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## Reviews

*Signals of Belief in Early England: Anglo-Saxon Paganism Revisited*, edited by Martin Carver, Alex Sanmark & Sarah Semple, 2010. Oxford: Oxbow Books; ISBN 978-1-84217-395-4 paperback £30 & US\$60; xvi+212 pp., 35 b/w ills.

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The study of pagan religion in the early Anglo-Saxon period is difficult and controversial. Most of the texts from Anglo-Saxon England that may contain relevant information are not contemporary but written by later Christian authors who tended to have little interest and/or knowledge about pre-Christian beliefs and cults. The far more substantial literature about pre-Christian religious ideas and practices from Scandinavia and especially Iceland is even later and it is debatable how relevant these texts are when studying religion in England. A further difficulty arises from the observation that the few references in the texts from England that relate to pre-Christian religious aspects can often not be correlated easily or convincingly with archaeological finds. This discrepancy may be due to the literary conventions that Anglo-Saxon writers followed when they based their narratives not on their experiences but treated accounts as normative that were written by late Roman Christian authors about non-Christian cults and religions in the Mediterranean world. Still, despite these methodical problems the study of religion in early Anglo-Saxon England has commonly been approached with categories that were derived from the early medieval texts and also from the knowledge of the much better known religions in the Greek and Roman world. That is why archaeologists have been looking for material evidence for gods, myths, temples, sanctuaries, priest(esse)s, magic, cults, etc.

In this new volume the authors have chosen a different approach. *Signals of Belief in Early England* is a programmatic title because the starting point of the investigations are archaeological observations that appear non-functional, strange or exaggerated (p. 6) as Martin Carver stated in the first agenda-setting chapter. They are discussed as material remains originating from diverse expressions of many different religious ideas. For Carver the fifth to eighth century was an exceptional period because no orthodoxy, control or institutions hindered the people in England to pick and choose from a wide variety of world-views, beliefs and cults, be they pre-Christian or Christian. This theoretical model of significant chronological and geographical discursiveness in early medieval belief-systems had already been employed

conclusively by Peter Brown (2003) when he talked about Christianities of the North.

The following chapters are a selection of papers that had first been given at two conferences in 2005 and 2006 on 'Paganism and Popular Practice in Anglo-Saxon England' and on 'Anglo-Saxon Paganism'. Unlike many conference volumes the authors of these papers appear to have had intense discussions and to be in broad agreement about the premises of their research and interpretations of the evidence. This consistency is evident in recurrent patterns of arguments and underlying assumptions. They include, for example, the use of predominantly Scandinavian finds and scholarship as explanatory models for observations in Anglo-Saxon England assuming direct links and similar belief system in early medieval Scandinavia and England. Chapters 2–8 are organized thematically covering a wide range of different evidence for religious ideas in the widest sense. Sarah Semple continues in 'In the Open Air' her work on observations of natural and man-made features in the landscape that were imbued in one way or another with special religious significance and in doing so she emphasizes the spiritual embeddedness of the Anglo-Saxons in their environment. She argues that this enlivened landscape provided the fabric for Anglo-Saxon pre-Christian beliefs. Julie Lund then focuses in 'At the Water's Edge' more specifically on the importance of rivers and lakes in the Anglo-Saxon world-view. She interprets watery sites, especially crossing points that are characterized by the depositions of selected artefacts as sites of ritual activities that belonged to the 'cognitive landscape' (p. 53). In the *longue durée* of depositions in wetland areas she argues that the significance of this ritual changed over time and place. Her examples from early Anglo-Saxon hagiographical literature demonstrate this shift in the meaning of wetlands after the Christian appropriation of watery features in the landscape. Howard Williams turns in 'At the Funeral' to the rituals and performances before, during and after burials that can be detected archaeologically. Instead of trying to find possible meanings in the burial rites, he is interested in them as 'mnemonic practices' (p. 71) that recreated the relationships between the living members of the community and the deceased through the ritual transformation of the dead body. He maintains that the great variety of practices that can be observed in Anglo-Saxon cemeteries demonstrates the considerable role for local communities in the processes of developing their own specific ritual expressions. Jenny Walker presents in her chapter 'In the Hall' a reinterpretation of the excavations at Yeavering, the most famous example for a ritual architectural complex in Anglo-Saxon England. She argues that the different buildings including the sequence of halls had primarily religious purposes. Her comparison with vari-

ous other halls in Scandinavia and England shows a great variety of uses of these buildings, an observation that she interprets as expression of preferences by the local owners within an ideological framework that the architecture of the hall offered. In this discussion about the functions of halls the difficulties of modern terminology become apparent as notional distinctions between secular and religious activities or social and ritual power displays are quite inadequate in the early middle ages. Aleks Pluskowski analyses, in 'Animal Magic', the importance of animals in Anglo-Saxon thinking. He argues that through animals human and numinous worlds were connected. That is why animals played an important role as highly stylized images on metalwork providing protection to its wearers and users, as sacrifices in funerary contexts or as totems in personal names. In his discussion of zoomorphic shield fittings that he based on Dickinson's research (2005) he concludes that the iconography in this specific context of protective armour was related to beliefs about 'supernatural and shamanistic engagements crossing the boundaries of life and death' (p. 111). Chris Fern concentrates then, in 'Horses in Mind', on the preeminent significance of the horse in Anglo-Saxon mentality. He discusses the long traditions of various horse rituals as they are documented in funerary situations, in art and in several stories known from Anglo-Saxon literature. Fern is able to show the particular significance of a horse cult for the Anglo-Saxon elite in the formative years of kingship development. Alexandra Sanmark takes a different approach in 'Living On: Ancestors and the Soul' to the previous authors. She starts her investigation into the existence of an ancestor cult and a belief in a soul that survives after death with written sources from Scandinavia and England. From these texts she deduces that similar ideas about the veneration of the ancestors were expressed in Anglo-Saxon images but also in rituals on the graveside. She argues that rituals that were mentioned in various Christian texts, mostly when they were prohibited, can be correlated with observations in the material remains. In the final chapter 'Creating the Pagan English: From the Tudors to the Present Day' Sue Content and Howard Williams give a valuable overview of the research history of Anglo-Saxon paganism in which they argue that the Anglo-Saxon pagans only played a fairly minor role in studies of early Anglo-Saxon history and archaeology. Observations about pre-Christian religion were largely confined to narratives of Anglo-Saxon migration, conversion and emerging statehood.

In the Foreword 'Heathen Songs and Devil's Games' Neil Price and in the Afterword 'Caveats and Futures' Ronald Hutton offer reflective assessments of suppositions and outcomes of the book and put the discussion into the wider discourse of religious history in the early middle ages. They provide justified praise — as might be expected — but also well-founded criticisms. Price alerted to the problems of terminology when he discussed the difficulties of describing the phenomena that are the topics of this book as the terms religion, paganism or tradition are all evoking connotations that are not quite adequate to the task. A more sustained engagement with this problem of words and how they can be used by archaeologists would have been

beneficial because throughout the different chapters there is a tendency to use 'superstitious', 'magical', 'numinous', 'sacred', 'sanctified', 'supernatural', etc. in a rather loose way, almost as if they were synonyms. However, these terms have distinct meanings and signify very different intentions and practices even if the remains appear similar in the archaeological record. Price also rightly highlights how little attention was paid to the mental landscape of late Roman Britain, the space people in the early Anglo-Saxon period either continued to inhabit or into which new people had arrived. Whilst Hutton welcomes the embracing of Scandinavian archaeological and religious historical research for comparative studies with Anglo-Saxon England he also expressed reservations. They concentrate firstly on the neglect of similar comparisons with areas closer to England in Continental Europe and secondly on the methods of interpreting similar and dissimilar observations, especially the exact definition of the points of the comparisons. Hutton also justifiably questions the lax use of the term shamanism as several authors assume its existence in early Anglo-Saxon England without further identifying its meaning.

The inclusion of these critical assessments underlines the aim of the publication, to inspire renewed engagement with a wide range of often well-known archaeological finds and provoke a debate about early Anglo-Saxon mentality and world-views. Through its stimulating discussions the book achieves this aim. Whilst the presentation of the book is overall pleasing with careful cross-referencing, general and topographical indices and satisfactory illustrations, it is a pity that some two dozen spelling errors, inaccuracies in the references and minor factual mistakes remained uncorrected.

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