

FIELDS, RITUAL AND RELIGION: holistic approaches to the rural landscape in long-term perspective (c. 1500 BC – AD 1086)

SUMMARY

This paper discusses the relationship between agricultural activity and ritualised/religious practices in England from the middle Bronze Age to the early medieval period (c. 1500 BC – AD 1086). It is written in the context of the ERC-funded Oxford-based English Landscapes and Identities project (EngLaId), which involved the compilation of an extensive spatial database of archaeological ‘monuments’, finds and other related data to chart change and continuity during this period. Drawing on this database alongside documentary and onomastic evidence, we analyse the changing relationship between fields, ritual and religion in England. We identify four moments of change, around the start of the middle Bronze Age (c. 1500 BC), in the late Bronze Age (c. 1150 BC), the late Iron Age (c. 150 BC) and the middle/late Anglo-Saxon period (c. 800 AD). Despite changes in agricultural and ritual/religious practices during this extended timeframe, a clear link between them can be observed throughout.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper we examine the long-term connections between ritual activity and agricultural production. The data for this discussion is based in research conducted by the ERC-funded English Landscapes and Identities project (EngLaId). EngLaId investigates the long-term history of the English landscape from c. 1500 BC to c. AD 1086, the 2,500 years between the middle Bronze Age (when fields were first laid out on a significant scale across parts of England), and the creation of Domesday Book (the first large-scale documentary survey of English landholdings). For this purpose, the EngLaId project has constructed a database of some 900,000 items derived from a number of sources, including Historic Environment Records (HERs), records held by Historic England (HE), and the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) (for more information, see Cooper and Green 2016; Donnelly *et al.* 2014). Approaching this data from a holistic perspective, cutting across traditional period divisions and disciplinary boundaries, we identify broad continuities but also radical change.

Agricultural activity was imbued with ritual significance in the past. The link between agriculture and ritual is apparent from texts that underpin western European thinking. The Old Testament is steeped in agricultural metaphors: to work the soil is God’s decree

to humankind (Genesis 3:17-19, 23). The cultivation of land is synonymous with the cultivation of the soul: 'he who tills his land will have plenty of bread, but he who pursues worthless things lacks sense' (Proverbs 12:11; also see Proverbs 28:19). God himself represents spiritual fertility: 'for, behold ... you will be cultivated and sown' (Ezekiel 36:9). In modern western European scholarship such ritualised aspects are nevertheless often ignored, and – in Britain at least – this is especially true of the more recent, Christianised periods. Instead, agricultural intensification is often regarded as being predominantly about creating surplus during periods of population growth and/or increased taxation. We start from the assumption that – before the invention of modern rationalism during the seventeenth century – such distinction between pragmatism and ritual is unhelpful. Everyday activities, including agriculture, also had spiritual significance. Their exact meaning may have changed over time, but their ritualised nature never did. While these connections may be most obvious in material from the early medieval period onwards, we argue here that archaeological evidence reveals close connections between these spheres far back in time. Furthermore, we argue that a long-term view is necessary to contextualise more recent evidence, and such a view reveals significant longevity in the connections between agricultural production and ritual activity.

When we consider the agricultural and church year from an anthropological perspective, one of the most important events is the harvest festival, where the results of the harvest are presented in church and thanks given to God for them. It is a celebration of successful communal effort and an acknowledgement of community relations for the rural parishioners responsible for growing the grains, fruits and vegetables that make up the harvest. In recent centuries, harvest festival has been held around the full moon nearest to the autumn equinox (the so-called harvest moon) and gifts of food were given to the poor. For the cultural analyst, this simple event leads off in many directions. Aspects of cosmology are key, with God seen as the source and guarantor of all forms of fertility; acknowledgement must be made so that crops continue to grow. Food was displayed, showing the sensory appeal of fruit and vegetables, as well as allowing for mild forms of competition as to whose produce was biggest and best. Special songs were sung for the harvest and other forms of performance were common, in church and without. Harvest festival looks like a point where agriculture meets religion, except that they were never separated in the first place. This separation has only occurred through our analyses, and is a division we want to counteract here.

Harvest festival verges on what might be called a total social fact (Mauss 1966, 76-7) – we can start with the harvest and end up discussing social structure, religious beliefs, the values given to various forms of food, the nature of agricultural labour and its results and so on, so that little of the life of a rural community is left out. Unfortunately, when thinking about past landscapes, their histories and the products resulting from them, we tend to divide our analyses between the economic, the cultural and the cosmological, with too little interchange between those discussing ploughs and oxen on the one hand and those interested in the history of the church on the other. Yet we know that this separation did not exist in the past. In the medieval period, the agricultural cycle was an integral part of religious and spiritual life. Medieval depictions of the so-called Labours of the Month, which identify the main agricultural activity for each month, often occur in ecclesiastical contexts, frequently linked to signs of the Zodiac, as is the case on the Norman lead font from St Augustine's Church in Brookland, Kent, a fine but by no means unique example (**fig. 1**).

The early medieval period has a particularly rich tradition of research into both the economy of the developing countryside (*e.g.* Banham and Faith 2014; Hall 2014) and more spiritual aspects (Blair 2005; Semple 2013), but the two are rarely joined together. This is despite evidence for the close interrelationship between economy and religion, apparent in a new and 'aberrant' settlement form that emerged in this period, the nucleated village (Astill 1988, 36-7; also see Gosden and Ten Harkel 2011, 1). The village, with its parish church and churchyard, is nowadays one of the most archetypal aspects of the English countryside. Seen from a long-term perspective, however, this arrangement was unusual in that it spatially brought together the communities of the living and the dead for the first time in settlement history, with the dead often existing at the heart of the settlement in a parish churchyard. In this context, the Dutch archaeologist Theuws (2010, 51) has emphasised the importance of the parish – a 'cult community' united under a patron saint – for the development of village identities, highlighting the central role of church or bell towers as territorial markers and places of communal assembly. Nevertheless, the majority of medieval scholarship seems to regard villages as a primarily economic phenomenon, linked to the development of medieval open fields and increased agricultural productivity, although explanations of the how, when and why continue to vary (Astill 1988, 37; Banham and Faith 2014; Hall 2014; Williamson *et al.* 2013).

We argue here for a holistic approach to landscape history, making no initial distinction between pragmatic and religious or ritualised aspects of past life. We identify a re-

organization of the landscape in the early medieval period that had considerable practical effects and derived its initial impetus from the religious sphere, as parishes and villages based around churches developed. This far-reaching 'cellularization' of the landscape – whose fine-grained density is visualised in **fig. 2** through the proxy of historic, pre-1850 parish boundaries – brought together communities who worked, worshipped and lived together in unprecedented ways.

Such a holistic approach to the medieval landscape raises the question of how we think about earlier modes of land use in the Roman period, Iron Age, and Bronze Age in a manner that combines the pragmatic and the sacred. We consider how the relationship between ritual and agricultural production developed over this long period of history, and how this deeper past may contextualise the activity of the early medieval period. We start in the middle Bronze Age, when evidence of religious/ritual practices were spatially dispersed. This was the period in which the first field systems were laid out, although we question below whether these were fields as we would understand them. The first more institutionalised and focused practices of ritual and religion occur much later in the late Iron Age, with succeeding Roman temples and shrines adding a newly impressive weight of evidence. The late Iron Age and Roman periods also see massive expansions of field systems. This raises questions about the relationship between the two facts. Overall, the perspective of two and a half millennia of change allows us to understand any one period in a new way and we utilise this long-term view to outline both the close connections between ritual and agriculture over the centuries, together with the ever-changing nature of this relationship.

AN HOLISTIC APPROACH

An important issue for people in all periods is that of efficacy: how does the world work and how can we influence modes of cause and effect to human benefit? We might think of efficacy as linked to practical action, so that best working practices derive from how people combine into groups to carry out tasks, what tools they have at their disposal, how products are distributed either locally or through longer distance means of trade and how consumption is managed. All of these technical issues will be important in all times and places, but they might not be the main or sole focus of groups with notions of means and ends that differ from our own. In all the periods we are looking at people who were concerned about more cosmological influences on the fertility of plants, animals and people, what sorts of actions would be considered morally appropriate by spirits and gods and the types and periodicity of actions needed to please spiritual forces. Practical actions were never just that, because humans were seen as only one part of worlds they

shared with many visible and invisible influences. Furthermore, people probably had no separate categories of agriculture, craft production, trade, religion and so on. These would have been intermingled and mixed in ways we find confounding. Ritual and religion may play a lesser part in our lives today in Western society, and ideas of how the world works may derive from a scientific and technical mind-set in which nature is separate from culture, with nature being the realm of objective and potentially quantifiable forces and end results. For people of the medieval period and earlier ploughing and prayer were both equally necessary to ensure a good harvest. As the Old English *Æcerbot* charm – a ceremony to improve the productivity of fields, preserved in a twelfth-century manuscript – reveals, fields also run the risk of being subjected to harmful curses (Jolly 1992; 1996). The Roman ritual appeasement of the god Mars (Cato *De Agri Cultura* 141, c. 160 BC) shows similar concerns for divine protection of fields over a millennium earlier, suggesting widespread concern with the matter, regardless of religion or geography. We argue below that similar intercessions and imprecations would have taken place in earlier periods as well, despite the lack of written accounts.

As a project surveying the 2500-year period from the middle Bronze Age to the Domesday Book, it is worth noting in passing the varying terminologies and ways of thinking about ritual and religion amongst people studying the various periods. In prehistoric periods people generally talk about ritual, rather than religion (Fogelin 2007). Ritual is seen to have a less formal and less institutionalised character and was not, we think, carried out in places like shrines and temples. Ritual is detectable in such forms of evidence as the deliberate deposition of artefacts, perhaps primarily metalwork in these periods, and of human remains. For later prehistory, there has been a long discussion on the impossibility and inadvisability of separating ritual and pragmatic elements of life (Brück 1999; Fontijn 2008; Bradley 2012; Cooper 2016). Practices of deliberate deposition carried on into the Roman (Derks 1998; Fulford 2001) and early medieval periods (Hamerow 2006; Sofield 2015) as a complement to the emergence of more formalised religion, although there is more scepticism to the interpretation of especially metalwork hoards as ritual depositions in these periods.

Some of the discussion is specific to the laying-out of fields. For example, Johnston (2000, 69) discusses the incorporation of barrows and cairns within the structure of field systems, stating that fields 'represent not just a concern with establishing the ownership of an area of land but also a concern to express the obligation visibly and in relation to established traditions, particularly those of burial'. However, taking a more economically-centred view, Yates links the construction of field boundaries and field systems to

economic expansion, population growth and new patterns of landownership related to the transition of a society structured according to ritual authority to one structured by a prestige goods economy (Yates 2007, 107-12, 121-2). For the Romano-British period, there is a greater tendency to emphasise the practicality and technical efficacy of the Romans, with their new forms of infrastructure, desire for taxation and need to feed new towns, villas, and the military (i.e. Haynes 2000; Fulford 2004; Mattingly 2006). Some scholars place these developments in the later Iron Age, viewing agricultural change as intrinsically linked to an understanding of the *oppida* as centres of redistribution within local and more extensive exchange networks (Cunliffe 1976; Lodwick 2014, 2; Sharples 2011). Furthermore, discussions of Roman religion in Britain do not tend to consider economic or functional relationships in cult practice, instead focusing on the diversity of Romano-British deities and cultural change brought about by the conquest and made evident by the introduction of the epigraphic habit (Henig 1984; Henig and King 1986; Aldhouse-Green 2004; Häussler 2008).

Definitions of ritual and religion are tricky, but necessary. Ritual is most usefully noted as being internally varied, so that Bell (1992) makes a distinction between proscriptive ritual in which it matters most whether rules are followed and performative ritual in which the main question is 'did it work?' (see Bradley 2005 for a discussion and application of Bell's distinction to archaeological evidence). Religion is implicitly assumed to be more formalized than ritual, and from the late Iron Age onwards there are shrines, some of which carry on to become temples in the Romano-British period (note a subtle shift of terminology here). Ritual has spirits and ill-defined forces; religion has named gods and deities. Ritual might overlap with magic, whereas religion is seen to differ from both, and in an earlier anthropology was thought to signal a superior stage in the evolution of thought and belief (Gosden in press; Tylor 1871). Current anthropological thinking is more inclined to emphasise the range of practices gathered under the term religion and hence the need to treat such practices contextually, not making blanket assumptions about them (Keane 2010). A spectrum is assumed to exist between informal ritual (where people intercede with the spirit world through practices carried out either in settlements or points on the landscape not marked out by structures) and religion (where gods were worshipped in more formal circumstances in shrines, temples or churches).

In all periods the landscape was saturated with a great range of meanings. The early medieval period, with its combination of archaeology, text and place-names, is particularly well-placed to demonstrate the range of values emerging from the imposition of a newly Christianized world onto older landscapes of belief that were seen as pagan.

Similarly variegated sets of beliefs and values would have existed in earlier periods, although not often constructed around a polarised difference between Christian and pagan. The early medieval village radically reconfigured the landscape of belief and practice, with a central focus on the church in all areas including agriculture, but other (perhaps older) belief systems were found in smaller shrines and deposits across the countryside, many of which concerned key issues of life, death and living well. Our central questions concern how far such landscapes of variegated belief existed in the pre-medieval past and how far it is possible to understand these through archaeological evidence alone.

THE FIRST FIELDS: CLAIMING THE LAND THROUGH THE ANCESTORS?

The Bronze Age saw the first widespread laying out of field systems across southern Britain (Yates 2007) (**fig. 3**). It is often held that this practice reached a peak in the middle Bronze Age (*c.* 1500 BC), ended in the late Bronze Age (*c.* 800 BC), and resumed again in the late Iron Age and Romano-British periods (*c.* 100 BC – AD 400). This is a south-centric point of view. The majority of middle Bronze Age field systems can be found in the south of England (Yates 2007, 111, fig. 12.2), but **fig. 3** reveals that Bronze Age field systems are also recorded in the north. However, given the coarse dating resolution in the EngLald database, which does not distinguish between sub-periods such as middle or late Bronze Age – these may also be of later Bronze Age date. A comparison of the construction of field systems across England from a long-term perspective furthermore reveals that different regions invested in the construction of field systems at different times (compare **figs 3, 5-6, 8** below).

The changes that took place in the Bronze Age, involving a transition from the construction and use of monuments such as stone circles, henges and funerary barrows, to the emergence of more permanent settlements of the living and associated field systems, have sometimes been regarded as a transition from a ritual society grounded in concerns about the past and the ancestors, to one structured by a prestige goods economy funded by a new intensification of agriculture (Yates 2007, 107-12, 121-2). We are doubtful about such conclusions, partly because we cannot think that the landscape of the middle Bronze Age was so easily purged of prior associations or that a pragmatic logic, so similar to our own, took over. More relevant to our main themes here, we cannot assume that the first fields had all the values and attributes attributed to them today. In fact, we might ask whether they were fields at all?

Some of the most extensive Bronze Age field systems in southern England are found in the military area of Salisbury Plain. There are almost 4000 hectares of extant field systems found across six main areas, with the largest, Figcheldean Down, comprising some 1497 hectares (3700 acres) (McOmish *et al.* 2002). A striking feature of the systems is their alignment, roughly north-east-south-west, across most of these early systems (McOmish *et al.* 2002, 19). EngLald GIS-specialist Chris Green, working on a broader set of field systems across England and of various periods, has found that this is a predominant alignment in many areas and most periods prior to the laying-out of ridge-and-furrow in the later part of the early medieval period. As McOmish *et al.* (2002: 153) note, 'the orientation appears to have no agricultural advantage, and the alignment was maintained across all topographic variations'. The terrain-blind nature of the system would have led some fields to be placed on heavily shaded slopes and others on plateaux with good sun. The complex combinations of fields indicated sophisticated processes of laying them out, with the main axes at least being laid out all at once. McOmish *et al.* (2002: 153) note the strong social cohesion that lay behind these efforts, both physical and intellectual. We would also indicate the possibility that strong cosmological imperatives existed behind so much coordinated effort in laying out systems to similar alignments across a mass of different landscapes in England.

There is also a general mismatch between the extent of the fields and the numbers of contemporary settlements. There are a number of possible reasons for a relative lack of settlement: settlement was generally ephemeral and has left little archaeological trace; people lived in slightly different places to where they created their fields – in more lowland areas in the Salisbury Plain case; there were many more fields than there were people to work them. The last possibility is most intriguing, although it is likely that all factors contributed to some extent to the overall pattern. Again McOmish *et al.* (2002, 153) note that there are no known settlements contemporary with the middle Bronze Age field systems on Salisbury Plain, so that it is not clear how the fields functioned, with many being left fallow and some may never have been used as fields at all. They see the fields as a means of bringing the land under social control. We would rephrase this by seeing the fields as a new form of monument within the landscape and a new sacralisation of the keeping of animals and tending of plants. Rather than seeing the Neolithic and early Bronze Age landscapes as being dominated by monuments and periodic gatherings at them that gave way to straightforwardly pragmatic and agricultural landscapes after 1500 BC, we would see newly focused sets of activities after that date, bringing together people with cows, sheep, horses, wheat, barley and oats, which involved practices we simplify under the heading of 'agriculture'. In such

gatherings the productive forces of the world were highlighted and these forces did not just comprise climate, social conditions and the needs of plants and animals (although all these were highlighted), but also the set of spiritual forces that guaranteed fertility and human abilities to engage with these spiritual forces for human benefit. The agricultural revolution of the middle Bronze Age, such as it was, evolved out of a sacred Neolithic world and only very gradually became agricultural in senses that we would understand.

If these ideas have any merit – and we need to explain the size and complexity of these early field systems that do not seem to relate to the needs of enhanced food production – then they pose a series of new questions about field systems that can be addressed through excavation and subsequent comparative analysis. Excavations, where they are extensive enough, are revealing the complex histories of field systems. At Perry Oaks, excavations in advance of Heathrow Terminal 5 showed up to nine settlement areas and ten trackways so that the landscape was divided into blocks with one possible settlement in each (although again evidence for settlements was poor, with few sub-surface features – Lewis *et al.* 2010: 135-6). The Bronze Age fields overlaid a Neolithic landscape and started around 1700-1600 BC when Farmstead 3 was established in a d-shaped enclosure in a set of aggregated fields through which Trackway 1 ran (**fig. 3**). The aggregated fields in this block seem to pre-date the co-axial systems to the east, which may develop from south to north, with trackways that were initially created through interrupted ditches becoming more continuous further north (Lewis *et al.* 2010, 139). Co-axial systems look to be laid out following a plan but here, at least, they seem to have been made in aggregated fashion as fields advanced from south to north following an overall alignment and plan. The expansion of the system raises questions as to why the number of fields increases within each block, even though there is only ever evidence of one settlement. One of us, Gosden (2013, 115) has raised the possibility that new fields were added not to meet agricultural needs, but rather as a response to events, such as the death of people who created the earlier fields. If this is true, a field system has a genealogical dimension, commemorating ancestors and marking the effects of new generations as active in the landscape.

The relationship between middle and late Bronze Age field systems and earlier Bronze Age barrows and cairns has been investigated (Cooper 2016). It is clear that areas where Bronze Age or 'prehistoric' field systems occur correlate broadly with areas of contemporary funerary monuments (compare **figs 4-5**), although when mapped on this scale it is more likely to merely indicate patterns of archaeological investigations. Nevertheless, we know that early Bronze Age round barrows were often (although not

always) incorporated into field boundaries, and in upland areas – such as the Cheviot Hills in Northumberland and parts of Cumbria – cairn fields can be seen to occupy the space between funerary monuments and stone clearance to prepare the ground for ploughing. In a study that explores the cognitive significance of linear features in later prehistoric landscapes in northwest Europe, Løvschal (2014a, 422; 2014b, 727) takes a more holistic and abstract view, regarding the period of creation of field systems and land boundaries as one stage in a long-term history of the creation of linear features in the landscape. Earlier expressions of this practice included barrow lines, stone rows, pit/post alignments, avenues and cooking-pit alignments, in other words, elements of supposedly more 'ritual' landscapes (Løvschal 2014b, 730).

The rather scattered deposits of human bones, metalwork or other placed deposits within field boundary ditches might take on an extra significance in this case. Field systems have a complicated relationship with barrows (Cooper 2016), although it is true that by the time fields were being constructed in numbers ostentatious burial monuments went out of construction (Bradley *et al.* 2015, 173), so that the dead were given a more dispersed or less visible burial. Careful excavation is revealing small amounts of cremated human bone in boundary ditches and other features (Bradley 2007) indicating the dispersed disposal of human remains across the landscape.

These early fields were certainly used for growing plants – as demonstrated by plough marks in a number of areas (Bradley *et al.* 2015), colluviation through soil erosion, and the increase in charred plant remains in a range of deposits – in addition to keeping animals. In the middle Bronze Age, domesticated remains are more common than wild ones for the first time (Stephens and Fuller 2013). On the other hand, the full range of crops needed for rotation were not present in the same way in which they appear in the Iron Age. But the fields themselves are far more numerous than appears necessary for the settled population at the time, their alignments are striking and depositions in and around them are intriguing. We would summarise these changes as representing a ritual revolution that focused on agricultural practices, rather than an agricultural revolution with socio-economic consequences. The forms of middle Bronze Age fields are extremely similar to those found in the late Iron Age, but they belong to two different worlds.

THE LATE IRON AGE AND ROMAN PERIODS: SURPLUS AND TAXATION?

A renewed investment in the construction of field systems occurred from the middle Iron Age. **Fig. 6** demonstrates that most areas (apart from Dartmoor in Devon) show an intensification of definitively-dated field systems in the course of the Iron Age. These

developments are often seen in the context of the need for increased surplus due to a move towards a market economy as Britain was increasingly tied into more extensive economic networks, or of feasting and conspicuous consumption to maintain an increasingly complex social hierarchy (Van der Veen and O'Connor 1998; Van der Veen 2007; Van der Veen and Jones 2006; 2007). For example, Iron Age sites such as All Cannings Cross contain evidence of large-scale feasting with the subsequent deposition of large numbers of animal bones and plant remains. Other, more pragmatic explanations have been brought forwards as well, including agricultural innovations allowing for the cultivation of heavier soils during the later Iron Age (Jones 1981; Campbell and Hamilton 2000; Taylor 2012; Lodwick 2014, 3). In all cases, agricultural activity is frequently linked to the emergence of the *oppida*, with the ritual functions of these centres having recently been emphasised (Bryant 2007; Garland 2013; Rogers 2008; Lodwick 2014, 4).

The Roman period built upon this societal change and magnified its effects, while introducing novel types of evidence for religious practice and belief to the new province. The genesis of Romano-British religion need not be recounted here (see Henig 1984), but we may consider that 'traditions', both Roman and British, were re-forged and reimagined in the new religious landscape of the imperial period (Millett 1995; Aldhouse-Green 2004; Häußler 2012). These cultural changes created new institutions and traditions, introducing for the first time written descriptions of contemporaneous life in Britain and also formalised centres of ritual activity in the shape of shrines, temples and, eventually, churches. This was certainly a period of disjuncture, but some traditions carried on. The connections between agricultural production and ritual, however, become more difficult to trace for reasons that we will discuss below.

The links between ritual and landscape during the Roman period in England are difficult to access, on the one hand because of the nature of preserved archaeological evidence, but on the other because of scholarly traditions and agendas that guide research in Roman Britain. Generally speaking, the religious transformation of early Roman Britain has been less emphasized than other cultural and economic elements. A major point of discussion is that the Roman advent brought increased exploitation of resources (mineral, agricultural, human) in order to sustain an Empire-wide economic system. It is within this changing economic system that many new field systems were organised across the English landscape (**fig. 7**), although the pattern is broadly a continuation of the Iron Age distribution (partially a data-artefact due to 'Romano-British' often including late Iron Age material). The development of an intensive villa economy in the south and

east of England was a response to these new Imperial expectations, focusing on producing food for urban centres, military garrisons, and inter-provincial exchange well above a subsistence level (Fulford 2004; Mattingly 2006; Roymans and Derks 2011; Bowman and Wilson 2013; Lodwick 2014). This new structure of the rural economy undoubtedly brought about changes in land ownership and labour organisation, though we know very few details for this region. Because of the dramatic socio-economic changes that came with the Roman conquest, investigations have often examined these economic developments separately from their religious and ritual implications.

Merrifield (1987, 7) criticised this division, writing 'this attitude is historically indefensible, for if there is any message on the subject that comes loud and clear from our many non-archaeological sources of information, it is that religion in the Roman world pervaded every human activity, and that practices relating to it were almost as common in the home and in the fields as in the temple'. As Merrifield pointed out, Roman written sources make it plain that ritual was pervasive in daily life, and many annually observed festivals of the Roman calendar revolved around the agricultural cycle, with particular emphases in spring and autumn for the planting and harvesting of crops (Scullard 1981). We can cite as evidence of this connection the rituals for divine protection of fields described by the Roman author Cato in the second century BC (*De Agri Cultura* 141), who writes

'Father Mars, I pray and beseech you so that you be well-disposed and propitious to me, to our house, and family, to which end therefore I have ordered that a pig, sheep, and bull be led around my field, land, and farm so that you may prohibit sicknesses seen and unseen, ward off barrenness and destruction, and avert calamities and storms, and so that you permit my harvests, grain, vineyards, and plantations to grow and turn out well.'

Cato's prayer calls for the sacrificial procession of a *suovetaurilia* (the pig, sheep, and bull) around the fields so that Mars may defend his harvest from malady. While this and many other Roman rituals had their origins in archaic and Republican Italy, many had long histories into the imperial period. It is an important detail that until the fourth century AD, the Roman senate did not meet during the autumnal months so that the necessary harvest rituals could be observed (Rüpke 2011, 148).

While most evidence for the observation of harvest rituals in the Roman world comes from written and documentary sources in Rome, it is clear that there was at least partial

observation of similar occasions in Roman Britain. Rituals linked to the harvest season in the Roman period were, on the one hand, continuations of pre-existing traditions but also, on the other hand, were conducted within new social and religious institutions.

The development of formalised temples and shrines in Britain from the late Iron Age onwards provided new centres of focus for ritual activity. These centres increase in number, size and complexity through the Romano-British period (see Lewis 1966; Smith 2001) and are shown here in **fig. 8**. The existence of temples and shrines represents a break from the situation of the middle Bronze Age to the end of the middle Iron Age when more dispersed forms of ritual and religion existed. In the early medieval period, as we have seen (**fig. 2**), this process of formalisation would reach even higher levels of density, with far-reaching effects on the structure and organisation of the rural countryside. The existence of these formal structures does not mean that ritualised activities ceased in other areas (Fulford 2001), but rather that they were complemented by more concentrated, formalised and regularised practices.

The evidence for seasonal rituals taking place in temples and shrines is relatively slight but compelling (Henig 1982; Isserlin 1994; King 2005). Epigraphic and material evidence certainly suggests maintenance of many traditional Roman festivals within Britain, including rituals connected to agricultural production such as the *Carmen Saliare* of 1 March or the *Armilustrum* on the 19th and 20th of October (RIB 882, RIB 883), and there is also evidence for the sacrifice of harvested crops to Ceres in the autumn (Henig 1982, 214-8). Further epigraphic evidence also suggests the observation of important Celtic festivals related to the agricultural and celestial calendar such as the autumnal equinox (RIB 327; RIB 328), Beltane (RIB 1255), and Samain (RIB 1465) (Isserlin 1994, 46) during the Roman period, suggesting that multiple traditions for these occasions existed simultaneously.

The ritual deposition of votives in sanctuaries has also been linked to seasonal activity, particularly around the autumn harvest. Animal bones recovered from temples at Harlow, Uley, and Great Chesterford (Woodward and Leach 1993; Legge *et al.* 2000; King 2005) are suggestive of seasonal sacrifice in the autumn, perhaps as part of harvest celebrations in which ritualised sacrifice of the year's produce was offered to a god and then consumed by the community in a feasting celebration. Moreover, a ritual shaft excavated at Ashill, Norfolk, dating to the first century AD contained a sequence of 12 deposits that, based upon faunal remains contained in each, seem to have been left in the autumnal months as part of an annual ritual (Barton 1879; Gregory 1977; Isserlin

1994, 52). Interestingly, the temple sites at Harlow, Uley, Great Chesterford, and Ashill are not dedicated to the same god, and therefore suggest that it was the date and the occasion that was important, rather than a rite pertaining to the worship of a specific deity.

That these celebrations line up with the scant epigraphic evidence for the celebration of both Roman and Celtic harvest festivals is suggestive of the blending of ritual traditions in the Romano-British period, helping maintain pre-Roman rituals but also giving them a new social context in the wider Roman world. The major change, of course, is the location in which these rituals were now carried out. Instead of the fields themselves, the formalised ritual centres of shrines and temples now acted as focal points of communal activity, celebrating the harvest and sharing in its bounty. That the economic scale of agricultural production had changed under the Roman Empire did not end earlier agricultural traditions, but rather enhanced their social context. The arrival of Christianity in Britain in the late-Roman period would see this context change further, as churches became new focal points in the landscape and old festival dates were aligned with new religious figures (Henig 1982).

THE EARLY MEDIEVAL PERIOD: 'HE WHO TILLS HIS LAND WILL HAVE PLENTY OF FOOD'

The early medieval period is characterised by a tension between Christianity and paganism, but the entwined nature of 'formal' religious activity and pragmatic agricultural concerns remains deep-rooted. This is clearly apparent from the aforementioned *Æcerbot* charm, describing a lengthy ceremony meant to improve the fertility of the land, or to heal it once it has been damaged through witchcraft or sorcery. The *Æcerbot* charm gives the impression of stemming from a deeper-pagan past, involving an appeal to Mother Earth and the preparation of a potion, but is thoroughly Christianised in its involvement of the local priest and the incantation of Christian prayers (Hill 1977; Jolly 1992; 1996: 9). Its implications for our understanding of the rural landscape and agricultural processes has, however, been inadequately explored in archaeological context.

Early medieval data for the construction of new field systems are under-represented in the EngLald database (**fig. 9**), but it is likely that relict field systems of earlier times continued in use. New research suggests that the Roman to early medieval transition fails to show evidence for significant changes in the structure of the agricultural landscape, although its use may have shifted more to animal husbandry. The Fields of Britannia project, analysing Roman to early medieval field systems, noted general

continuities in terms of land-use based on some 200 analysed pollen samples and various continuities or re-uses of boundaries and boundary alignments (Rippon *et al.* 2013; 2015). Banham and Faith (2014, 141-3, 294), however, still argue in favour of a decrease in arable activity after the withdrawal of Roman administration, suggesting the economy became more heavily dependent on livestock, whose grazing would also have kept woodland regeneration under control. In this view, existing Romano-British field systems continued to be used, but the nature of their use changed.

Questions about the survival of Christianity in the post-Roman period are problematic. Older models whereby a largely Christian Romano-British population was replaced by thoroughly pagan Germanic incomers are no longer widely accepted. There is an overall lack of recognisable post-Roman churches. Exceptions can be found in the South West (Turner 2006) and arguably in other isolated instances, such as the possible post-Roman church at St Paul-in-the-Bail, Lincoln (although the evidence could be mid-Saxon; Gilmour 2007). There is a comparable lack of Germanic 'temples', however; those that have been tentatively identified – often superimposed on prehistoric funerary monuments – have been interpreted as structural responses to the Christian practice of church building (Blair 1995). Meanwhile, Semple (2013, 256-8) has identified a broader pattern of re-use of prehistoric funerary monuments for funerary purposes in this early period, suggesting perhaps a return to more dispersed 'ritual' practices like those discussed above.

When Christianity was formally reintroduced in the seventh century and placed under the patronage of kings, there is evidence for renewed investment in church-construction and the foundation of monastic communities on a more extensive (and archaeologically visible) scale. Yet even then, religion and ritual continued to coexist. Ælfric of Eynsham's eleventh-century sermon *De Falsis Diis* ('On the False Gods') fulminates against the worship of the sun, the moon, and the stars, as well as fire, water, and the earth that 'feeds all things' – perhaps the same Mother Earth addressed in the *Æcerbot* charm. The nourishing nature of the earth is not denied, but its worship is, representing as it does a threat to the monotheistic teachings of Christianity.

It was also in this period following Christianisation that we can detect renewed intensification of arable cultivation, including the laying out of strip fields within enclosures, and eventually the communally-worked open fields characteristic of the (later) medieval period. These changes were contemporary with, and supposedly related to, the emergence of the nucleated village. Explanations of this change tend to be

overwhelmingly socio-economic, including a growing population and changes in secular landholdings (Banham and Faith 2014; McKerracher 2014; although Banham and Faith 2014: 158 briefly acknowledge the importance of ritual). Yet changes in territorial and ecclesiastical organisation went hand in hand, the most far-reaching of which was the development (from the ninth century onwards) of smaller parishes around local churches under the patronage of local landowners, representing an exponential and unprecedented growth in the establishment of formal religious centres in the rural landscape (Blair 2005, ch. 7; Morris 1989, ch. 4). These secular landowners fulfilled a dual function as lord and spiritual patron, especially when they were (or descended from) the parish founder. What is more, some of the new landowners were the local churches themselves, as apparent from grants of land to local churches, occasionally recorded in eleventh-century and later documents (Morris 1989, 140). Thus Christianity became increasingly integrated in lay society in a reciprocal relationship of pastoral care in return for food rents and other dues (Blair 2005, 153-7). In the law codes of the West Saxon King Ine (688-726) (Ine 4), these dues are known as churchscot (OE *ciricsceatte*), and had to be paid on Martinmas, the feast day of St Martin, on the 11th of November.

The reciprocal relationship between peasantry and Church can be traced in the naming of the very fields that underpinned it. Recorded field names include numerous 'Church', 'Chapel' and 'Priest Fields', many of which were holdings of local churches (rather than, for example, fields near churches) (Field 1993, 187-90, 198-9). Although the written evidence tends to be post-medieval, the assumption is that the origins of these names can often be traced back much further. Other field names reveal that the revenues from certain pieces of land were reserved to fund church furnishings, such as candles, or contain references to specific responsibilities of the Church, such as the celebration of regular masses for the souls of the donors or the provision of charity for the poor (Field 1993, 190-3, 200-03). Finally, field names such as *Sangetfeld* (Walkern, Herts) or *Syngett* (Stanton St John, Oxon) can be translated as 'burnt (field)' and probably indicate the location of the midsummer bonfires that were lit on the feast day of St John the Baptist (24 June), which were similar to the harvest festivals referred to at the start of this paper in that they represented an important stage in the agricultural and religious annual cycles.

Many local churches became focal points for – or were added to – village communities (Everson and Stocker 2006), creating the aforementioned 'cult communities' that Theuws discusses. This process of settlement nucleation – like the development of open fields – was more than a practical consequence of increased taxation demands. The roles of

practical landowner and spiritual provider were inseparable. It was in the interest of the Church therefore to elevate agricultural labour into a spiritual act, but also to create distance from earlier ritual practices. In the process, an increasing philosophical rift was created between cultivated/inhabited land and wilderness, the latter a place of inhospitality and danger, dwelling-place of demons such as *Beowulf's* Grendel (Franklin 2006, 147).

Semple (2013, 267-8) has noted a deliberate discouragement on the part of the Church of the reuse of prehistoric monuments and natural features with ritual connotations, such as sacred springs. Such discouragement could take different shapes, including their deliberate marginalisation in acts of landscape restructuring (the redrawing of boundaries) and the construction of churches in their immediate vicinity; for example, a Chapel Field in Eshton (YW) was situated close to a holy well (Field 1993, 200). (Semple 2013, 267-8; Blair 2005, 374-83). Some of these sites may represent the 'field-churches' (OE *feldcyrcan*) referred to in eleventh-century law-codes, existing at the bottom of a four-tiered ecclesiastical hierarchy (Blair 2005, 368-9). These field churches thus represented a degree of continuity in terms of the location of ritual/religious activity, although the nature of this activity changed.

Relevant in this context also are the so-called field cemeteries that can be dated between the eighth and eleventh centuries AD, after the official date for the conversion. These are isolated cemeteries, not associated with a church but sometimes spatially associated with prehistoric monuments, but also devoid of grave goods, often seen to represent an intermediary phase between furnished 'pagan' burial and Christian churchyard burial. Both Blair (2005, 243-4) and Astill (2009, 224, 231) regard these as a continuation of much older practices, and an indication that it was initially not the settlements but the fields – and the practice of working the fields together – that created a community identity. In this context, Astill (2009, 232-3; also see Sofield 2015) also draws attention to the evidence for human burials in ditches in settlement contexts ('the most field-like elements of settlements'). Their eventual abandonment may have much to do with the fact that, as Astill (2009, 233) argues, those forced to live *in agris* ('in fields'), in other words, outside the safe confines of the village community, were increasingly considered ostracized and fated to be plagued by evil spirits.

The gradual adaptation of the ritual significance of the rural countryside under the influence of the Church reflect what we know of conversion strategies from a letter written by Pope Gregory the Great to bishop Mellitus about the task of converting the

heathen Anglo-Saxons in AD 601. In this letter, Gregory advised the bishop not to destroy the temples of idols, but to destroy the idols themselves: in other words, to transfer new, Christian meanings onto old, pagan places (Bede *HE* I: 30). Again, the *Acerbot* charm represents an excellent example of this in practice. Ritualised practices were never rooted out entirely, but Christianity did gradually convert the ritual significance of agricultural activity into a total religious act. The result was an extensive restructuring of the landscape that laid the foundations for the medieval and modern English countryside.

DISCUSSION

In the early medieval period the Church depicted agricultural labour as a spiritual act. This we feel is the key to understanding agriculture in all the periods we are studying, although obviously both the nature of the spiritual changed continually, as did the forms of the agricultural acts. Rather than looking for a history of agriculture, driven solely by the pragmatics of cows and ploughs, we are sketching a more complex history in line with the intermingled notions of the spiritual and practical in all periods before the Industrial Revolution.

We can identify four broad periods of land-use and ritual. The first lasts from 1500 - 1150 BC (the middle Bronze Age) when there was a first massive laying out of fields in many areas. This we see as not as an agricultural revolution, but more one in which the practices of agriculture were sacralised. Fields are new monuments within the landscape, rather than a newly pragmatic use of it. Very gradually, and in ways that still need investigating, agriculture became more about the provision of food on an everyday basis, and about feasting. From the late Bronze Age (1150 BC) to the end of the middle Iron Age (150 BC) the landscape evolves not solely or mainly through fields, but through features that are different or more difficult to detect. The linear ditches of the late Bronze Age have been called range boundaries, cutting across the earlier fields and dividing up large parcels of land. In the early and middle Iron Ages full-blown agriculture is in evidence from the remains of plants and animals, but evidence of fields is scarcer, either because they did not exist or (more probably) because land divisions were more ephemeral through fences and hedges and hence more difficult to detect archaeologically.

The third period runs from 150 BC – AD 410, covering the late Iron Age and Roman period. Dispersed practices are complemented from the late Iron Age onwards by the creation of more formal temples and shrines, which grew greatly in number in the Romano-British periods, as did fields. An increasingly developed economic system and a

complex mixture of ritual traditions led to the formation of new harvest celebrations, many of which involved communal sacrifice and feasting in temple sites. Roman period observances can, unsurprisingly, be viewed as a mixture of local Iron Age ways and those of the incoming power. An important indicator of this combination is the existence of a number of Roman autumn harvest festivals that fall on days auspicious in the Celtic calendar. The advent of Christianity in the later-Roman period developed these mixtures, repackaging pagan rites as Christian celebrations. An older narrative, in which there was a complete break of cultural practices at the end of the Roman occupation of Britain in AD 410 is now replaced with a much more complicated one of change and continuity. This mix is also found with the possibility of continuations of Roman agriculture into the fifth and sixth centuries, as well as many elements of Christianity especially further west. In either case, the practices of everyday life were still deeply imbued with notions of the sacred, albeit in complexly changing forms.

From c. AD 800 onwards, the most radical changes are apparent, when a totally new settlement form – the village – emerged, bringing together the living and their dead ancestors around a church (and sometimes a manor house), surrounded by open fields. The fields took on new forms requiring novel and communal modes of working, different from what was found previously. Inevitably, the communities changed as well. Although dispersed ritual practices undoubtedly continued to a degree, the landscape now became cellularized to an extreme. Communities operated in focused units, providing for their own needs under the spiritual and practical guardianship of their village saint, priest and lord. To be outside this system was not a viable option, unless one chose to be outside society.

The advantage of the long view, developed here, is that it allows us to see the middle to late Anglo-Saxon developments as constituting a break from an older set of practices. The coexistence of the living and the dead in a single community had never been seen before, nor had the cellularization of the landscape with the rise of secular parish churches, substituting an essentially dispersed system of rituality for a focused one. These were a profound set of changes in the utilization of the landscape, but also in the identity of communities both in their human dimensions and through their relationships with the divine.

Overall, we are dealing with complex forms of continuity and change. The forms of fields have a considerable continuity from the middle Bronze Age to the end of the Romano-British period, although their number explodes at the end of prehistory. This formal

continuity is counterbalanced by shifts in ritual practice from dispersed to a combination of dispersed and concentrated. Everything changes from c. AD 800 onwards as Christianity becomes firmly engrained, with new villages and a substantial change in the manner in which the land was worked. It is with good reason that the early medieval period is seen as one of the great transformations in culture in England. A long-term view, which combines an understanding of the ritual and the pragmatic, allows us to appreciate the fundamental nature of this change.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The EngLald project is funded by an ERC Advanced Grant. Many thanks must go to the other members of Team EngLald (and friends) for providing the intellectual context for this paper. Chris Green deserves a special mention for providing the images.

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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>HE</i>	<i>Historia Ecclesiastica Gens Anglorum</i> , written by Bede
HE	Historic England
HER	Historic Environment Record
OE	Old English
PAS	Portable Antiquities Scheme
RIB	Roman Inscriptions of Britain

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(<http://faculty.virginia.edu/OldEnglish/aelfric/defalsis.html>).

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ILLUSTRATION CAPTIONS

Fig. 1: Top: Norman lead font from St Augustine's Church in Brookland, Kent. Bottom: detail showing (on the left) an individual threshing grain for the month September, underneath a depiction of Libra. Photographs by Lionel Wall (www.greatenglishchurches.co.uk); figure compiled by Letty ten Harkel.

Fig. 2: Approximation of the density of churches in the medieval English landscape (based on the proxy of 1 church per historic parish). Figure by Chris Green.

Fig. 3: Field systems and trackways at Perry Oaks, highlighting the location of Farmstead 3 (Framework Archaeology 2011). Redrawn from data © Framework Archaeology supplied via Archaeology Data Service; also contains Ordnance Survey data © Crown copyright and database right 2016. Figure by Chris Green and Letty ten Harkel.

Fig. 4: Bronze Age field systems in England (in black), overlying field systems dated more broadly as 'prehistoric' (in white). Figure by Chris Green.

Fig. 5: Bronze Age funerary evidence in England (in black), overlying funerary evidence dated more broadly as 'prehistoric' (in white). Figure by Chris Green.

Fig. 6: Iron Age field systems in England (in black), overlying field systems dated more broadly as 'prehistoric' (in white). Figure by Chris Green.

Fig. 7: Roman field systems in England. Figure by Chris Green.

Fig. 8: Roman shrines, temples, and churches in England. Figure by Chris Green.

Fig. 9: Early medieval field systems in England. Figure by Chris Green.