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Marshlands and Monasteries:
The Impact of Weapon Deposition on Medieval British Christianity

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Abstract

This paper, using proven archeological evidence, time-specific literature, and references on monastic life, local tradition, and social concepts of mythology, draws a clear connection between the prevalent European Iron Age practice of ritual votive and weapon deposition into bodies of water and the state of Christianity in middle ages Great Britain. The ceremonial county of Lincolnshire, particularly the Witham Valley, is featured heavily for its high concentration of deposition and monastic sites in a verifiably close distance of each other. The paper explores the possibility that the existence of these pre-Christian ritual sites remained relevant throughout the Roman period through the practice of syncretization, and eventually became intrinsically associated with the land, until the construction of monasteries and the determination of land use during the middle ages was affected by the spiritual connotations the ritual-associated land maintained. The second half of the paper focuses on selected writings of the Christian era that featured weapon deposition as well as prominent plot elements that suggested a non-Christian influence as evidence that these practices remained relevant enough in the consciousness to be worthy of inclusion in works such as the Arthurian Cycles and several Old English poems. Through an analysis of these literary works, the archeological and geographical make-up of the monastic landscape, and the cultural contexts of both medieval and pre-Roman Britain, this paper argues that ritual deposition was a spiritually and socially significant aspect of Britain's history that had an observable impact on the religion, ritual, literature, and local lore of the British middle ages.

Between the summers of 2004 and 2005, surveyors from the National Mapping Programme supported by Historic England (an executive non-departmental public body of the British Government) mapped a section of the Witham Valley in Lincolnshire known for its nine medieval monasteries (the largest concentration in the country).¹ They subsequently discovered from aerial mapping photos that nearly all of the monastic ruins were connected to ancient causeways that led to bodies of water containing pre-Christian metal deposits. These deposits contained troves of swords, spears, and ornate personal belongings in both local Celtic and Roman styles.² Based on previous research conducted at similar Western European sites such as Llyn Cerrig Bach in Wales and the La Tene Culture type site in Switzerland, as well as more local sites such as Coventina's Well on Hadrian's Wall, it could be determined these watery deposits were votive offerings.³ The connection between the Christian monasteries and these pagan offerings was not immediately identifiable, but evidence connecting Witham's deposit culture to a centuries-spanning tradition across Britain draws a line to the long-lasting sacredness of watery lands, and their impact on the monastery's construction locations. In addition to this, post-Christianization literary and poetic evidence supports the continued impact of weapons and water on British culture, including Old English hagiographic poetry and the Arthurian Legends.⁴

Britain's Iron Age practice of depositing weapons and other votive objects in watery locations continued to influence medieval Christian authors and religious institutions because it spoke to the importance of water as a transitional and sacred bridge between the human and mythic elements of the British landscape. It is a tradition that was carried by the Celts into the isles, supported by the Romans upon their arrival, and continued to be steeped into the local lore

¹ "Witham Valley NMP Summary Report" (Historic England 2005), <https://historicengland.org.uk/research/results/reports/6839/WithamValleyNMP-SummaryReport>

² Hingley, *The Deposition of Iron Objects in Britain During the Later Prehistoric and Roman periods: Contextual analysis and the Significance of Iron* 2006, 213-257.

³ Todd, *A Companion to Roman Britain* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2003), 10-20.

⁴ Lund, *At Water's Edge* (2010), 5-6.

of communities for centuries, which led to its permanent association with the land on which abbeys were constructed, Christian poetry was penned, and medieval societies lived, irrevocably binding itself to Middle Ages Britain.

The practice of votive deposition has been present in Europe since the Neolithic era. Cultures across the continent have placed meaningful objects in bodies of water to honor various deities for centuries, from ancient water deposits to modern holy wells.⁵ While objects similar to those deposited for votive reasons can be found on land, in general, archeologists have interpreted wetland finds as votive offerings, whereas most dry land finds are seen to be treasure hoards or scrap metal. Watery depositions are defined as existing in lakes, ponds, rivers, streams/tributaries, marshes, fens, meres, bogs, and otherwise wetland environments as well as man-made structures such as wells, water tanks, and constructed pond systems. Dry depositions are typically embedded within the local landscape, often under layers of silt or sediment that must be excavated.⁶ This creates a distinction in which water finds are termed ritual and purposeful deposits, while dry finds are typically regarded to be the results of battle casualties, wealth hoarding, or accidental abandonment.

One of the most defining and heavily researched archeological deposition sites is the La Tène typesite on the northern shore of Lake Neuchâtel, Switzerland. The typesite documents a highly preserved tradition of deposition that is observable throughout Northwestern Europe for many centuries following. The site includes around 2500 artifacts including spearheads, swords, arrowheads, scabbards, shields, rings, brooches, and pieces of coinage in Celtic and Roman styles.⁷ The La Tène site also features timber causeways to access the lake, another hallmark of

⁵ “Witham Valley NMP Summary Report” (Historic England 2005), <https://historicengland.org.uk/research/results/reports/6839/WithamValleyNMP-SummaryReport>

⁶ Crease, *Re-Thinking Ritual Traditions* (University College of London, n.d.), 30.

⁷ Fitzpatrick, *The Finds From La Tène in the British Museum* (Cambridge University Press, 2018)

deposition areas that are present across Scandinavia and the British Isles. The styles observed in the artifacts and construction of the site were later carried to Britain by Celtic Britons, illustrating the reach of the deposition tradition.⁸ Archeologists have uncovered a large number of ritual sites matching the La Tène criteria throughout the Neolithic and extending into the Late Iron Age/Pre-Roman Iron Age.⁹ Within the British Isles, there are notable offering sites at Lisnacrogher, Flag Fen, and Llyn Cerrig Bach; a Welsh lake famed for containing over 150 Iron Age votive objects.¹⁰

An important aspect of British deposition sites is the reason for their spiritual significance—the deities associated with them. Located within the ceremonial county of Somerset and the valley of the River Avon is the British spa town of Bath. Once the Roman settlement of *Aquae Sulis*, it is famed for its well-preserved Roman baths. Its three natural hot springs, popular with tourists, are also the source of a long history of water deity worship. The goddess Sulis, to which the original colony owed its name, was once worshiped at the baths.¹¹ Despite the bath houses being constructed in the 1st Century AD during Roman occupation, she was originally a local British deity, who was later syncretized with the Roman goddess Minerva.¹² Her pre-Roman importance was uncovered using research done in the late 1970s by archeologist and now-emeritus Oxford professor Barry Cunliffe. During excavation he uncovered a gravel causeway predating the Roman-era resin void constructed to contain the spring's waters.¹³ Similar to causeways discovered at sites such as La Tène, the structure was likely erected to allow religious pilgrims to navigate the marshy landscape in order to pay tribute

⁸ MacDonald, *Llyn Cerrig Bach* (University of Wales Press, 2007)

⁹ "Collections Online / British Museum," n.d, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/term/x111161>.

¹⁰ "Witham Valley NMP Summary Report" (Historic England 2005), <https://historicengland.org.uk/research/results/reports/6839/WithamValleyNMP-SummaryReport>

¹¹ Reynolds and Volk, *Gifts, Curses, Cult, and Society at Bath* (Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, 1990), 379-391.

¹² Todd, *A Companion To Roman Britain* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2003), 201

¹³ Cunliffe, *Roman Bath Discovered* (Routledge Kegan Paul London, 1971)

to their goddess's sacred spring.¹⁴ A clear aspect of worship was the votive objects thrown into the springs. Offerings ranged in time-span; from Roman-era lead and pewter defixiones (curse tablets), Bronze Age brooches, finger-rings, and earrings, to eighteen Iron Age coins.¹⁵ While Sulis was syncretized and influenced by Roman settlers, some local water deities remained wholly British. One notable example is the healing water-spirit Coventina, whose shrine, aptly termed Coventina's Well, is located at Carrawburgh on Hadrian's Wall.¹⁶ Situated on the bottom of a valley, the area surrounding the well was made marshy by several streams that flowed through it during antiquity, causing Coventina's landscape to become clearly linked to water. Followers of her cult deposited many objects into the well and cistern containing it, largely between the 2nd and 4th centuries. 13,487 coins, an assortment of personal objects, dedication slabs, clay incense burners, and several bas-reliefs of Coventina as a triple goddess and nymph-like figure have all been uncovered.¹⁷ Both Sulis and Coventina were associated with healing powers, with pilgrims often seeking their assistance in matters of illness. Tablets thrown into their springs typically bore pleas for miracles of health.¹⁸ Other British water deities exhibited the same aquatic healing symbolism, such as Nodens, the presiding deity at the Lydney Temple in Lancashire, which contained an assortment of baths and an association with the River Severn's episodic tidal surge.¹⁹

Britain's history of water deposition did not end with the advent of Christianity or the conclusion of Roman occupation in the Late Iron Age. There is an archaeologically documented

¹⁴ Ibid. 13

¹⁵ Todd, *A Companion To Roman Britain* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2003), 203

¹⁶ Allason-Jones and McKay, *Coventina's Well* (Trustees of the Clayton Collection, 1985)

¹⁷ "Heritage Gateway – Coventina's Well," n.d, https://www.heritagegateway.org.uk/Gateway/Results_Single.aspx?uid=1013364&sort=4&search=all&criteria=coventina&rational=q&recordsperpage=10&resourceID=19191.

¹⁸ Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (Oxford University Press, 1992)

¹⁹ Todd, *A Companion To Roman Britain* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2003), 208-209

lineage of ritual deposits in the wetlands of Britain from the 4th to 11th centuries.²⁰ The number of medieval objects in bodies of water during this period is too prevalent to ignore or explain as accidental losses. For example, the River Thames contains over one hundred Anglo-Saxon spearheads found in twenty-five different locations. In addition, swords, spearheads, and axes dating to the 9th-10th centuries have been found in prominent British rivers such as the Lea and Witham.²¹ These weapons were likely deposited in the Christian era for the same reason as pewter tablets, coinage, personal ornaments, and other weaponry were deposited during the pre-Roman and pagan British times— as spiritually significant offerings with ties to the mythical properties of water and watery landscapes. All told, the impact and rich history of deposition is clear, but this storied practice was more influential than the surface archeology would suggest. Medieval British religious and literary life holds the key to further evidence.

The archeological project area in the Witham Valley of Lincolnshire spans 367 sq. kilometers and includes 485 monuments and 205 find spots. It is defined by the course of the River Witham, which is sourced from a series of springs in the clay-capped limestone of the Kesteven uplands immediately west of the village of South Witham, and covers approximately 140 km from source to sea.²² The valley has been of interest to archeologists for years due to its unusually high concentration of medieval abbeys and other religious structures.²³ Witham features nine medieval monasteries dispersed across a stretch of land approximately 35 km long and 8 km wide.²⁴ There is a reasonable explanation for this oversaturation of religious

²⁰ Catney and Start, *Time and Tide: Archeology of the Witham Valley* (Witham Valley Archaeology Research Committee, 2003), 6-10

²¹ Lund, *At Water's Edge* (2010), 4-8.

²² Catney and Start, *Time and Tide: Archeology of the Witham Valley* (Witham Valley Archaeology Research Committee, 2003), 3

²³ Oliver, *An Account of the Religious Houses Formerly Situated on the Eastern Side of the River Witham* (1846)

²⁴ "Witham Valley NMP Summary Report" (Historic England 2005), <https://historicengland.org.uk/research/results/reports/6839/WithamValleyNMP-SummaryReport>

buildings— and the answer lies within the earlier history of the landscape. In addition to the buildings erected during the middle ages, the valley also features Neolithic funerary monuments, the ruins of Roman temple sites, and ten timber causeways that end in large metal depositions.²⁵ These structures interact with the monasteries in interesting ways, implying a connection. Take South Kyme Priory, for instance. The site of an Augustinian Priory, the monastery was constructed ~200m north of the River Slea, a tributary of the River Witham. At South Kyme, Bronze Age metalwork is present on the south side of the river and at the monastery itself. South Kyme is also located southwest of a field of Neolithic round barrows— identified as funerary in use. What makes the monastery at South Kyme unique is the fact that, unlike any of the other monasteries, it was constructed a good distance from the river.²⁶ Its immediate adjacency to ancient funerary sites and metalwork offerings suggest that the medieval builders understood the spiritual significance of the land closer to the river, and found a funerary site inappropriate for the construction of a church. Barlings Abbey and Catley Priory also have monastic foundations and barrow cemeteries immediately adjacent. While both monasteries were constructed near the river, their precincts are constructed at a distance from the isolated barrow-fields.²⁷ Together, this implies that Neolithic monuments were understood to be of importance for many centuries after their use, especially seeing as the monastic sites chose to be erected in the viewing vicinity of the barrows at respectable distances, when they could have easily been built elsewhere.

While the affinity for building near funerary sites is indicative of a continued reverence for the spirituality of the landscape, it is the thematic prevalence of water from prehistoric rites to middle ages monastic culture that highlights the influence of deposition practices on Witham's

²⁵ Chowne, *Aspects of Later Prehistoric Settlement in Lincolnshire: a Study of the Western Fen Margin and Bain Valley* (University of Nottingham, 1998), 4-46

²⁶ "Witham Valley NMP Summary Report" (Historic England 2005), <https://historicengland.org.uk/research/results/reports/6839/WithamValleyNMP-SummaryReport>

²⁷ *Ibid.* 25

medieval religious lifestyle the most. Nearly every monastery features a variety of aquatic elements. Bardney Abbey, a Benedictine House thought to have been a cathedral during the Saxon period, includes an enclosing moat with a network of fishponds and water channels. Other sites have fishponds as well— Catley Priory’s grounds are flanked by a trackway leading to a medieval fishery on the edge of the River Witham, with evidence of additional fishponds closer to the precinct of the Priory.²⁸ Archeological records reveal further details at Stansfield and Stixwold Priors. The former was once a house of Benedictine nuns, but no structural remains survive to provide additional context. Instead, earthworks reveal a complex of fishponds, fishery mounds, breeding tanks, and associated buildings. Stixwold, a medieval Cistercian nunnery, features a substantial bank that suggests a potential monastic route running towards the River Witham. Also at this location, adjacent to the river, is a large mound visible as crop marks. The mound contains medieval finds that include pottery, net sinkers, and fish smokers, which suggests a long-term occupation of fish farming amongst the Priory’s members.²⁹

The concept of religious personnel engaging in pisciculture is ambiguous until the context of spiritual significance is applied. From the 7th to 10th centuries, the aforementioned Bardney Abbey contained the bone-relics of St. Oswald, a king of Northumbria whose severed arm was alleged to have caused a mythical spring to appear from the ground.³⁰ This gave him an association with aquatic healing properties (much like ancient local British deities), and several holy wells would be established around England in his name.³¹ Bardney Abbey, the possessors of his relics, habitually leased medieval fishing rights on the confluence of the River Witham to the nuns of Stanfield Priory. The terms of Stanfield’s lease specifically permitted the monks of

²⁸ “Witham Valley NMP Summary Report” (Historic England 2005), <https://historicengland.org.uk/research/results/reports/6839/WithamValleyNMP-SummaryReport>

²⁹ Catney and Start, *Time and Tide: Archeology of the Witham Valley* (Witham Valley Archaeology Research Committee, 2003), 10-29

³⁰ Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History* (AD 731)

³¹ “St Oswald’s Well” n.d, <https://www.visitoswestry.co.uk/attractions/st-oswalds-well/>

Bardney to visit the grange at Barleymouth to fish the river once a year, on the vigil of St. Oswald. This grange was presumably the site of an ancient causeway.³² Bardney, located on the island of Oxney, is connected northward to the river by the causeway, which spans 1 km in length. The causeway ends in a number of significant metalwork finds containing artifacts from the Bronze Age to medieval era, as well as a Neolithic cemetery of 30+ barrow mounds— more evidence of the connection between ancient and medieval spiritual centers in the valley.³³ The practice was continued during intermediary Roman years as well. The valley contains three assumed Roman temple sites which share characteristics with Romano-British water deity worship sites such as Bath and Coventina’s Well, including one, Red Bridge, that is located near Stixwould Priory. Cropmarks signify evidence of a Roman road leading from the temple to the medieval fishing mound, which implies long-lasting use and more religious connection across several faith practices.³⁴ The connection stemmed from the medieval ceremonial fishing pilgrimage occurring at the same location as an ancient causeway once traversed by pre-Christian worshippers and the Roman temple road used by later venerators indicates a continued importance of Witham’s waters seeping into monastic tradition.

The presence of Iron Age causeways in the valley constitutes a substantial amount of evidence for the link between the monasteries and metal deposition practices. Ten timber causeways have been documented as appearing at regular intervals along the course of the River Witham, with each corresponding to a monastic structure, and many also connecting to medieval fishponds, Neolithic burial mounds, and Roman roads and temples. All ten causeways share a consistent set of characteristics and orientation, which heavily suggests that they are

³² Ibid. 28

³³ “MLI83351 - Branston Booths to Bardney Causeway” n.d,
<https://heritage-explorer.lincolnshire.gov.uk/Monument/MLI83351>

³⁴ “Witham Valley NMP Summary Report” (Historic England 2005),
<https://historicengland.org.uk/research/results/reports/6839/WithamValleyNMP-SummaryReport>

pre-monastic in origin.³⁵ For instance, the causeways' associated ecclesiastical sites are, without exception, always located at their northern end, while the southern end leads to the River Witham (often passing a variety of water features along the way).³⁶ Seeing as the majority of deposits were made into the Witham or its adjacent ponds, tributaries, and peat bogs; the locations of the future monasteries would have originally been the starting points for religious pilgrims. The geography of the valley gives further context to the causeways' use— they cover the marshy floodplains and open waters of the valley, enabling them to deliver the pilgrims to various bodies of water where metalworks, personal ornaments, and weapons were deposited.³⁷ They were essential features of the landscape; likely generating new pools and meres in the shifting Witham wetlands, as well as being the foundations for future Roman roadways.³⁸

While most of the causeways have been located using aerial photography and mapping techniques, one—termed the Fiskerton Causeway— has been extensively excavated and researched, yielding an impressive range of metalwork finds. The wooden remains of the Fiskerton Causeway have been dated to 480-170 BC using samples from oak posts.³⁹ Despite Fiskerton's evident Iron Age creation date, the deposits range in era wildly. Early finds include the hilt of a bronze-fitted iron sword decorated with typical Celtic motifs, several other corroded iron swords still in their scabbards, iron spearheads, and a host of bronze personal jewelry, including rings, decorative sheets, bands, and penannular rings.⁴⁰ The finds are not exclusively limited to the Iron Age, however. Deposits located at all ten of the causeways amount to thirty-two finds of medieval date, including ten swords, five daggers/long-knives, six axe-heads,

³⁵ Ibid. 33

³⁶ Catney and Start, *Time and Tide: Archeology of the Witham Valley* (Witham Valley Archaeology Research Committee, 2003), 9-13

³⁷ Field et al. *The Timber Causeway* (Oxbow Books, 2003), 1-16

³⁸ Ibid. 35

³⁹ Field et al. *The Wooden Remains* (Oxbow Books, 2003), 25-48

⁴⁰ Field et al. *The Other Iron Age Artefacts* (Oxbow Books, 2003), 87-114

and six spearheads.⁴¹ A number of swords feature incantations inscribed into their blades, which emphasize the ritualistic nature of their depositions.⁴² Combined with the causeway's involvement with the monasteries, it can be inferred that the votive depositions had a continued effect on the valley, even into the Christian era. Additional deposits upon Fiskerton's stretch of the River Witham include an Anglo-Saxon bowl and a triple brooch, a viking sword and a host of medieval weaponry and other such metal artifacts dating as late as the 14th and 15th centuries, further proof of the causeway's staying power.⁴³

The style of the objects found at the causeways display connections to a wider tradition of deposition across Britain, which is also supported by local etymological and archeological evidence, affirming that the rituals in the Witham valley were not isolated. A number of the ironwork deposits exhibit similarities to those found in the Welsh lake of Llyn Cerrig Bach on the island of Anglesey. For instance, Fiskerton Causeway's Item 300 was an ash-wood spearhead, the same wood used for the spearheads found at Llyn Cerrig Bach, indicating a familiar culture across deposition sites.⁴⁴ Other votive metalwork sites from a similar time period across the Celtic world feature similar characteristics as well, such as Llyn Fawr in Glamorganshire, Wales.⁴⁵ This connection is made possible by the fact that Lincolnshire was originally settled by Celtic Britons, which is further supported by the etymological history of the area's place-name. Lincolnshire was named *Lindum Colonia* by Roman settlers, which derived from a reconstructed Celtic name *Lindon*.⁴⁶ The 'Lin' element of this name is a cognate for the

⁴¹ Ibid. 35

⁴² "MLI52890 - MEDIEVAL SWORD from the WITHAM" n.d, <https://heritage-explorer.lincolnshire.gov.uk/Monument/MLI52890=>

⁴³ Catney and Start, *Time and Tide: Archeology of the Witham Valley* (Witham Valley Archaeology Research Committee, 2003), 11

⁴⁴ Field et al. *The Iron Age Weapons* (Oxbow Books, 2003), 49-86

⁴⁵ "Witham Valley NMP Summary Report" (Historic England 2005), <https://historicengland.org.uk/research/results/reports/6839/WithamValleyNMP-SummaryReport>

⁴⁶ "Lindum Colonia" n.d, https://www.lincolnmuseum.com/assets/downloads/Investigate_Roman_Lincoln.pdf

Welsh *llyn*, and Scottish/Irish Gaelic *loch*, meaning lake or pool.⁴⁷ Ptolemy's *Geography* refers to modern Lincolnshire as not only being called Lindum, but as a *polis* (town) within the jurisdiction of the Corieltauvi— the local Celtic tribe.⁴⁸ Interestingly, the evidence for Lincolnshire's broader Celtic connection also affirms the ancient ritualistic importance of water in the region. It is suspected that the pool referred to in its original name, Lindon, was the Brayford Pool— a well-known widening of the River Witham.⁴⁹ Coincidentally, the greatest frequency of metalwork deposits on the River Witham occurs between the Brayford Pool and the river's confluence with its tributaries the Slea and Bain just below Kirkstead Abbey in Tattershall.⁵⁰ Combining the etymological history with the archeological evidence of ritualistic deposition, the river would have been a major center of spirituality and cultural significance for centuries, and Lincolnshire's practices were likely a microcosm of a more wide-spread phenomenon.

While there appears to be a large amount of evidence for the bridge between British pre-Christian deposition rituals and middle ages Christianity, there is still a lingering curiosity as to why the connection was sustained in the first place. The answer could lie with the cultural construct of England's land itself. According to Julie Lund, a professor of Archeology at the University of Oslo, "The [medieval] landscape was personified as cognitive, having its own roots in mentality, world-view, and cosmology. It carried sacredness and weight. The landscape is a 'social artifact' for humanity."⁵¹ This claim is supported by the nature of weapon depositions being inherently personifying. Weapons, especially swords, were believed to carry their own

⁴⁷ Ibid. 44

⁴⁸ Ptolemy, *Geography* (n.d)

⁴⁹ "River Witham: Survey of English Place-Names" n.d, <https://epns.nottingham.ac.uk/browse/id/5328680db47fc40b93000675-River+Witham>

⁵⁰ Catney and Start, *Time and Tide: Archeology of the Witham Valley* (Witham Valley Archaeology Research Committee, 2003), 6

⁵¹ Lund, *At Water's Edge* (2010), 2

histories, and bare the mark of their wielders. This sentiment was also reflected with the tradition of sacrificing personal ornaments to water deities.⁵² As detailed before, pewter tablets with messages, brooches, earrings, miscellaneous keepsakes, and coinage (personal wealth) were all common offerings.⁵³ By giving up their belongings, they gave up themselves. Following this logic, depositing swords allowed warriors to symbolically submit their agency cultivated in battle to their deities.⁵⁴ Evidence for the personification of swords lies in their naming traditions, which are identifiable in archeology and poetry. For example, the River Witham's 'Lincoln Sword,' uncovered adjacent to Monk's Abbey, features the inscription *Leutlrit*, a continental Germanic name.⁵⁵ Other weapons were named as well; a 9th-10th century iron scramasax extracted from the Thames at Battersea, London has the futhorc rune inscription *Beagnoth*.⁵⁶ In poetry, the famous Old English epic *Beowulf* (c. 700-1000 AD) names two swords of importance—*Hrunting* and *Naegling*⁵⁷—and the fragmented poem *Waldere* features the sword *Minning*.⁵⁸ The swords are often personified beyond their names. Swords in *Beowulf* are described as “spiteful” (2202), “never found to be wanting in warfare” (1460) and to have “abandoned [Beowulf] in the battle” (2670).⁵⁹ The most famous literary sword, however, shares a closer connection to water deposition rituals. From the Arthurian literary canon, Excalibur serves as an iconic archetype in the cultural sphere, associated especially with the lake and its guardian. Continental and Insular Celtic cultures have long relied on archetypes to categorize and synthesize their mythological figures. Examples include the healer persona of the

⁵² Osbourne and Robin, *Hoards, Votives, Offerings: The Archaeology of the Dedicated Object* (Taylor and Francis, 2004), 1-10

⁵³ Todd, *A Companion To Roman Britain* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2003), 207

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 51

⁵⁵ “Sword | British Museum,” n.d, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1848-1021-1

⁵⁶ “Seax | British Museum,” n.d, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1857-0623-1

⁵⁷ Heaney, *Beowulf* (Faber and Faber, 2000)

⁵⁸ Himes, *The Old English Epic of Waldere* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009)

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 56

Romano-British Sulis, the father-hunter role of the Celtic and Gallo-Roman Cernunnos⁶⁰, and the triple-goddess archetype (exhibited in depictions of Coventina). The same can be said for the characters and symbols of the Arthurian Legends, which function as the basis for a number of medieval literary cycles.

While Arthurian motifs are embedded in the cultural zeitgeist, their actual origins are much more elusive. King Arthur himself was first noted in the pseudo-historical account of Britain's early history, *Historia Brittonum*.⁶¹ Written around 828 AD, it is commonly attributed to the Welsh monk Nennius.⁶² However, the largest body of work associated with the legends is the *Matter of Britain*, which acts as a centuries-spanning compilation of important British-related texts, from the famous *Canterbury Tales* to a host of anonymous and relatively unknown poems.⁶³ Many of the texts are written in Old French and Latin instead of Middle English, but they all concern the purported history of the British Isles— especially through the tales of King Arthur and his entourage. Excalibur was originally mentioned in earlier Welsh texts such as *Culhwch and Olwen*⁶⁴ (c. 10th-11th century), where it was known as *Caledfwlch*, a possible cognate of the legendary Irish sword *Caladbolg*, although the proposition is debated.⁶⁵ This early name was later translated in a *Matter of Britain* work, Welsh author Geoffrey Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (The History of the Kings of Britain, c. 1136) as Caliburnus.⁶⁶ No matter its name, the central theme of Excalibur stories is pervasive. Arthur being gifted the sword by the Lady of the Lake is an endlessly replicated image, seen everywhere from English author Sir Thomas Malory's famed *Le Morte d'Arthur*⁶⁷ (c. 1485) to Lord Alfred Tennyson's

⁶⁰ Green, *Symbol and Image in Celtic Religious Art*, (Routledge London, 1989), 150

⁶¹ Nennius, *History of the Britons*

⁶² Lambin and Thomas, *Arthurian Writers: A Biographical Encyclopedia* (Bloomsbury, 2007), 17-21

⁶³ Morland and Raine, *The Matter of Britain* (Graal, 1984)

⁶⁴ Bromwich and Evans, *Culhwch and Olwen* (1992)

⁶⁵ Ibid. 63

⁶⁶ Geoffrey, Reeve, and Wright, *Historia regum Britanniae* (2009)

⁶⁷ Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, (1485)

illustrated poem *Idylls of the King*.⁶⁸ (c. 1859) The Lady of the Lake, while a literary character, functions as a mythological archetype, in the same way the Romano-British water deities do. She has been attributed to dozens of names across regions and languages, the most prominent being Nimue and Vivienne, with many scribal variations.⁶⁹ While she has a variety of portrayals across the Arthurian cycles and poems, using etymological, archetypal, and thematic inference, her origin can likely be linked to the Irish goddess Niamh, who walked across the ocean to bring the hero Oisín to Tír na nÓg, the land of the forever young.⁷⁰ She is usually portrayed as a nymph-like guardian of her lake, or the concept of water and springs in general, which aligns her with typical water deity archetypes. It is likely she, like most deities, is a syncretization of a general archetype.⁷¹ However, it is the fact that she distributes weapons that connects her to water deposition the most. The fact that every source text for the Arthurian legends was written after the introduction of Christianity to Europe implies that the presence of this detail had to be a deliberate inclusion as a reference to the practice, especially seeing as Excalibur is a personified sword.⁷² At the time, humans simply lacked the technology to investigate bodies of water, leaving them unexplored and transformative spaces, which led to their mystification and incorporation into spiritual practice.⁷³ Worshipers deposited their weapons expecting them to meet a definitive end. Excalibur being brought out of the lake by an extra-human force would have represented a *deus ex machina* for Arthur— a godly gift. In the Middle English poem *Alliterative Morte Arthure*⁷⁴ (c. ~1400), and several other English and French sources, Arthur instructs his knight Sir Bedivere to return Excalibur to the lake after his death at the Battle of

⁶⁸ Tennyson, *Idylls of the King* (1859)

⁶⁹ Nitzze, *An Arthurian Cruc: Viviane or Niniane?* (Brepols Publishers, 1954), 326-330

⁷⁰ Markale, *Merlin: Priest of Nature* (Inner Traditions, 1995), 119-120

⁷¹ *Ibid.* 69

⁷² *Ibid.* 63

⁷³ Lund, *At Water's Edge* (2010), 8-9

⁷⁴ Benson, *King Arthur's Death* (1994)

Camlann. In many tellings, Arthur is convinced the sword's return will cause a mythological event while Bedivere is skeptical. In the end, a hand arises from the lake and drags it back into the waters, balancing out the supernatural situation generated by the gifting of Excalibur to Arthur. It is possible this symbolic imagery serves as a visualization for ritual deposition, as it displays a mythical water-being receiving a sword that is both implicated with its wielder and a greater expanse of mythology. The extensive centuries-spanning Arthurian legends feature many pagan elements like this moment; from magic-casters such as Merlin and Morgan le Fay to the inclusion of dragons and pagan-infused Christian imagery.⁷⁵ Still, the story of Excalibur and the Lady of the Lake seems to epitomize pre-Christian life the most, with its artfully decorated references capitalizing on a historical tradition to relay its story more effectively.

Other medieval literature supports the legacy of deposition and the personified landscape as well. The Old English companion poems *Guthlac A* and *Guthlac B* (c. 730-740), otherwise known as *The Life of St. Guthlac of Crowland* and *The Death of St. Guthlac*,⁷⁶ are a hagiographic account of St. Guthlac's life in Lincolnshire, where metal deposition rituals are highly documented. The poems are controversial for their depiction of demons; St. Guthlac becomes a hermit and builds himself a cell within a barrow on the island of Crowland in the Witham Fens (a wetland environment), where he subjects himself to live with supernatural creatures. It is implied the mound he takes residence in represents a transition between the natural and demonic realms.⁷⁷ *Guthlac B*, in particular, features an opening conversation between the saint and the hellish beings before St. Guthlac succumbs to death. The demons are described in great detail; everything from "horrid ghafts [and] crime-wights" (82-83) to "wretched and wracking spirits"

⁷⁵ Meister, *Arthurian Literature as a Distorted Model of Christianity* (Scriptorium Press, 1991), 32-43

⁷⁶ Felix, *The Anglo-Saxon Version of the Life of St. Guthlac, Hermit of Crowland* (1848)

⁷⁷ Noetzel, *Monster, Demon, Warrior: St. Guthlac and the Cultural Landscape of the Anglo-Saxon Fens* (UCLA, CMRS Center For Early Global Studies, 2014), 21-23

(399).⁷⁸ The descriptions echo the language used for pre-Christian supernatural figures, and Guthlac's consistent dialogue with the demons allows them to voice their ideology, which is where the poem generated particular controversy. Importantly, evidence of the Witham's wetlands being associated with the supernatural in a Christian context provides further support for the continued religious personification of the landscape.⁷⁹ St. Guthlac is still venerated in the fens, demonstrating continued influence through congregations such as St. Guthlac's Church in the town of Marketing Deeping.⁸⁰ Another Old English poem that exhibits object personification through an explicitly Christian lens is *The Dream of the Rood*⁸¹ (c. 8th-10th century). In it, the Crucifixion story is related to the narrator by the cross itself. While other Old English poetry featured weapons described as exhibiting personality traits or bearing names, this poem takes the practice and filters it through an entirely Christian theme. When considered together, it is clear that even the most influential Christian literature was impacted by somewhat pagan or unconventional themes.

It is apparent from this evidence that the lines between eras are blurred by the hand of cultural memory. Whether it seeps itself into the building sites for monasteries, lays the foundation for water-centric Saint-veneration rituals, or inspires core story beats of iconic literary masterpieces, there is no denying the power of ritual. As if by osmosis, ancient traditions become unseen motivators for unrelated practices. The real question lies in the extent of this impact. One must wonder how many facets of medieval life were rooted in much more complicated historic undercurrents, and if they were, how that manifested in the account of middle ages Christian life that is understood today. All told, pre-Christian ritualistic votives had a clear and direct line of

⁷⁸ Ibid. 75

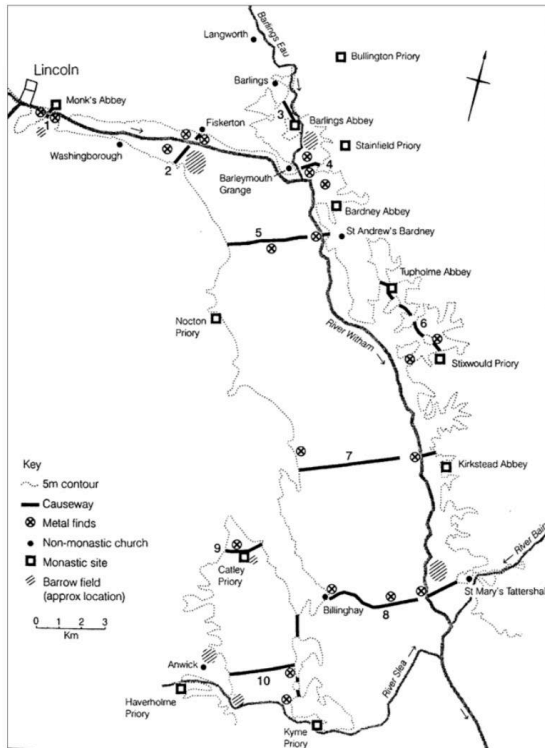
⁷⁹ Ibid. 76

⁸⁰ "Church in Market Deeping - St Guthlac's" n.d, <https://stguthlacs.org.uk/>

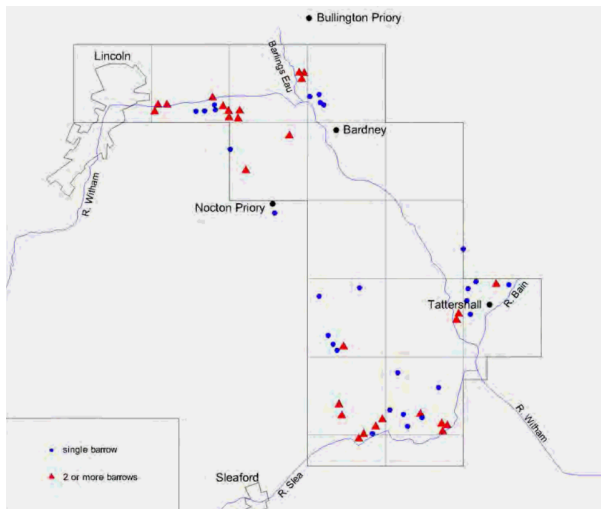
⁸¹ Dickins and Ross, *The Dream of the Rood* (California State University, Bakersfield, 1965)

influence on their landscape and its peoples for generations to come, and perhaps a hand in shaping Britain forever.

Appendix



Map of Witham Valley and its abbeys, causeways, and barrows
 (“Witham Valley NMP Summary Report” (Historic England 2005),
<https://historicengland.org.uk/research/results/reports/6839/WithamValleyNMP-SummaryReport>)



Distribution of barrows in the Witham Valley
 (“Witham Valley NMP Summary Report” (Historic England 2005),
<https://historicengland.org.uk/research/results/reports/6839/WithamValleyNMP-SummaryReport>)

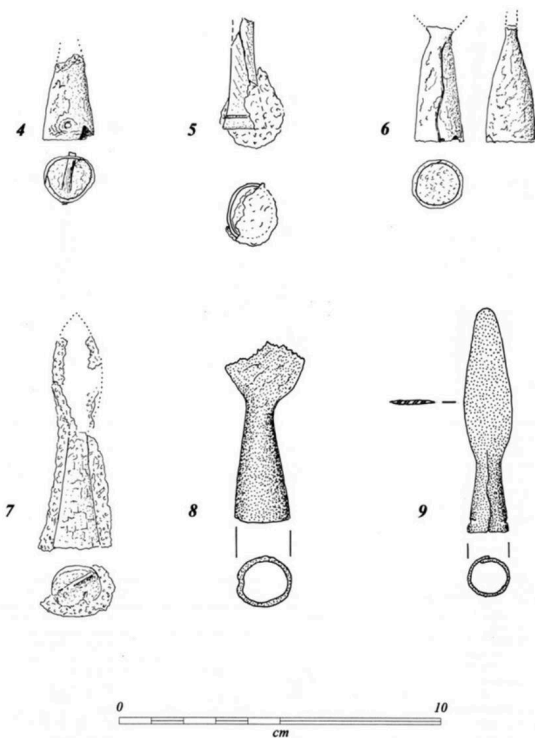


Fig. 4.7 4-9. Iron Age spears 48, 90, 203, 220, 260, 300 (M. Clark). Actual size.

Iron Age spearheads at Fiskerton (including Item 300)
(Field et al. *The Iron Age Weapons* (Oxbow Books, 2003))



The Lincolnshire Sword (Leutlrit)
(Sword | British Museum, n.d., https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1848-1021-1)



Depiction of Arthur receiving Excalibur from Lord Alfred Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (Tennyson, *Idylls of the King* (1859))

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