Pagan Wirral – Myth or Reality?

By Gavin Chappell

Wirral's links with its pagan past are few, and of those that remain, the better known are dubious. Naturally, the peninsula's millennia and a half of Christianity is more evident. Church dedications such as St Hilary's in Wallasey Village (named for a fifth century Gaulish saint), not to mention Landican (*Llandegan*, probably named after the obscure Welsh saint Tegan), suggest that the Conversion was early. Legends speak of St Patrick's presence at Bromborough (the well bearing his name is still visible in Brotherton Park), and it has been suggested that St Kentigern was active in Wirral, as well as Glasgow. Despite these early beginnings, Christianity must have suffered a relapse with the coming of the pagan Norsemen in the ninth and tenth centuries.

As Hrolf Douglasson points out in his *Wirral Vikings: The Wider Context*, place name evidence led to an assumption that the Vikings who settled Wirral in 902 AD were Christian, having come into contact with Christianity in Ireland. Places such as West Kirby and *Kirkby-in-Walea* (now Wallasey Village) contain the Old Norse word *kirk*, meaning 'church,' while several Norse Christian crosses remain, notably at West Kirby and Neston. However, as Douglasson states, these date from more than a century after the Viking settlement of Wirral. Moreover, the *Three Fragments*, the closest we have to a documentary source for the period, state clearly that the Norse and Danish invaders were heathen, in contrast to their Irish comrades.

Thor's Stone

The place popularly associated with the Vikings in Wirral is Thor's Stone (also known as Thor's Rock), on Thurstaston Common, a massive block of sandstone that sits in a natural amphitheatre, surrounded by wood and heathland. According to local legend, this 'gigantic rock altar' is the site of Viking religious rites in honour of the thunder god Thor – the red rock is stained with the blood of victims! – or else was raised by the Vikings to commemorate the Battle of Brunanburh in 937 (supposedly fought at Bromborough), *or* in a tradition recorded by Professor Steve Harding in *Ingimund's Saga,* it is the location of Thor's Hammer, the weapon the Norse god uses to defend the world from the frost giants. But is there truth in any of these stories?

No, would appear to be the short answer. Writing in *Notes & Queries* in November 1877, local worthy Sir James Picton brought to the attention of the general populace the 'Great Stone of Thor' a 'very interesting relic of Saxon or Danish heathendom.' Stating that there was no local legend about it, and that local historians did not mention it, he linked the rock with the township in which it was located, suggesting that it was 'Thor's Stone,' and that the name Thurstaston came from *Thors-stane-tun*, or the town of Thor's Stone. His real agenda was to stop the encroachment of developers in the area, and the article is directly responsible for Thurstaston Common becoming a public park rather than a Victorian housing development.

Regardless of this, the story grew and grew. The associations between Thor's Stone and pre-Christian religion were such that in the late nineteen eighties, members of an organisation called the Hearth of the Sons of Odin provoked a minor furore when they 'reclaimed' the rock for the worship of Thor and other Norse gods. Spoilsport academics maintain that the association is bogus: 'Thurstaston' actually derives from

‘Thorsteins tun,’ or the farm of Thorstein (a popular name in the Viking Age). So the myth has been debunked. Thor’s Stone, despite its symbolic status relating to Wirral’s Viking heritage, had no pagan connections prior to 1989. Various theories have been advanced to explain the existence of the rock outcrop, including the possibility that it was part of a quarry, perhaps the site of a crane for loading stone into carts. However, no records exist of such a quarry and it is worth pointing out that, although Thorstein was indeed a Norse personal name, it means ‘Thor stone.’

The *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, Vol. XLIV, printed in 1888, included an article describing a trip made by its members to Wirral, during which they visited ‘the Thor Stone’ where Picton himself regaled them with its supposed history. Again, he maintained that no legend was associated with the area (clearly unaware that he had invented one) but he was corrected by the Reverend A. E. P. Gray, Rector of Wallasey, who said that

> *…the people round about the country gave the name of “Fair Maidens' Hall” to the place where the Stone stood, and … the children were in the habit of coming once a year to dance round the Stone….*

Obscure folkloric rites such as these are often held to represent traditions dating back to pagan antiquity. Perhaps no one prior to Picton had linked the rock with the mighty Thunderer of Norse religion, but this picturesque area was the centre of earlier traditions. Certainly this forgotten folk custom is more authentic than the reconstructed rites of the Sons of Odin, or the Mayday Morris dancing encouraged by Professor Harding.

Pagan Survivals

But do genuine pagan survivals exist in Wirral? Further place name evidence reveals the existence of pre-Christian burial practices. The Arno in Oxton is not named after the famous Italian river, but rather represents a worn-down form of the Old Norse *Arnis-haugr*, the 'burial mound of Arni', an otherwise unsung Viking. In Meols, meanwhile, we find Fornall Green, derived from *Forn-haugr*, the 'ancient burial mound.' In Birkenhead Park there were two burial mounds known locally as 'the Bonks,' which according to Caton's *Romance of Wirral* were the scene of Easter celebrations by local children, which included rolling eggs up the mounds. Despite (or perhaps due to) their popularity with children, these prehistoric monuments became an eyesore in the local council's opinion, and were demolished.

Up on Bidston Hill, near the Observatory, are several rock carvings, including one of a horse, reputedly facing towards the midsummer sunrise; one of a sun goddess; and another (very worn) of a moon god. These are usually said to be the work of the Vikings, around 1000 AD. There is no real evidence for this, although Norse mythology certainly includes a sun goddess, Sol, a moon god, Mani, and Arvakr, a horse with solar connections. However, the date of 1000 AD seems too late for heathen Norsemen in Wirral, being only a few decades prior to the carving of the Norse crosses at West Kirby and elsewhere. The sparse evidence suggests that heathenism flourished in the tenth century, before dying out in the eleventh – by the end of which century Norway and Denmark were both staunchly Christian.

Harrow Fields

Another source of evidence for paganism in Wirral is to be found in place names and field names containing the element ‘harrow.’ This derives from the Old English *hearg*, meaning a pagan shrine, related to the Old Norse *hörg*. A *harrowe hay* is recorded in Heswall in 1293, while a whole crop of ‘harrow’ field names is to be found not far from the apocryphal Thor’s Stone.

First mentioned in two academic articles published in 1993, Harrow Fields lie between Oldfield and Thurstaston, on either side of Telegraph Road. A field-walking expedition carried out a year earlier by Rob Philpott of Liverpool University yielded many archaeological relics suggesting occupation of the area from prehistory until the Viking Age. Linking the field names with the long period during which the site was occupied, Sarah Semple of Durham University concluded that this area was the scene of pre-Christian religious ritual in the Viking Age, the Saxon period, during the Roman occupation, and throughout the Iron and Bronze Ages, the New Stone Age and all the way back to the Middle Stone Age, between 9000 and 7000 years ago. Dr Semple maintains that this theory is reinforced by the continuity of religious and ritual connections with the area: not only the close proximity of Thurstaston Rectory, but also the fact that to the present day, Thurstaston Common continues to be the focus for ‘low-level ritual activity.’

Perhaps Sir James Picton wasn’t so wrong after all.

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