

Conference Report

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CONFERENCE TITLE: SUBTERRANEAN IN THE MEDIEVAL WORLD

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SPONSORED BY: THE UNIVERSITY OF YORK'S RESEARCH COMMITTEE AND ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY AND THEORY RESEARCH SCHOOL, THE ROYAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY AND THE VIKING SOCIETY FOR NORTHERN RESEARCH

'Subterranean in the Medieval World' was a two-day interdisciplinary conference, that sprang from the idea that much of the material culture associated with the medieval world is identified with the ground in some way, aiming to (re)consider ideas and associations such material produces in the scholarship. It was a highly successful event with 18 speakers presenting 20-minute papers and a keynote given by Howard Williams, attracting between 30 and 40 delegates across the two days of the conference. The speakers were drawn from various disciplines and periods, and brought together emerging scholars with established academics, all working across several fields of research to provide a platform for the reconsideration of the idea of the 'subterranean', in all its forms. The papers presented across the two days generated a huge amount of discussion between speakers and delegates and the conference was incredibly fruitful in terms of producing connections and conversations across disciplines and scholars from multiple institutions. The event was successful in its aim to provide a forum for new avenues of thought around how the idea of 'subterranean' is conceptualised within the medieval period, reflecting the flexible, shifting and changing attitudes to

the art, objects, places, ideas, and histories which currently define the ‘subterranean’ in both popular and scholarly consciousness.

The conference began from the standpoint that it is not an overstatement to suggest that much of the material culture associated with the medieval world (including artefacts, objects and spaces), are identified with the ground. From the famed grave goods of the high-status burials such as Prittlewell and Sutton Hoo, to the subterranean spaces of the crypts and catacombs from Rome to Repton, to the recent metal-work finds in Staffordshire and Yorkshire, as well as the multiplicity of objects uncovered by antiquarian and archaeological digs which form the mainstay of the corpus, the field of the medieval is suffused with objects which are irrevocably associated with the earth. The idea of such treasures being hidden from the view of the modern world, just beneath its surface is intriguing and these subterranean spaces (and the objects they hide, hold or reveal) exert a fascination for today’s viewer and contemporary scholars alike, which this conference sought to foreground. In addition to papers considering these objects in a direct manner, the conference also encouraged a more liberal approach to epistemologies of *Sub Terra*, as medieval material culture is also rife with sites and spaces which connect the earth, the ground, to hell, and to the heavens; as epitomized in churches which may be considered to connect subterranean spaces with those of the heavens, or the monumental carved stone crosses of the insular world, embedded within the earth, but pointing to an eschatology beyond it, all topics that were addressed by speakers over the two days of the conference.

The conference set out to explore the idea of the ‘subterranean’ within the medieval world, both in terms of the objects and spaces located there, beneath the surface, but also in terms of that which is hidden or secret, reconsidering the ‘subterranean’ as concept, object and location for discussion. The idea of the ‘Dark Ages’, though largely dismissed in the scholarship, is nonetheless an idea which has a prevalent hold on the public conception of the medieval, chiming with the dark, unknown of the ‘subterranean’ and many papers at the conference were concerned with addressing ideas of whether, by looking again at well-known objects, artefacts, texts and spaces, further light may be shed on them; unearthing new meanings, ideas and references. The conference deliberately, brought together emerging scholars working across several fields of research with established academics, to provide a platform for the reconsideration of the idea of the ‘subterranean’, in all its forms; a model that proved extremely successful; aiming to provide a forum for new avenues of thought around the idea of ‘subterranean’, allowing for flexible, shifting and changing attitudes to the art, objects, places, ideas and histories which currently define it and all the various papers given during the conference went some way to further this aim.

There were several papers that addressed ideas around burial rites and practices. **Melissa Herman’s** paper on burial as the meeting place between the sub- and super-terranean, considered the grave site both as a place which fixes individuals in the ground but which also helped wider communities to think about burial, discussing ritual practices having social significance in terms of developing

chronological fixity, as well as having resonance for ideas of identity. **Eric Lacey**, speaking on behalf of **Lacey** and **Ruth Nugent**, gave a thought-provoking paper on the Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Butler's Field, Lechlade, with its burials with identifiable bird remains; focusing on inhumation 91 that contained the remains of a medium-sized corvid. The research presented by Lacey explored the potential social significances and possibilities created by the juxtaposition of rare grave-goods in this unique burial; exploring the declarative connection between the bird and the iron bell situated closely to it, suggesting changing understandings of this burial that may be produced by considering it in a new light. **Thomas Pickles** also presented a paper that considered funerary practice, focusing on the extraordinary cemetery at Street House, Loftus. Pickles argued for an even closer connection with Streanaeshalch than that originally noted by Stephen Sherlock, suggesting that the community's estate of Osingadun was located at modern Easington, just a mile or so from the cemetery and went on to consider the implications of this context for the cemetery and its unusual features; highlighting the diversity and significance of burial practice and societal behaviours and understandings. The wider social implications of such practices were considered in the paper presented by **Heidi Stoner**, who suggested that the kings of the early medieval insular world are suffused into the landscape through the burial, the foundations of royal centres and the forming of kingdoms through battlefields. Stoner argued that despite the invisibility of Anglo-Saxon kings, the signifiers of this early medieval kingship can be seen in the incredible wealth and ornament surviving in burials from the period, examining how the relationship of the king and the land manifests itself in the early medieval Insular world through burial practices and subterranean spaces as experienced through textual, archaeological and visual material. Ideas of the significance of time and place in relationship to burial were suggested by **Lucy Donkin** in her discussion of burial within the interior landscape of churches, suggesting the enduring function of apparently inactive actors within lived and experiential landscapes. Donkin's paper addressed the surface of the ground as a space of mediation between different spheres, separating and joining the realms of the living and the dead and connecting temporal categories in a more fluid manner. The argument in her paper of the space above ground representing the past for the dead and the present for the living; that below ground is the present abode of the dead, but speaks to the living of both the past and the future, were themes that were reflected throughout the conference. **Victoria Flood** considered the topic of the mythological burial of dragons, in a paper that suggested the locus of the subterranean as being a reflection of what's going on above ground – with the dragons, becoming a method of commenting on political activity on the earth's surface. Ideas of the (im)permanence of remembered landscapes were also addressed by **Margaret Tedford** in her paper on the landscapes present in *The Wife's Lament*, and in *Guthlac*; ideas that were also touched upon by **Patrick Gleeson**, in his consideration of the understandings of landscape in early medieval Ireland. Gleeson suggested that these understandings were fundamentally structured by a belief in the status of the land itself as the nexus of the worlds of humans and gods, and past and future. Exploring man made monuments as being part of the fabric of the land, implicated in the exercise of power, and the construction of authority.

Similar themes in a broader context were addressed by **Guy Halsall**, who presented a critical response to writing about the use of past monuments in early medieval funerary practice, whether talking about Britain or Gaul in terms of a desire by post-imperial élites to associate themselves with

the past in order to legitimate a local position by claiming a link with ‘ancestors’, especially by being buried in ‘ancient monuments’. Halsall’s paper drew attention to the lack of any empirical basis for such an obsession with ‘ancestors’, arguing instead that, rather than being about the past, aristocratic concern with marking a place in the landscape was with the future. **Neil Christie** usefully widened the discussion into the Mediterranean, taking the conference further afield with his discussion of the catacombs of Rome, a much frequented tourist hit. Christie suggested that the fascination with these subterranean spaces lies in stepping down to the deep, narrow corridors carved into the natural volcanic bedrock and trailing through the complex honeycomb of channels, brushing past and peering into emptied burial shelves, seeing the fragmented covers, and admiring the larger chambers for wealthier early Christians and remnant, but much degraded painted artwork. His paper considered the distinctions between modern and academic tourists, comparing our contemporary experiences of these spaces with those the pilgrims of the fifth through ninth centuries AD, to ask how useful a contemporary experience of these spaces is in terms of building an accurate image of the pilgrim experience in Rome’s catacombs and enquiring whether asking further questions of these spaces may help modern scholars understand the ‘feel’ of long-lost cities.

Ideas of landscape, in terms of mapped space, human agency and academic response were discussed by **Dale Kedwards** who considered two world maps preserved in a learned miscellany written in Iceland *c.*1250 (Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, GkS. 1812 III, 4to), in terms of the distinctions of the maps’ geographical contents, the place-names and toponyms arranged inside the maps’ outlines, and the more abstract qualities that are disposed around the maps’ perimeters presented in their inscriptions: such as the cardinal points, the names of the winds, the four ages of man, and the four seasons.

Kedwards argued that the maps’ framing inscriptions should be included in the scholarly considerations of their schemes of geographical representation; coherently demonstrating that the maps’ geographic contents are built irremovably into these frames. **Beth Kaneko** also considered mapped landscapes, presenting three ‘hidden’ maps of subterranean water charts. Kaneko observed the ubiquity of watercourses and oceans on medieval maps, suggesting the element’s ability to define and identify place in a cartographic context. Her paper focused on a late development in medieval cartography, highlighting the connection between water and settlement through the close examination of three medieval English plans of underground waterlines, of Christchurch, Canterbury (twelfth century), Waltham Abbey (thirteenth century), and the Charterhouse Monastery (fifteenth century) to shed new light on the emergence of cartographic understandings of landscape and local significance in this period. Landscape was also considered as the locus for the discovery of objects that themselves acquire disputed histories, as addressed by **Aideen Ireland** in her discussion of the hoard of remarkable gold objects (apparently) discovered while ploughing at Broighter near Limavady, Co. Derry in 1896. Ireland discussed the national politics and constructed history attached to the hoard, which was acquired soon after its discovery by a well-known Cork collector of antiquities and sold to the British Museum shortly thereafter. Her paper tracked the disputed

ownership of the hoard through the establishment of a Committee of Enquiry (1898), a public hearing (1899) and a law case (1903); asking ‘were the objects truly Treasure Trove, were they a hoard, had they been found at Broighter, what date were they, were they of native or imported manufacture?’ in a paper that sought to place this find in its wider socio-political context.

Several of the papers at the conference suggested a link between the ‘subterranean’, the surface of the earth and the regions beyond it, either the heavens above or the space of hell below. **Mike Bintley** presented a paper discussing the idea of Evil in Old English literature, discussing ideas of the ‘Tree of Death’ in the Old English Genesis and the frosty trees overhanging Grendel’s mere in *Beowulf*. His paper considered the roots of these various trees as reaching down into the earth, suggesting that the trees may function as a poignant reminder, therefore, of the continuing grasp of original sin upon the human family tree while making the point that what lies beneath the surface of the earth, whether physically, historically or conceptually acts as a foundation for what’s being constructed above it. **Meg Boulton**, in a similar vein, considered the space of Hell, the infernal realm that formed one of the two polar empires that eschatologically flanked the earth in Christian cosmology. She discussed the conceptualisation of Hell in the contemporary popular consciousness, suggesting that the idea of an Anglo-Saxon hell that pre-dates the Renaissance is often overlooked, going on to consider the influence of this potent site on the human imagination; further suggesting that Hell should be considered as a localised and conceptual space (sub-terra) that has forcefully held and demanded a complex cognitive response to its space and nature since it emerged as a coherent eschatological site in the Christian imagination.

From the subterranean as a place of burial and horror, several papers suggested a link between the (sub)surface of the earth and the heavens. **Austin Mason**, presented a paper concerned with funerary rites and societal significances, suggesting that a grave’s story does not always end with the burial rite. Mason’s paper focused on one aspect of Anglo-Saxon secondary burial practices manifest in both pagan and Christian contexts: house-shaped structures, marking pagan-period cremations and inhumations, house-shaped coffins held the bodies of Christian saints, and gable-ended reliquaries housed their exhumed and translated relics. All of these practices suggest that the living considered the dead gone, but not forgotten; they could still be visited at their houses, which connected the world below ground with earthly and heavenly realms above. **Jane Hawkes** presented a paper discussing the links between the form of the carved Anglo-Saxon high stone cross and *sub terra*, rising as they did in the form of highly decorated and polychromed sculptures, inset with glittering metal and paste glass, highly visible to those walking on the surface of the earth. Hawkes pointed out that most of these monuments are only known to us through excavation, having been deliberately buried at the point of their destruction (as was the case with the Ruthwell cross; and the shrine from Lichfield, Staffordshire), or subsequently used in the foundations of later churches, acting as the stones on which the churches could be built (like those from Bakewell in Derbyshire). She argued, that despite our modern perceptions of them, in order to stand as monuments dominating the landscape in their original form, the high crosses had, of necessity, to be ‘buried’ in the earth suggesting that the Anglo-Saxon crosses were not set in elaborate bases that stood above ground as they were in Ireland, but were ‘planted’ straight into rough-cut bases buried in the ground, as at

Bewcastle in Cumbria; thus appearing to emerge from the earth, suggesting several symbolic significances that may be read from the act of planting a cross into the earth. **Nick Baker** also addressed the significance of stone monuments placed in close relation to the surface of the earth, discussing representations of the evangelists, which, together with other participants in the heavenly drama, can be found on objects connected with the departed. His paper considered images of the evangelists as they appear on items intimately associated with the dead, such as sarcophagi, and on public monuments, like cross-shafts, which not only reference Christ's death but also alert the viewer to the resurrected life; aiming to show how these images (c.AD 700–c.AD 900) could have been employed by the literate religious in their contemplative journeys from the earthly to the divine.

All these papers produced a rich network of ideas related to the 'subterranean' that were reflected in **Howard Williams'** keynote lecture entitled *The Archaeology of Weyland the Smith*, which addressed a wide range of ideas relating to the conference theme, including perceptions of material traces of the past in the early Middle Ages, and the widespread desire to tie monument reuse into models of mass-migration and the replacement of earlier peoples, the process of Christian conversion, and 'kingdom formation' in the seventh century. Williams suggested that it is important that we explore the many potential reasons and situations in which ancient monuments and old things were redeployed in ritual, social and economic life in a more contextual manner, giving several instances and examples of such practice.

He addressed the sites of graves and tombs as one particular strategy of engaging with the underworld, encompassing ideas of digging and depositing, but also closing off and imagining, rediscovering and encountering the dead, before turning to discuss Weyland the Smith in Anglo-Saxon England, focusing on the attribution to a Neolithic tomb as 'Wayland's Smithy'. Williams asked questions of why this specific monument, in that specific location, received the place-name association with Wayland, and why it was referred to as his 'smithy' (as opposed to his tomb), in order to raise wider questions of how scholars can be more specific in thinking about the choices made in allocating myths and legends to ancient monuments in the later Anglo-Saxon landscape; producing an intellectually challenging keynote that engaged with the themes of the conference while being academically exciting in its own right.

The success of this conference was that it drew together wide ranging themes producing discussions and simulating (re)consideration/s of the idea of the 'subterranean'. Moreover, it is hoped that the ideas and significances foregrounded at 'Subterranean in the Medieval World' will be an active contribution to the scholarly discourse of the textual and material culture of the Medieval, and the terms used to articulate it.