

Northumberland: landscape of spirits and saints  
Max Adams

Northumberland attracts spiritual pilgrims by the thousand. They come to visit Holy Island by way of Durham Cathedral, to bathe in the reflected glory of the Golden Age of Anglo-Irish Christianity. Holy Island, or Lindisfarne, is where the monks of Saint Columba's Ionan monastery came in the seventh century to bring their ascetic Irish brand of Christianity to the recently-converted northern English. It is the place where that fabulous object of devotional beauty, the Lindisfarne Gospel, was created. Its twice-daily tidal isolation from the mainland gives it a unique sense of tranquillity – at least during the autumn and winter when less-hardy trippers stay away. It is their loss. From November to February, when guest-houses find bookings hard to come by, is the season when ancient spirits seem to come alive. They can be felt in the low clouds that come scudding in from the west, seemingly at head-height; in the glassy light, and in the blue-black streams of pure Cheviot water that rush towards the sea; in the sound of the breeze in skeletal oaks and twisted Scots pines and the crash of North Sea waves.

The more persistent visitor, braving scarifying winds and diamond-tipped rain, might track down the site of King Oswald's cross at Heavenfield or trace the hundred-year journey of St. Cuthbert's relics to Chester le Street. Perhaps they will be fortunate enough to come across, and shelter in, some of our beautiful early churches at Bywell, Blanchland and Hexham. But if they want to understand the story of spirituality in this region from its beginnings they might do better to stand on a hill, almost any hill, and look around them, for that story is written in the landscape.

When hunters and gatherers first colonized Northumberland some nine thousand years ago they must have seen magic and meaning everywhere. They were probably animists, believing that spirits lived in rocks and trees and rivers. As they walked from the coast across the lowland plains, up through densely wooded valleys onto the great rolling hills they must have formed intimate relationships with places that became familiar to them. An ancient gnarled tree might have inspired stories about the ancestors. A strangely-shaped rock might have been looked to for guidance, or visited on a special day. And above them, at night, the stars would have been woven into the myths that explained their creation.

This is not mere fancy. By the time humans started to settle, farm and build monuments, they were already leaving behind clues for us to read. In the Neolithic period there were no less than twelve henge monuments in Northumberland, a tribute to the region's fertility, of course, but also its sense of magic. Take the rounded, ancient volcanic hills of the Cheviot massif. An artist friend, on being taken up to Brough Law hillfort in the Breamish Valley for the first time, exclaimed, 'I see reclining nudes everywhere!' He wasn't the first. In the Stone Age and Bronze Age the peoples of these hills saw these sensuous rounded hills as breasts, and quite reasonably adorned them with stone cairns, so that from afar they look like nipples. Stop for a coffee at Powburn on the A697, look west with the early sun and you will see for yourself.

These cairns were not simply idle adornments. By beautifying the landscape early farmers expected something in return - a good harvest and fertile women - and they also buried their dead under these cairns so that their ancestors would watch over them for all time. It is no coincidence that all over the world, land and death have such a close relationship. There are thousands of ancient burial mounds still surviving in the landscape, and many of them lie in prominent places. A burial mound was like a title deed to the land that you had cleared and cultivated, and before the earth banks and ditches of the Iron Age and Roman periods divided the land between farms, burials acted as boundary markers.

No life was lived without reference to another world which we can barely imagine, one peopled with ancestors, spirits, and natural forces whose whims and caprices must have seemed only too real. Throughout the prehistoric period, so far as we can tell, people believed that to ensure a good harvest, healthy children, success in battle and a safe passage to the afterlife, it was vital to maintain good relations with the spirits through negotiation, offerings and respect for the animals and plants and weather that they relied on. There are other tangible remains to show how this was done. Wherever you find a spectacular view in Northumberland - and there are hundreds of them - you are likely to find rocks with strange carvings on them. Climb Old Bewick, a few miles north-west of Alnwick, late in the afternoon of a crisp autumn day when the sun is low. Behind the double hillfort are two great slabs of sandstone, covered in chiselled patterns whose symbols, to this day, we cannot decipher. There are concentric disks, clusters of pits, some linked by channels. If they had a precise meaning we shall probably never know it. But they are reminiscent of the drawings that shamans from around the world make when, in a state of trance, they are speaking with the spirits, asking for guidance or intervention. They may also have acted, for mere mortals, as symbolic maps or guides to the world of the ancestors. They have left us with the most tantalising clues to an immensely rich otherworld whose inhabitants we can scarcely begin to visualise.

Even the most practical aspects of life had a religious dimension. Take hillforts. The palisades and ramparts which people built in the Bronze Age and Iron Age for defence reflect the insecurity of the times, of course. But their often circular shape had a talismanic value, as did the number of ramparts. More significant still, perhaps, was that the ditches that surrounded them may have been created by special ploughing rituals which the builders believed gave them extra protection.

Driving along the lush and beautiful Tyne valley, or looking out across the Simonside Hills, we can perhaps guess what it was that drew people to these places. But even hilltop sites with spectacular views couldn't compare with the magical value of water. Waterfalls like Linhope Spout and Roughting Linn or springs with healing powers must have been the most sacred places of all.

At Holystone, west of Rothbury, there are two springs. The less well-known of the two is St. Mungo's Well, a little stone drinking fountain that stands by a narrow lane. It is said that St. Mungo (also known as Kentigern), the founder of Glasgow Cathedral in the sixth century AD, fought the legendary wizard Merlin. The well has been sacred to Christians for over a thousand years. But before that it must have held magical significance for the ancient British: on the hills behind the spring are burial mounds and standing stones, and the little lane next to it was built by the Romans.

The same is very likely true of the better-known and more enchanting Lady's Well at Holystone, where Bishop Paulinus baptised some of the first Englishmen and women fifteen hundred years ago.

Surrounded by a grove of magnificent beech trees a mere couple of hundred years old, this pool of the clearest, sweetest water is not just a living monument to early Christianity but to humans' deepest need to forge spiritual relationships with the landscape. To be affected by the power of religion, or faith, or even superstition, we must sense the power of a place: what the Romans would have called the *genius loci*. There is nowhere with a greater sense of that than the Lady's Well. It is no wonder that Paulinus chose it as a place to impress on the heathen English the power of the one true God. Even so, it must have been sacred long before his time.

We shouldn't be surprised that Christians took over many sites of pagan significance. After all, our festivals - Christmas, Easter, the harvest supper, are essentially heathen in origin. And while our heavens may be populated with angels, we still name the constellations after hunters and bears.

When the British and later the Anglo-Saxons were converted to Christianity, the relationship between land, power and religion did not disappear. Christianity either tried to outlaw pagan beliefs or adapt itself to them. As late as the tenth century AD the Northumberland Priests' Law was proscribing those who continued to worship in sacred groves or at pagan wells. Relationships with God, mediated by priests, gradually replaced a myriad of complex relations with the spirit world, interpreted by shamans - or druids, or magi like Merlin; but the sense of magic remained. Even now, in villages across Britain, families gather every year to dance around maypoles or to dress trees and wells.

There is no better example of a surviving sense of magic than the little Norman church at Old Bewick, which huddles in the shadow of the hillfort and its carved rocks. The round apse of this jewel of a Norman church is still painted with gold stars on a blue background: the Christian heaven or the pagan firmament. When it was built the power of the church was vested almost entirely in its priests. Thus the architects of the church constructed a small window in the south wall which, at certain times, shines a spotlight of sun on the altar where the priest would have celebrated solemn mass wreathed in incense. It recalls a sense of theatre not so very far from that of the shaman.

It is one thing to be able to say that five thousand years ago our ancestors watched the stars and gathered at henges and burial mounds to speak with the spirits. It is quite another to know whether they were laughing or crying when they did so. We shall never know. But we can at least say that the landscape that inspired them to build monuments, clear the forests and watch the sun rise and set, is still here for us to explore and ponder for ourselves.