in western Cornwall. They had each been carefully lined with a swan's pelt, and contained between them more swans' skins, along with magpies, eggs of a variety of birds, birds' claws, quartz pebbles, human hair, fingernails and part of an iron cauldron. The swans' pelts have been dated to around 1640, and the construction and filling of the pits would have needed the attention, over an extended period, of a significant number of people, presumably the inhabitants of the nearby hamlet of Saveock Water who worked at a local mill. A stone-lined spring there also proved to have been given seventeenth century deposits, including 128 strips of cloth from dresses as well as pins, shoe parts, cherry stones and nail clippings, before being filled in. Another pit, found subsequently, contained eggs and the remains of a cat and was dated to the eighteenth century; and another, with parts of a dog and a pig, to the 1950s. It seems very likely that the seventeenth century deposits were ritual in nature, and just possible that the later two were. Jacqui Wood, the leader of the excavations, not surprisingly, publicised the results in an extensive campaign in the mass media; Wood, however, chose to interpret them as evidence of a pagan fertility cult carried on by witches, despite a considerable risk of execution for doing so, and suggested that the later pits meant that it had continued until recent times.<sup>11</sup>

Leaving aside the question of whether the later deposits had a ritual character, less sensational interpretations are possible for the finds, which cover a range of practices intended to secure protection or good fortune, which would have been perfectly legal at the time, and had nothing to do with paganism and would not have been comprehended within the legally defined crime of witchcraft. Thus far, this interesting excavation seems not to have been properly published in order to allow an informed discussion of it to ensue. Meanwhile, other early modern pits with apparent ritual deposits are being identified and are starting to receive such publication, such as the four found at Barway in the Cambridgeshire Fens. Two were on a north-south alignment and two on an east-west one, together forming a T-shaped pattern. The former pair were half packed with stones on one side and had a copper disc put into the top; the latter each had a seventeenth century shoe placed in the bottom. All were certainly earlier than the nineteenth century orchard on the site, and the first two pits were aligned on

Ely Cathedral. The protective symbolism of shoes will be considered later in this volume; while copper is the metal of Venus in alchemy and astrology, although (as the excavator suggested) the discs might also have had a lunar significance. Again, this looks like a rite, or a sequence of rites, of blessing and protection, but other interpretations are possible.<sup>12</sup>

Such cases as these have served to raise general awareness of the value of material remains to the study of ritual of all kinds in Christian Britain, and the potential for expansion is considerable. Suddenly change is in the air. The study of material culture in general is now becoming a recognised sub-discipline of history.<sup>13</sup> Dietrich Boschung and Jan Bremmer have edited a collection entitled *The Materiality of Magic* concerned with solid objects associated with magical practices in the ancient Mediterranean and Near East, but with two final chapters taking the story further, into modern Europe.<sup>14</sup> At the 2013 session of the main annual meeting of British archaeologists, the Theoretical Archaeology Group, Ceri Houlbrook and Natalie Armitage organised a session with an identical title, on cross-cultural examples of physical evidence for magic. It attracted papers of sufficient number and quality to make another collection possible, edited by Armitage and currently in press.<sup>15</sup> Antje Bosselman-Ruickbie and Leo Ruickbie are currently editing a third collection of essays, spanning the globe, on *The Material Culture of Magic*.<sup>16</sup>

Individual researchers are also making explorations in the same field, although they tend, like many of the contributors to the three collections, to concentrate on subjects where textual evidence makes it easy to match the artefacts to an established story or tradition: a good example is Amy Gavin-Schwartz's study of objects related to rites of protection, health, divination and the negotiation of social relationships, recorded in the Gaelic folklore of modern Scotland.<sup>17</sup> David Barrowclough, the excavator of the Barway pits, suggested that the only sure way to identify ritual behaviour from material evidence is to triangulate archaeology, historical sources and folklore, in an essentially textual approach. He is undoubtedly correct, but the Barway site itself lacked the last two dimensions, and his checklist of features which archaeology alone can identify as probable indicators of ritual behaviour – a restricted range of material, with rare or non-local objects, deposited in a structured way, with no apparent utilitarian function and with some effort, at places which are prominent in the landscape and placed in alignment with local landmarks, points of the compass or heavenly bodies – still invites the systematic recording of such features and their placement in the public record.<sup>18</sup>

A sufficient accumulation of such material data begins to enforce the reconsideration of the historic and folkloric record, and the concern of the present book is largely with such a body of data. It has a tighter focus than the three other recent edited volumes mentioned above, being wholly concerned with medieval and modern Britain, and a single interrelated

collection of evidence. This evidence has not been yielded by systematic excavation and has mostly not yet been studied by professional historians and archaeologists but by a range of scholars from other disciplines and occupations. It consists of a range of material objects revealed by casual discovery or collected from owners, and of sets of markings on buildings and other human structures. The former comprises bones and other organic remains, amulets, pottery, bottles, pieces of metal, and garments, including shoes, while the latter consists of carvings or burn marks upon stonework or woodwork. Some of these have been given attention from folklorists over the past hundred and fifty years, usually individual and sporadic in nature, while most have been largely unnoticed until recently: Ralph Merrifield was the first writer to survey them, and even he, as an archaeologist, concentrated much more upon objects than markings. The systematic and extensive study of the material in both categories is a relatively new phenomenon, which is another reason why it has as yet made little impact on the mainstream writing of history. The purpose of this collection is to draw it together, and thereby to alert fellow historians and archaeologists to its significance. The contributors are in most cases the leading experts in the category of evidence upon which they are writing, and in some cases, the pioneers of study of it. Some are presenting new evidence, while some are summarising, for a broader readership, publications which they have mostly made previously in more scattered form and in more specialist locations.

Matthew Champion opens the sequence with a study of apparent marks of ritual protection made on medieval churches, an aspect of activity which has been more or less completely overlooked to date, despite the burgeoning interest in the physical trappings of churches and their relationship to liturgy. The large corpus of graffiti revealed by recent surveys testifies to a world of textually invisible devotional, protective, curative and occasionally malicious, activity. It has long been accepted that the power of the established Church to bless and curse resulted in a general belief in the inherent spiritual potency of material objects (such as water, candles, wafers and wooden crosses) which had been formally consecrated by it or physically associated with its sanctity. It seems that many medieval people extended this concept to using the fabric of the parish church itself as an element in ritual acts from which they could gain personal spiritual or material benefit. As far as is known, none of these acts of inscription became the cause of an action in an ecclesiastical law court, or of a condemnation by any churchman or group of them, and so – as Matt stresses, they were plainly visible – the connivance of the religious authorities seems to be an inevitable assumption. This begs the question of how or why this was granted: were the marks simply regarded, in Matt’s ringing phrase, as ‘prayers made solid’?

The chronology of the practice is especially interesting, as the paltry amount of dating evidence available assigns the marks to the later Middle Ages, opening the question of whether the practice was commenced much

earlier without leaving surviving evidence, and whether it was terminated by the massive shifts in attitudes to physical sanctity represented by the Reformation (when it is similarly textually invisible). It seems to represent another feature of the union of Christian ritual with physical acts of the sort associated with magic which Roberta Gilchrist detected in the placement of special objects in medieval graves.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps there is also a tie-in with Don Skemer's finding that the use of textual amulets in Western Europe peaks in the late Middle Ages: do the markings in churches represent another aspect of a distinctively late medieval form of piety, heavy on the combination of physical materials with ritual acts?<sup>20</sup> Champion's reference to curses inscribed in Norwich Cathedral, incidentally, sheds some light on a conundrum noticed by a historian of ancient magic: that the 'curse tablets' which are a common feature of Greek and Roman religion and magic – ritualized imprecations and calls for justice on wrongdoers, etched on pieces of metal (usually lead) – reappear in early modern England. The obvious question is whether the custom had been revived in the later age, either coincidentally or as a direct imitation of ancient practice, or whether it had continued in other media through the intervening centuries.<sup>21</sup> On the face of it, the last explanation seemed most likely, as the closeness was rather great for coincidence, and imitation was hard to credit for lack of available models; its probability is now much increased by the church carvings. Again, written curses would feature in Christian culture, like most of the other marks on church fabric, as a private deployment of rites and symbols used formally by the established Church, in this case as the process of excommunication.

Timothy Easton's first contribution leads on directly from Matt Champion's, in showing how apparent protective marks on domestic buildings were frequently taken from symbols already associated with medieval religion: this transfer of religious rites or designs to the secular sphere has already been noted in the adaptation of medieval seasonal church rites into folk customs in the aftermath of the Reformation.<sup>22</sup> Clearly, the marks concerned became accepted as part of the service provided by professional carpenters and builders as well as applied by occupants of the buildings; it is equally clear that some at least became detached from their medieval meanings, as symbols derived from the late medieval cult of the Virgin Mary were widely used long after the Reformation period in as well-evangelised an area as East Anglia. What is less obvious is whether these marks were used as commonly in domestic contexts before the advent of Protestantism, and whether their much greater abundance from later buildings is merely a consequence of more abundant surviving material. Certainly they were starting to make the crossing to secular contexts by the early Tudor period, as evinced by the presence of some on the timbers of the warship 'Mary Rose', constructed between 1509 and 1511, and on a wooden bowl left in it when it sank in 1545.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, the survival of late medieval secular

buildings is probably sufficient to suggest that the use of such symbols in domestic settings did burgeon in the early modern period.

Turning now to objects rather than designs, the collection continues with John Billingsley's chapter on carved stone heads. The existence of enigmatic examples of these, at various places in Britain but especially the North of England, had attracted the attention of a few archaeologists. They were correctly identified as being both relatively numerous and conforming to a fairly standard type, with flat, pear-shaped faces, lentoid eyes and oval mouths. Provisionally, because of an apparent lack of datable context for them, they were assigned to the Iron Age as they had some resemblance to faces in metalwork of that period.<sup>24</sup> It was John who first realised that some can be dated and that the majority of these derive from the seventeenth century.<sup>25</sup> Some appear to have a decorative value and some a humorous one, but both of these overlap with another, as they were placed overwhelmingly in positions where they could act as symbolic protectors for entry and boundary points in buildings and the landscape. He now builds upon these earlier insights to set these early modern artefacts very broadly into a much older tradition of the use of the head for such purposes, so that once more the interplay of continuity and novelty is apparent.

The volume turns next to the deposition of particular items within or beneath buildings, as measures of protection and aversion. As the contributions to this section attest, these were first noticed by antiquaries, folklorists and archaeologists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but systematic research into them only began in the 1960s with June Swann's collection of data concerning concealed shoes. June has naturally contributed the chapter on that topic, while Brian Hoggard accompanies her chapter with one on witch bottles and another on concealed animal remains, Dinah Eastop with one on garments, and Timothy Easton on 'middens' of different artefacts. Once more, these acts represent both continuity and alternation of ancient tradition. Witch bottles are specifically a modern phenomenon, commenced in the seventeenth century, but represent one form of a wider activity of countering malevolent magic by deploying special objects which seems prehistoric. Shoes are the most commonly deposited items in these apparently ritualised contexts, and hark back to Roman times, when they were used as foundation deposits all over the empire, including Britain, especially in pits and wells.<sup>26</sup> Their particular significance in such contexts probably also remained unchanged, as the garment which best retains the shape, and so the identity and essence, of the wearer; and yet the deposition of them was only apparently resumed in the later Middle Ages and increased greatly in the early modern period.

Likewise, bodies and body parts of animals feature in ritual deposits from the Middle Stone Age onward, but the favoured species changed over time. In the earlier parts of prehistory food animals – cattle, sheep and pigs – were most common, and while they were still important in later periods, horses

and dogs become frequent in Iron Age and Roman Britain.<sup>27</sup> These were, presumably, the beasts who bonded most closely with their owners, and dogs would have had in addition some significance as protectors and guardians of the places in which they were interred. This being so, it is notable that although all of these animals continue to be represented in what seem like ritual deposits into early modern times, the one of choice has emerged by that period as the cat. If, as Brian Hoggard convincingly argues, this was concealed in houses to act as a protector of them against 'spiritual vermin', this would suggest that the nature of invisible attacks upon households had been perceived to alter by that time. There are other categories of material found in what are definitely or apparently ritual contexts, such as metalwork (such as the famous lucky horseshoe) and human images, notably figurines or 'poppets'. These either have as yet not been the focus of concerted study in Britain (as in the former case) or are as yet apparently too rare to support one (as in the latter). They therefore feature in this book only as part of assemblages or in chapters concerned with broader subjects.

The tour of the British material ends with amulets, defined as portable solid objects, usually kept about homes, outbuildings or the person, which were believed by the owners to be charged with a form of invisible power which conferred protection or good fortune. In one sense they are virtually timeless. Objects without any apparent utilitarian function, and seemingly possessed of some kind of symbolic significance, have been found associated with human beings in Britain since the oldest known human burial in it, the so-called Red Lady of Paviland, dated to around 34,000 years ago.<sup>28</sup> Daniel Ogden, one of the leading experts in Greek and Roman attitudes to magic, has called amulets 'the most ubiquitous and visible of magical tools in antiquity'.<sup>29</sup> Roberta Gilchrist's medieval evidence, cited earlier, abounds with examples of finds in graves and buildings which seem amuletic in character. The subject is covered jointly in this collection by Alexander Cummins, considering the textual evidence – a rare case where there are abundant literary sources for a material magical practice in Christian Britain – and Tabitha Cadbury, concerned with the survival of the actual product. What is so striking about their joint efforts, which at first sight should make a complementary whole, is that chronologically they hardly match. Al has abundant literature from the early modern period which defends and prescribes the making of amulets, but not a single clearly dated example of one seems to survive from this time period, while Tabitha has located about 1700 of them collected in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, by which time the only people to write about them did not themselves apparently believe in their efficacy. Tabitha does, however, prove amply their enduring popularity, while the theoretical arguments that Al discusses as underpinning a trust in them could equally apply to many of the other kinds of early modern objects and designs considered in this collection. These chapters dovetail at points with the chapter contributed by Owen



Davies and Timothy Easton on the evidence for the use of local specialists in magic (cunning-folk) for some of the depositions and inscriptions considered earlier in the book. This provides an invaluable context, and framework of action, for the creation of some of the deposits considered in earlier chapters.

Comparative studies of these phenomena, over geographical space, should yield further insights into the British material. In 2013, as part of the recent sudden surge of interest in the materiality of magic, Sarah Randles published an article which surveyed the apparent ritual concealment of clothing (including footwear) as an activity found in early modern times across Europe and into the Middle East, which invites the question of whether a common belief system inspired it. She suggested a range of such systems which could have provided the impetus.<sup>30</sup> The broader – European and global – aspect of the subject has been relatively neglected in the present book, largely because it is hoped to make this wider context the subject of a different collection. Nonetheless, the final chapter by Owen Davies, Chris Manning and Ian Evans, traces the diffusion of most of the practices considered earlier into the English-speaking colonies overseas. One value of this exercise is that local records there can enable a closer consideration of the circumstances in which some of the acts concerned may have occurred (especially in Ian's Australian material). Coupled with incidental references to European parallels in other chapters, it also permits some provisional conclusions with regard to the ubiquity of the practices under consideration. Some of them – protective symbols in churches and secular buildings, the use of amulets, and the apparently ritualised deposition of shoes and other garments – fairly clearly seem to span the continent, and extend beyond it. Others common in Britain seem to have had more regional foci elsewhere in Europe, for example, the concealment of horses' skulls in Scandinavia and of cats in Germany and Austria. Only witch bottles seem to be uniquely British, and indeed mostly English. Conversely, the American and Australian evidence suggests that all of the practices examined in this collection reached the English-speaking colonies overseas. Many of them seem, therefore, to have been part of a lexicon of protective, and occasionally aggressive, ritual action which spanned ethnic and linguistic zones across Europe, and was easily projected across the world by European immigration.

To say this is, of course, to invite the question of what is actually in the lexicon, because much of the content of this book raises methodological problems. Most acts of ritual protection or aggression will have left no tangible trace, and it is likely that most of the material evidence that they have left has been destroyed simply because it has not been recognised as what it was; or, when it was correctly identified, because the finders were uncomfortable with it. We are therefore left with a fraction of the data which must have once existed, and face difficult judgements concerning how representative

it is. There is also the problem that while most of the apparent evidence that we do possess is solid in a physical sense, it is far from being so in an interpretative one. Material remains may be read in different ways, as any archaeologist knows. It is the contention of the contributors to this book, and of the editor, that most of the data presented can most reasonably be considered the product of ritual action, and in many cases this is probably beyond doubt. In some, however, it is not. Timothy Easton himself excludes from the probable category of ritual the tragic bodies of infants found concealed in his 'spiritual middens', and it is possible that some, at least, of the pieces of glass in those, and of the written and printed material, should not belong to it either; but it is also possible that they should. Some of the absences in the material are also noteworthy, and puzzling: given the importance of amulets as protective and lucky items, throughout the period covered by this volume, why do they not occur, or occur more obviously, as deposits in buildings, even in 'middens'? Nor is there any apparent reason why most of the customs suggested in this book seem to have persisted from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries, but some, such as candle marks, disappear sooner. The single major consolation when confronting these sorts of issues is that they are hardly unique to this particular subject area, being perennial challenges to the archaeologist and historian.

It would be comforting to suggest, as David Barrowclough did, that an intersection of history, archaeology and folklore would provide the best way of meeting such difficulties. The trouble is that every one of those disciplines may, even in combination, not be equal to the job. When the collections of folklore made between the eighteenth and early twentieth centuries are consulted, a few of the material objects and markings, which are the focus here – such as witch bottles and animal hearts stuck with pins – become the physical manifestation of recorded folk beliefs. The folklore record remains obstinately silent, however, with respect to most.<sup>31</sup> It may seem that, having now long been accustomed to the concept of prehistory, we may have to reconcile ourselves to that of *ahistory*, of whole classes of human activity and thought, carried on in highly literate societies, which nonetheless escape the written record and leave only material evidence behind. To this would belong, for example, the carvings of erect phalluses and outlines of shoes on the more heavily-stressed points of Victorian railway bridges, echoing a custom apparent in Roman structures and deposits but having no known written references in either period.<sup>32</sup>

So, can the material evidence for magic and related ritual practices in medieval and modern Britain be historicised at all, as, for example, the textual evidence for ceremonial magic and beliefs in witchcraft can be? Ritual magic can certainly be shown to have undergone considerable development between the twelfth and twentieth centuries, reflecting changing cultural contexts, while the social and legal status of witchcraft beliefs underwent a series of dramatic alterations over the same period. By contrast, the data

considered in this book can readily be made to seem a timeless expression of the impulses to bless, protect, avert and exorcise (aims which are themselves seldom easy to distinguish using the evidence concerned), applied to people, places and property sometimes routinely and sometimes in cases of specific need. The objects employed might in this reading alter in some respects over the centuries, with changing fashions and available materials, but the behaviour itself, and the fundamental instincts and beliefs which propelled it, does not.

Such a conclusion is attractive in many ways, but may miss an important point. When all allowances are made for problems of dating and survival of data, the pre- and post-Reformation worlds do look very different with regard to the evidence for private and personal acts of ritual designed to achieve practical results. With the establishment of Protestantism, they seem to contract notably within churches and burgeon notably in domestic and occupational contexts. If this apparent process was a real one, then it argues for a large-scale transfer of acts of blessing, exorcism and spiritual repulsion from the ecclesiastical to the secular sphere, where use of them remained widely employed until the waning of an active and literal belief in the efficacy of magical acts and objects among the populace at large in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is tempting here to revisit a famous proposition made by Sir Keith Thomas, that the removal of most of the 'magic' provided by the medieval Church, in charging material objects and elements with sanctity and potency, may have produced an increase in the demand for magic from other sources.<sup>33</sup> This would certainly accord with a double pattern suggested by the evidence here: that the quantity of activity intended to protect the home and its outbuildings increased in the wake of the Reformation and that specific protective symbols were transferred there from ecclesiastical settings. A further possibility, however, also cannot be neglected: that the Reformation crisis also produced an enhanced fear of the Devil, of evil spirits, of bewitchment and of capricious misfortune in general, which endured long into modernity. This would make a fit with recent work which has suggested a relatively sudden increase in concern with witchcraft in Britain during the sixteenth century, accompanying and provoking its redefinition as a secular crime.<sup>34</sup> If the apparent pattern of deposition is genuine and not a product of survival, it seems that measures of self-protection against witchcraft increased as legal prosecution of it waned, making another good fit with research which has provided evidence of the continuation of a popular belief in malevolent magic as the legal remedies for it declined and disappeared.<sup>35</sup>

It may thus be argued that the material data can serve to fuel new debate over a cluster of major hypotheses concerning the history of British magic which were developed from textual evidence. Whether this is so must remain within the judgement of the individual reader, and the purpose of

this volume is primarily to set out the data in such a way as to make such judgement easier.

## Notes

1. Published in London by Batsford.
2. Roberta Gilchrist, *Medieval Life* (Woodbridge, 2012), 229.
3. *Ibid.*, 200–215, 227–236, 267–271. See also her earlier ‘Magic for the Dead? The Archaeology of Magic in Later Medieval Burials’, *Medieval Archaeology* 52 (2008), 119–158.
4. For a series of surveys of the field, of differing length and weight, see Geoffrey Scarre and John Callow, *Witchcraft and Magic in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Europe* (2nd edition, Basingstoke, 2001); Wolfgang Behringer, *Witches and Witch-Hunts* (Cambridge, 2004); Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (Harlow, 3rd edition, 2006); and Brian P. Levack (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America* (Oxford, 2013).
5. Stages in its development are represented by Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, 1989); Claire Fanger (ed.), *Conjuring Spirits* (Stroud, 1998); Claire Fanger (ed.), *Invoking Angels* (University Park PA, 2012); Frank Klaassen, *The Transformations of Magic* (University Park PA, 2013); and Sophie Page, *Magic in the Cloister* (University Park PA, 2013). For an overview of the subject, see Michael D. Bailey, *Magic and Superstition in Europe: A Concise History from Antiquity to the Present* (Lanham MD, 2007).
6. The great turning point here was probably Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c. 1400 to c. 1580* (New Haven, 1992).
7. The famous pioneering work is Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London, 1971). The best since then is probably Owen Davies, *Cunning Folk: Popular Magic in English History* (London, 2003).
8. Don C. Skemer, *Binding Words: Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages* (University Park PA, 2006); Mindy McLeod and Bernard Mees, *Runic Amulets and Magical Objects* (Woodbridge, 2012).
9. David Stocker and Paul Everson, ‘The Straight and Narrow Way’, in Martin Carver (ed.), *The Cross Goes North* (York, 2003), 271–288.
10. Merrifield, *Archaeology of Ritual and Magic*, 112–115.
11. The publicity included an article in *The Times* by Simon Bruxelles on 10 March 2008; and an article by Kate Ravilious, ‘Witches of Cornwall’, *Archaeology* 61 (2011), at [www.archaeology.org/0811/etc/witches.html](http://www.archaeology.org/0811/etc/witches.html). Accessed 4 November 2011.
12. David Barrowclough, ‘“The Wonderful Discovery of Witches”: Unearthing the Occult, Necromancy and Magic in Seventeenth Century England’, at <http://www.academic.edu/7973344>. Accessed 11 December 2014.
13. See, for example, Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello (ed.), *Writing Material Culture History* (London, 2015).
14. Published in Paderborn in April 2015.
15. To be published by Oxbow in the autumn of 2015, (of course) *The Materiality of Magic*.
16. Due for delivery in July 2015.
17. Amy Gavin-Schwartz, ‘Archaeology and Folklore of Material Culture, Ritual and Everyday Life’, *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 5 (2001), 263–280.