

ELVES IN AS ENGLAND

On the publication of the first paperback edition of his book, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England: Matters of Belief, Health, Gender and Identity*, Dr Alaric Hall kindly gave some of his time to answer our questions and explain the significance of elf-belief.

Boydell: *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England*. A £50.00 academic hardback about elves that sold out in a little over a year, has continued to sell as POD, was shortlisted for the Katharine Briggs Folklore Award *and* will now enjoy a new lease of life as a £17.99 paperback. Quite a success! Did you expect this kind of response?

AH: Erm, thank you for the plaudit. When I mention to people what the book's about, a few people back away nervously, but most say, 'Oh, that sounds very interesting'; and I then have to try to explain that although it's on a very interesting topic, it's actually a very dense, PhD-turned-into-a-book kind of text with lots of linguistics in it. So part of me worries that there are just a lot of unfortunate punters out there who made the mistake of judging a book by its cover. That said, I remember when I read popular academic books when I was a teenager how I'd get frustrated that they tended to try and hide the footnotes away at the end, or avoid them having them altogether, and skirt round the hard issues: I guess there are actually quite a lot of people out there who are willing to deal with heavy philology to get at stuff they find interesting, which is a more positive thought.

Also, Boydell and Brewer have been quite enlightened about letting the Internet do its work in promoting the book: the Ph.D. thesis on which it's based is available free-access online, and a lot of people have come to the book by finding the thesis by accident while Googling for something else, and then chosen to buy it. Word about the book got out a lot quicker than it would have otherwise I think.

Boydell: Of course, to appreciate them fully the book has to be read, but can you briefly summarise your main ideas about the elf in Anglo-Saxon England?

AH: Well, elves were like people, or even *were* people; they sort of lived next door and you didn't normally meet them. And they weren't out to pull your world to pieces, unlike monsters like Grendel in the Old English poem *Beowulf*; but if you got on their bad side, you might find yourself afflicted with illness. And I argue that some ideas about elves changed too: some but by no means all Christians aligned them with demons; less expectedly, there are hints that in earlier Anglo-Saxon beliefs elves were male but sort of effeminate, whereas later in the period elves were being thought of simply as female: ways of constructing gender in the early medieval period were changing rapidly, and this may be a manifestation of that process.

Boydell: The reviews, from journals as disparate as the *Historical Journal* and *Anglia* to the *Fortean Times*, have also been overwhelmingly positive. You must be delighted with this response, and what do you make of the spread of review coverage?

AH: Well, pretty much everyone has complained about the heavy prose! That was the stage my writing was at that point in my career, and Rome wasn't built in a day, so I don't feel bad about it, but they certainly have a point. But I was chuffed that the book was so widely and kindly reviewed—and it was a real honour to appear in the pages of the *Fortean Times*! I got a few surprised emails from old school-friends after that.

I thought the *History* review was particularly interesting though—it commented that the book 'adopts a methodology with which many historians are likely to be uncomfortable'. One of my key methods in the book was to try to use evidence for the past meanings of words, and how they changed, as evidence for past world-views—to move between historical linguistics and cultural history. This approach arose pretty naturally from the quite old-school philological education I had, both in a grammar school that taught Latin and ancient history, and in the Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic department at Cambridge. But I've come to realise that in the current academic landscape it looks pretty innovative: students in history departments seldom learn any linguistics, and medieval specialists are channelled into learning Latin rather than vernacular languages; people in linguistics seldom study much historical linguistics these days; and the people who learn medieval vernacular languages tend to come to them through literary approaches. Some of my reviewers have been excited to see these approaches come back together—but some have been left wondering if the approaches are valid. There's quite a lot of work to be done here to work out how to make these approaches speak to one another again.

Boydell: Now the more affordable paperback is available, who else should be reading your book, and why?

AH: Well, as I say, most of the ideas in the book are available for free because of my Ph.D. being on the Web, so the book is kind of for people who are interested enough to want to more refined version, or for people who'll refer to it often enough to want a hard copy. I get quite a few emails about it from people in Central and Eastern Europe so maybe the paperback will prove to be in their price-range.

Boydell: What can you tell us about the development of your ideas and how the book came to be written? Does your interest in elves extend beyond the academic and into hobbies and outside interests?

AH: Not as such, though I do like to pay my respects to elvish haunts when I visit Iceland. I really enjoyed *The Lord of the Rings* as a teenager, and did quite a lot of fantasy role-playing—which may have prepared me better for studying cultural history than my actual history courses at school, since it was a pretty rigorous exercise in imagining my way logically into other worlds and trying to think within alternative parameters. Anyway, when I was an undergraduate this guy called Alex Woolf came to give a research paper at Cambridge. I'd really enjoyed reading some of his work when I did a piece of A-level coursework on Anglo-Saxons, and I had a long chat with him afterwards. He thought that

studying elves might be a way to study cultural continuity between Celtic Britain and Anglo-Saxon England, but my main thought at the idea was, 'You mean you can do a Ph.D. on *e/ves*?! Brilliant!' (Which is what some of my students still say, so it's evidently still a well-kept secret!) And Alex encouraged me to go to Glasgow to it too. I never did find out much about cultural continuity, but I did conclude that there were pretty similar ideas about elf-like beings right across early medieval north-west Europe. Where my academic interests and hobbies really overlap is in learning languages, and as I say it was really studying language and culture that drove the research.

Boydell: You are now based at Leeds but were working in Helsinki. Do elves hold a different place in Nordic folklore? Elves, trolls and the like seem to hold a more prominent position in Scandinavian folklore, with representations of them appearing much more often than they do in the UK. Is that right?

AH: More or less! Places which industrialised early generally lost their supernatural beings sooner—though there's a great study showing how in Denmark stories once told about elves are now told about ethnic minorities, like Turks and Greenlanders. But the prominence of elves also says a lot about how nineteenth-century intellectuals wanted their nations to be seen: scholars in places like Ireland, Scotland, Norway and Finland, which were in various ways seeking political independence from ruling neighbours, sought and talked up local traditions in an effort to build up nationalist sentiments; whereas scholars in places like England, Denmark and Sweden tended to be keener on showing their nations as progressive, leaders in innovation and governance. To a large extent, we have evidence for beliefs in elves where nineteenth-century scholars sought it; and we lack it in places where they didn't bother.

Boydell: And how was Finland? Please, give us some Helsinki must-sees. (I hear the Leningrad Cowboys restaurant has closed though. Shame.)

AH: I was really lucky to get to live and work there—for a year during my Glasgow Ph.D. and then for two more as a postdoctoral researcher. For me as a cultural historian, it was really eye-opening to live in a country which is very unlike England or Scotland, and as a linguistic researcher to spend pretty much every day moving between English, Finnish and, on a good day, Swedish (which is another of Finland's languages). I tend to be a bit of a rubbish promoter of tourism to Finland though! Helsinki lacks the grandeur of Stockholm or the medieval charm of Tallinn. But I find it a really homely city: very pleasant to be in. Almost no-one visits Kallio church, despite it dominating the skyline of the city, but I really like it. Churches in Britain are almost all neo-Gothic, which I find a bit tedious, but Scandinavia has some wonderful art nouveau/Jugendstil churches, and Kallio church is one of them. I've got a big soft-spot for the campsite at Rastila, where I've often stayed. It has a pretty good sauna and a swimming beach, and beside the beach, the metro bridge arcs away over the bay towards town. I really enjoy that combination of the natural and the high-tech. And when the sea freezes, you can ski on it! Brilliant!

Boydell: What's your current area of research, and can you tell us anything about your future plans?

AH: Both are dictated to a large extent by external pressures: on the one hand, my employers are doing their best to make it feel more important to 'capture' grant-money off which the University can profit than to actually *do* any research; and on the more positive side, although I love teaching at Leeds, I'm keen to find excuses to live in a Nordic country again! Somewhere where these impulses intersect there must be a pot of gold with a groovy project in it. I'd love to do a co-written monograph with a couple of friends comparing how Christian ideas about morality have interrelated with ideas about health and healing in Christianising societies. That develops my elves work, but would also bring in things like missionary work in Africa, and has already led me towards some exciting comparative work and even a piece on how settlers in South Africa used their ideas about the early medieval past to construct ideas about Africans.

Then I'm still developing my old school philological skills by looking at Icelandic saga-manuscripts, and using software to work out how the many handwritten copies of a given saga all relate to one another—which was copied from which; the 'family trees' of these sagas, if you will. Computers allow us to work out a saga's family tree much quicker than has ever been possible before: suddenly it's viable to map the changes and developments of many texts at once, and try see whether texts radiate slowly out from a single place—or can we see them working their way up a fjord in the course of a century? Or are they criss-crossing Iceland in all directions, a southern text being copied by a guy in the north, whose text is then copied by a guy in the south? Are family members sharing texts, or neighbours, or distant friends? With a bit of thought, we might be able to use these interconnections as proxies for investigating a lot of social networks besides literary ones.

Boydell: Thank you.

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