



Folklore Virtual Special Issue 2021: Archaeology & Geomythology

In his presidential address on the subject of archaeology and folklore delivered at the Royal Anthropological Society in 1948, H. J. Fleure invited his audience to look beyond ‘the facts accumulated by prehistoric studies’ into the lives of the people who built the monuments. (H. J. Fleure, ‘Presidential Address: Archaeology & Folklore’, vol. 59, no. 2 (1948): 69-74.) Drawing on narrative traditions such as Geoffrey of Monmouth’s accounts of giants, Trojan invaders, and the origin of Stonehenge, Fleure suggested that such sites evoke a sense of mystery that gives rise to tales which are handed down and elaborated over time. Prehistoric sites and other landscape features undoubtedly play an important role in the creation of folk tradition. Their durability creates a feeling of continuity, and this perceived landscape simultaneously connects us to the past and localizes us in the present. Since the 1960s, geomythology, a term coined by the American geologist Dorothy Vitaliano and applied to a wide-range of folk legends by Adrienne Mayor, has provided another perspective from which to view possible links between mythic material and natural phenomena. This year’s Virtual Special Issue presents a selection of articles examining connections between traditional folklore, notable features in the landscape—especially prehistoric sites, and the natural world.

Leslie Grinsell devoted much of his career to the archaeology of prehistoric monuments and the folklore attached to them. His lecture on ancient Egyptian sites compares traditions associated with these monuments with material attached to European megaliths. His article identifies cross-cultural similarities, such as accounts of structures being built or haunted by supernatural beings, and contains examples of hidden treasure stories culled from the records of tomb raiders (L. V. Grinsell, ‘The Folklore of Ancient Egyptian Monuments: Paper read before the Society at the Royal Anthropological Institute’, vol. 58, no. 4 (1947): 345-60.) Many years later, Grinsell collaborated with Dorothy Carrington, an English folklorist who wrote extensively on Corsican culture, to assemble a significant collection of tales and beliefs associated with the prehistoric monuments of Corsica. Here too, many traditions overlap with Egyptian and British ones; for example, petrification as a result of a crime or sin, Christian symbols added to pagan sites, and construction by gigantic beings (Dorothy Carrington & Leslie Grinsell, ‘Folklore of Some Archaeological Sites in Corsica’, vol. 93, no. 1 (1982): 61-69.)

Although professional archaeologists excavate and study prehistoric sites, there is often a substantial history of folk interpretation which attributes meaning beyond the archaeological significance. This material is often neglected in preference to scientific techniques—an oversight that fails to recognize the richness of this source of data both as a way to understand cultural attitudes and, through the techniques of geomythology, earlier geologic events. David Barrowclough and John Hallam stress the advantages of combining folklore and archaeology in their study of legends about the devil leaving footprints or dropping stones which provide popular explanations for both archaeological and natural features in Lancashire (David A. Barrowclough & John Hallam, ‘The Devil’s Footprints & Other Folklore: Local Legend & Archaeological Evidence in Lancashire’, vol. 119, no. 1 (2008): 93-102.) On one level this is a common aetiological legend which attributes mysterious carvings to the actions of malevolent



(often gigantic) supernatural creatures. However, in Lancashire, the concentration of footprint carvings has a particular local significance given the scarcity of rock art in the region.

Numerous traditions attached to ancient monuments reflect societal norms. The anthropologist Jerome Voss considers these cultural values, which he describes as metaphorical history, in relation to archaeological folklore in Britain, Europe, and North America (Jerome A. Voss, 'Antiquity Imagined: Cultural Values in Archaeological Folklore', vol. 98, no. 1 (1987): 80-90.) Tales incorporating traditional folk themes concerning the construction and original purposes of prehistoric monuments have been well documented and remain popular alongside professional study that has substantially expanded scientific understanding of these spaces. Beliefs cluster around monuments where knowledge about who made them, or why, is lacking, and this creates an opportunity for the expression, through folklore, of perceptions of human history and society. For example, when old skills are lost, the power to set up large standing stones or great barrows becomes, in folk memory, the work of giants. In this context the folklore of prehistoric monuments permits expressions of cultural antiquity, contemporary social concerns, or the superiority of the present. According to Grinsell, the prevalence of disturbed tombs in Egypt encouraged hidden treasure traditions. In Corsica the size of prehistoric stones suggested forges and tables used by giants, while monsters and hidden treasures embodied the uncanny mystery of monuments whose function had been forgotten.

The article by Francis Celoria approaches cultural issues through what is found inside tombs (namely the dead themselves), including the exhumation of graves of historically important individuals (Francis Celoria, 'Burials & Archaeology: A Survey of Attitudes to Research', vol. 77, no. 3 (1966): 161-83.) A balance between respect for the dead and the demands of archaeological research has caused concern in contemporary archaeology. Celoria's consideration of attitudes to dead bodies—how they should be buried and what should happen when they are disinterred—was sparked by the discovery of Anne Mowbray's coffin. Part of his analysis centres on reactions to that event: speculation on 'what if' the child bride of one of the Princes in the Tower had lived, press criticism about disturbing the dead, public curiosity (which often masquerades as scientific interest), and notions of appropriate re-burial. The article also considers instances of 'pseudo-scholarly' tomb prying, problems attached to funerary souvenirs held in museums, and the significance of techniques aimed at preserving bodies, such as embalming and lead coffins. Celoria also examines examples of the dead who leave their tombs (usually to deliver a message). Such incidents include pagans, who are usually rewarded with baptism, ghosts with unfinished business, and more elaborate narratives like the tale of the Grateful Dead.

The same year that Fleure delivered his lecture on archaeology and folklore, T. C. Lethbridge published his unique view of Britain's archaeological landscape, *Merlin's Island*. In a later book, *Gog Magog*, written under the influence of Margaret Murray's primitive witch cult theories, he claimed to have discovered an ancient hill figure (Niall Finneran, 'A "Divine" Purpose? The Legacy of T. C. Lethbridge', vol. 114, no. 1 (2003): 107-14). During his long career, Lethbridge made significant contributions to Anglo-Saxon scholarship and employed techniques we would



recognize as experimental archaeology. Unfortunately, he also embraced a number of eccentric beliefs about psychic energy in the natural environment, stone circles as beacons for UFOs, and advocated dowsing as a technique for archaeological investigation.

Although Lethbridge's ideas were never taken seriously, his work highlights the wide appeal which archaeology has as a popular topic, and even professional archaeologists have been affected by traditional ideas concerning monuments, such as a tendency to assume a correlation between complex monument construction and the level of socio-political complexity in prehistoric societies. These attitudes echo folk themes that extend back centuries, and reinforce the perception of monuments as mysterious, magical, and associated with unusual peoples. Taking folklore as a starting point, Nela Scholma-Mason's article on Orkney mound lore points to the value of legend for our understanding of how ancient sites are perceived over time (Nela Scholma-Mason, 'Those Who Dwell under the Hills: Orkney's Mound Lore & Its Wider Context', vol. 131, no. 2 (2020): 180-203.) This study recognizes the links to well-known Scandinavian migratory legends, but it also highlights local variants and the function of mounds as liminal spaces in the community.

Recent scholarly interest in geomythology has focused on possible intersections between myths, legends, and the understanding of natural phenomena. Two important articles, one of which is Andrienne Mayor's analysis of the griffin myth, have already been featured in a VSI on Cryptozoology, available on [The Folklore Society's website](#). Timothy Burberry uses the techniques of this hybrid approach to explain the unearthing of the bones of a dead hero as an imaginative interpretation of the fossil remains of an extinct mastodon (Timothy J. Burberry, 'Fossil Folklore in the *Liber Monstrorum*, *Beowulf*, & Medieval Scholarship', vol. 126, no. 3 (2015): 317-35.) The finding and display of the alleged bones of King Hygelac is recorded in the medieval *Liber Monstrorum*. As he is one of the few historical figures mentioned in *Beowulf*, traditions that characterized the heroic king as a giant would seem to be reinforced by such discoveries. Geomythology can be a valuable tool in analysing traditional material such as the link between giants and random discoveries of the bones of prehistoric animals. Megalithic sites in Corsica are frequently associated with giants and specifically with Charlemagne's paladins, conceived of as oversize. Geomythology can also expand our understanding of material which has already been the subject of research. Fleure analysed Geoffrey of Monmouth's famous account of Stonehenge as it might have reflected trade routes and migration patterns, but a geomythological approach can help identify the sources of the stones themselves.

Folklore relating to prehistoric monuments involves beings and powers that reinforce the values and norms of social and cultural practices, while nations and ethnic groups often consciously attempt to lengthen their historical traditions to validate their cultural identity. Prehistoric monuments provide suitable focal points for this precisely because they are visible but ambiguous and can be interpreted in a multitude of ways. New techniques in folklore studies have helped to refine our understanding of the folklore of prehistoric monuments and fossil-related traditions, and geomythology has offered new perspectives on what folklore can reveal about geological phenomena and the natural environment.