

VERBEIA



GODDESS OF WHARFEDALE

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Published by Dreamflesh

BM 2374

London, WC1N 3XX

England

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First published as a booklet under the name G.T. Oakley by Rooted Media, Leeds, 1998

Second edition (revised) published by Rooted Media, Leeds, 1999

Third edition published by Norlonto, London, 2000

PREFACE

THREE YEARS HAVE NOW passed since the initial bout of research which formed the foundation for the first edition of this booklet. Last year, many mysteries created by that research were elucidated, and many new ones took shape. Such is the amazingly complex nature of the ‘geomythologies’ that seem to weave themselves around the prehistory of Wharfedale, I was only been able to include the more pertinent aspects of my more recent investigations. A more comprehensive update would probably entail a total revision and re-structuring of the entire work, which is unfortunately beyond my resources at this point in time.

One of the most important new discoveries was the similarity of the floral decorations on the Mavilly altar to the flowers of the plant *Verbena officinalis* (vervain—p. 13). In addition, Paul Bennett brought to my attention another Romano-Celtic altar stone, showing a figure holding two snakes in the manner of Verbeia, also accompanied by floral designs similar to those of the Mavilly goddess (p. 14). This made the possible link between Verbeia and verbena—which I dismissed in the first edition as “possibly spurious”—much more compelling. If this is the origin of Verbeia’s title, I do not think it invalidates the many other possibilities and speculations presented here. On the contrary, the plausibility of the other etymologies of ‘Verbeia’ makes them even more intriguing, since they clearly demonstrate the way in which geomythical complexes such as that spawned by Verbeia can never really be reduced to a rational, cut-and-dried formula.

I hope you enjoy this booklet, and continue to enjoy the unfolding of prehistoric possibilities in Wharfedale.

Gyrus

London, Autumn 2000

INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOKLET BEARS the fruits of an intensive period of research into the history of Ilkley and Wharfedale. Hopefully it will provide readers with a general introduction to the origins and possible nature of Verbeia, a curiously neglected Romano-Celtic divinity associated with Ilkley and the River Wharfe, as well as giving a feel for the richness and depth of human reverence for this beautiful and inspiring landscape. I have tried to incorporate a wide range of material, from local folk tales to the latest academic research. References to this goddess are numerous but scattered. No one before has attempted to collate all the possible origins of Verbeia, with a view to obtaining an overall perspective; I hope this work will serve as a tentative first attempt.

There are a great number of problems in trying to trace human history back into the distant past, and the problems are multiplied when it comes to ‘spiritual’ or ‘religious’ matters. Verbeia stands on the borderline between recorded history in Yorkshire, beginning with the Roman occupation, and prehistoric, Celtic and Stone Age Yorkshire. Even writing about Roman times is laden with speculation; pre-Roman investigations are yet more subject to interpretation. I ask that none of this is taken as ‘truth’. While every effort has been made to ground this research in accepted historical and archaeological evidence, I have also attempted to piece various scraps of evidence together to try and form coherent ideas (or clues, at least) about the nature of pre-Christian paganism in Wharfedale. It’s highly unlikely that the ‘actual’ history of paganism in the area, or indeed in any area, is anywhere near as coherent as many modern interpretations can suggest. So I will aim to present a range of possibilities instead of any singular theory. All the references are here for anyone who wishes to follow my path and look into these possibilities further.

I should also note that although I refer to Verbeia in my title as goddess of the Wharfedale, her association with the River Wharfe itself is not exclusive, or even totally certain (just *very* likely!). I have merely used this title to express my feeling that Verbeia, as one of the key relics of pagan religion in the Wharfedale area, is like a door into the wider and more complex history of the human sense of the ‘spirit’ of the landscape here.

I will present a potted ‘prehistory’ of the area for background purposes, followed by a series of enquiries about the different possible aspects of Verbeia. Speculation increases ever more as this account progresses and we move further past the door, so bear with me and make your mind up for yourself!

Through comparisons with various other traditions and mythologies, this booklet also becomes a look at some highly archetypal elements of nature-based spirituality. Broad comparisons may often enrich our understanding of regional myths, but we should always remember that we are talking about a very specific landscape, one that has to be seen, heard and felt as much as possible before it can even begin to be comprehended. My investigation has been inspired by simply exploring and absorbing the landscape itself as much as it has been by scholarly research. It is hoped that the reader will be encouraged, at the very least, to get outside and explore this region (or any local landscape that attracts you). I have given Ordnance Survey map references for most of the sites discussed in relation to our subject matter.¹ I urge anyone serious about getting more

1. All references are to Sheet 04/14 in the Pathfinder Series of Great Britain.

intimate with this region, or any other, to arm themselves with a good OS map, an invaluable tool indeed.

All past nature-based spirituality here was inspired by the local hills, stones, streams, rivers, plants and animals, and by the sky. We have altered the natural environment irrevocably now, often for the worse, but we can still appreciate and enjoy in our own ways what has been preserved. Maybe this will motivate us to respect it, and conserve it for the benefit of future generations.

I would like to thank the staff of the Manor House Museum in Ilkley, especially Gavin Edwards, for their co-operation, as well as the Local History Library in Leeds. Thanks for help, inspiration and encouragement are also due to Grufty Jim, Jake Kirkwood, Andrea Arca, Paola Farina, Guiseppe Brunod, Julian Cope, Jan Fries, Monica Sjöö, Graeme Chappell, Andy Roberts, Bob Trubshaw, Lee Moonus, Joscelyn Godwin, Polly Harvey, Michael Stipe, and especially that scurrilous fount of hidden local wisdom, Paul Bennett.

*Please note that dates in this booklet are designated by 'CE' (Common Era) and 'BCE' (Before Common Era), equivalent to the Christian tags 'AD' and 'BC'. Also, in sections dealing with etymology, an asterisk before a word (e.g. *uerb) indicates that the word is a hypothetical root that has not been recorded in known literature.*

PREHISTORIC YORKSHIRE

THE FIRST TRACES of human life in the Wharfedale area are from the Mesolithic, or Middle Stone Age period. After the glaciers of the last Ice Age retreated around 10,000 BCE, hunter-gatherers moved into these lands (which were as yet not separate from the continent). A camp site from this era was found on the banks of the Wharfe at Otley. Tiny Mesolithic flints have been found across Rombald's Moor, and evidence of settlement at Green Crag Slack (SE 131 459) dates back to about 7,000 BCE. Forests covered most of the moors and much of the lowlands then, but the clearing of wooded areas began, albeit slowly at first, in the Mesolithic. More advanced stone tools and agriculture (and hence more deforestation and a more settled lifestyle) were introduced during the Neolithic period, from around 5,000 BCE, but there isn't much evidence left from this time around the Wharfe valley. There are some stone circles and burial cairns, which usually date to the late Neolithic or early Bronze Age.

The climate in Britain during most of the Mesolithic and Neolithic was comparable to that in modern southern France. It began to rapidly deteriorate after about 1,800 BCE, getting colder and wetter, only beginning to recover after 500 BCE.

Rombald's Moor and nearby areas are richly endowed with surviving prehistoric rock carv-

ings (petroglyphs).² They are commonly based around small cupped depressions carved into rock surfaces, frequently with accompanying patterns of grooves and lines. Many cups are surrounded by one or more concentric circular grooves, and often these have a straight groove (or sometimes a ladder-like design) extending from the central cup across the circles (fig. 1). The generic name for these glyphs is ‘cup-and-rings’, and they can be found across West and North Yorkshire, and also in Northumberland, Argyll, and western Ireland. Carved cup-like marks are common throughout the world. In Hawaii, for instance, there are vast rocks covered in cup marks and other symbols, including cup-and-rings. The image of a carved cup (or painted dot) surrounded by one or more concentric circles is a near-universal ‘primitive’ motif, found in the art of indigenous peoples across North and South America, Africa and Australia.

On Rombald’s Moor, the rocks bearing these carvings are significantly clustered along the northern edge, overlooking the Wharfe valley, though there are also large groups of them on the south side of the moor, at Rivock Edge near Keighley and on Baildon Moor. Many more are dotted about the higher hills, as well as on the moors to the north of Ilkley. Although most have been documented, carvings are still being discovered in the region.

These petroglyphs are usually dated to the Bronze Age (2,000-500 BCE), because of their proximity to or inclusion in Bronze Age burial sites in many regions (though not here), or to the Neolithic (5,000-2,000 BCE), because of their connection to the megalithic passage grave art in Ireland from that period. They could possibly date back even further, though. Across the globe today, such abstract art is most frequently associated with the shamanic practices of hunter-gatherer tribes, so there is no reason to suppose that Yorkshire’s Mesolithic hunter-gatherers were somehow not ‘advanced’ enough to carve cup-and-rings. It should also be remembered that even if they date to the Neolithic, when more settled lifestyles arose, they may still have been carved by more mobile peoples. Changes in settlement patterns are not sudden and total; they are often gradual, with different styles of living intermingling over periods of time.

However, in themselves the glyphs are usually impossible to date because they are found on rocks that are exposed to the elements, eroding most dateable matter. Also, there is a wide variation in stylistic elements, even just on Rombald’s Moor; from simple clusters of cup-marks, to varied interlocking patterns of cup-and-rings, to numerous complicated and idiosyncratic designs, such

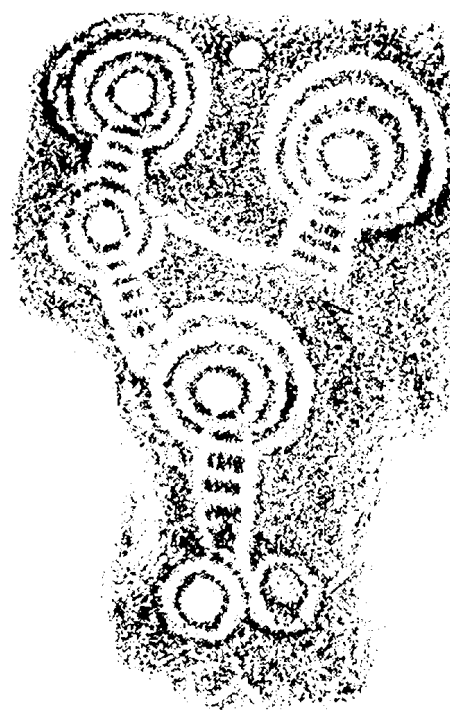


Figure 1. A rubbing of carvings on the Panorama Stone, St. Margaret’s Church, Ilkley

2. Some of the most interesting carvings can be found at the Badger Stone (SE 1108 4605), the Piper’s Crag Stone (SE 0849 4709) and Hangingstone Quarry (SE 1281 4675). Ladder designs are found on the Barmishaw Stone (SE 1119 4642) and the Panorama Stone (repositioned in a small enclosure below St. Margaret’s Church in Queen’s Road, Ilkley, SE 1147 4728). And of course there is the Swastika Stone (SE 0956 4695). But these are just the most famous, or my favourites. Explore for yourself!

as the maze of interlaced grooved patterns on the Hangingstone Quarry rock (SE 1281 4675), and the finely executed and coherent design on the Swastika Stone (SE 0956 4695, fig. 2), unique to the British Isles. All this could argue for an evolution of rock art styles covering a long period of time.



Figure 2. The Swastika Stone, Ilkley Moor, facing north

By the Bronze Age the British Isles had separated from the continent, and metallurgic technologies had made their way with migrating tribes from there to Yorkshire. The low walled enclosures that can now be seen at Green Crag Slack date from this time, about 1,000 to 500 BCE.

Following quickly on the heels of the first wave of metal-working invaders came the iron-wielding Celts, who first arrived on the east coast of Yorkshire from France in 500-450 BCE, close to the start of the British Iron Age. The Celts were a loose affiliation of tribes ('Celtic' only really refers to a common pool of languages), who often warred among themselves. The main groups which settled around Yorkshire were the Parisi, who occupied the East Riding, and the Brigantes, a vast network of tribes extending from the West Riding of Yorkshire up to Cumbria. The Brigantes took their name from the goddess they united under, Brigantia ('High One' or 'Queen'), and the nucleus of their kingdom was the West Riding.³

Three hundred years of Roman activity around Ilkley, and thus the entry of the area into written history, began with the first Imperial invasion of northern Britain in the winter of 79-80 CE. The earlier Roman occupation of southern Britain didn't initially expand further north because the Brigantes were Roman allies under their queen Cartimandua (whose chief citadel was at Almondbury near Huddersfield). But Cartimandua's consort Venutius quarrelled with her, and began to lead a strong anti-Roman faction of the Brigantes against her. The queen was carted off to safety by the Romans, who, under Julius Agricola, decided to subdue the hostile Brigantes. They invaded the Pennines and established a series of roads and forts, including the fort at what is now Ilkley, which was situated where we now find the All Saints' Parish Church of Ilkley and the Manor House Museum. There were occasional Brigantian uprisings during the Roman occupation, but there is little evidence of active warfare. Roman military forces began to withdraw from Britain around 410 CE.

3. Ross 1967, p. 452

THE ALTAR STONES

AT THE BACK of the All Saints' Parish church in Ilkley, hidden behind the impressive Anglo-Saxon cross, are two altar stones, probably from the Roman fort that once covered about three times the area of the present church grounds. They were found built into the north-west corner of the church, having been recut for use by the builders. Thankfully today's church proprietors are a bit more hospitable to these pagan relics.

The stone on the right shows a pitcher and a patera, a type of flat dish with a handle which Romans used in sacrificial rituals. It is thought that they were used for making offerings to altars, like pouring barley on a sacred fire. The altar on the right (fig. 3) shows a female figure wearing a long pleated robe, with what looks like a shaped head dress. She also holds two long wavy objects, described by the plaque next to the altar as torches. This interpretation is perhaps understandable in light of the patera's function, but they make much more iconographic sense when seen as snakes—if only because torches are rarely serpentine! Again, it is probably because of the patera's connection with barley that the plaque interprets the figure as the earth and barley goddess Demeter. But Demeter was a Greek deity, and we must look closer to home for her identity.



Figure 3. Roman altar stone, Ilkley

THE WATER GODDESS

Verbeia and the Wharfe

SHE IS UNIVERSALLY identified by scholars as Verbeia. This title comes from another altar stone, inscribed in Latin with these words:

*To Verbeia.
Sacred.
Clodius
Fronto.
Ded.
Prefect of the Cohort,
Second Lingones.*

This stone was found by the historian Camden at the time of Elizabeth I, and was then being used to support some stairs in a house. It was removed to Middleton Lodge, north of the Wharfe from Ilkley, which is possibly close to the area where it was originally discovered by William Middleton.⁴ The inscription became illegible due to exposure, but Middleton made a copy of it, and a copy can now be seen in the Manor House Museum.

Camden traced the name Verbeia to Old English *guer* or *gurav*, or the Saxon *guerf*, all of which mean ‘rapid’ or ‘rough’, leading him to associate her with the Wharfe. He had slipped and nearly come a cropper in the river, and guessed that the Roman Prefect Clodius Fronto had done the same, and inscribed an altar stone in relieved gratitude to this sometimes dangerous as well as beautiful river.

This aspect of these waters is reflected in legends surrounding a perilous place further up the Wharfe near Bolton Abbey, called the Strid (fig. 4), where the river narrows down to a foaming torrent. It is said that sometimes the goddess of the river appears here as a white horse and claims a victim in her waters.⁵ Bogg mentions a “demon steed or water kelpie”⁶ that is sometimes to be seen in the evening, foretelling disaster. A water kelpie, tales of which are found all along the Wharfe, “generally presented itself to the belated traveller in the shape of an old shaggy-haired pony near to some well-known crossing place on the bank of a river. But woe to the traveller who, to escape the discomfort of getting a wetting, unsuspectingly mounted the supposed steed! It instantly sprang with a wild shriek of laughter into the deepest whirlpool, without giving its human victim any chance of dismounting.”⁷

Also, near Kereby further down the Wharfe from Ilkley, there is a tradition recorded last century that a witch named Jinny Pullen lived there about two hundred years ago. “She was seldom to be seen by day, but her windows were illuminated far into the night. She must indeed have been a person possessed of some secret power, for we are told she usually crossed the Wharfe in a sieve, or, as the local gossips say, in a cinder riddle, and the higher and stormier the river, the better she could sail in her strange craft.”⁸ Folklore also relates tales of strange female water elementals that haunt stagnant pools by rivers, waiting to drag in children who come too close to the edge. These are known now as ‘nursery bogies’, invented beings created to keep children out of danger. The Yorkshire version is called Grindylow; in Lancashire, especially along the River Ribble, which



Figure 4. The Strid gorge, upper Wharfedale

4. Collyer & Turner, p. 26

5. Clarke & Roberts, p. 90

6. Bogg, *Higher Wharfedale*, p. 189

7. Bogg, *Lower Wharfedale*, p.348

8. *ibid*, p. 346

flows southwest from the hills near where the Wharfe begins and flows southeast, there is Jenny Greenteeth, “who is supposed to seize children in her long, green fangs and drag them down into stagnant pools at the river’s edge.”⁹ Such folk myths commonly surround British rivers, and although they should mostly be considered as ‘nursery bogies’, they may also be echoes, somewhat demonized echoes at that, of ancient aquatic cults—especially in areas where other evidence of such cults abound, such as in Wharfedale.

In France, Celtic cults have left legends in their wake in a way that reflects some of the British folklore surrounding ‘goddess’ rivers like the Wharfe and Ribble. Olwen Brogan writes: “The *matres* [Celtic mother goddesses] and other goddesses outlived official paganism and took refuge in the countryside as fairies and other creatures in folk-lore. The Latin *faita* (fates) have become *fadas* in Provence, *fades* in Gascony, *fayettes* elsewhere, and are sometimes seen in the moonlight, washing the garments they have woven; they live in springs and sacred trees, and sometimes they have serpent’s tails.”¹⁰ In Valcamonica, northern Italy, where there is much rock art similar to Ilkley’s, the region called Naquane is thought to take its name from the ‘Aquane’—semi-divine female beings, often with animalistic attributes, who live in caves, lakes and springs.¹¹ They are sometimes fearful, sometimes protective. As in Ilkley, ancient water cults were superseded by late pagan and then Roman water/mother goddesses.

Most antiquarians after Camden accepted Verbeia as goddess of the Wharfe. The first recorded references to the river are in a letter by Simeon of Durham, where it is called ‘Hwerver’ and ‘Hwerf’.¹² Middle English *hwerfen* means ‘turn’ or ‘change’, so these names obviously echo the winding of the river; also, *hwerfen* was spelt by Ormin in 12th century Lincolnshire as *wharfen*. If we want to try and trace ‘Verbeia’ back to Latin, we find that *vertere* also means ‘to turn’. From this word our language gets ‘vertebrae’, meaning ‘something to turn on’, describing the pivotal structure of the spine. There is also ‘vertex’, meaning ‘the highest point’, especially the spiral of hair on the crown of the head. Latin *vertex* means ‘that which turns’, and can mean ‘top, summit, pole, whirl; whirlpool, eddy’. Properly it refers to the turning point, especially the night sky’s central pivot, the Pole Star.

The Anglo-Saxon *wer-bære* means ‘a weir where fish are caught’. But the Anglo-Saxons invaded well after the Romans left, so although it has appropriately ‘turning’, watery connotations, this word couldn’t have influenced the altar inscription. It is worth noting, though, that Wetherby, a town located further down the Wharfe from Ilkley, is thought to have inherited its name from Anglo-Saxon roots which referred to the town’s position on a bend in the river.¹³ This was one of the first conjectures about the origin of ‘Wetherby’. An early Victorian writer said that the town was named by the Saxons *Wederbi*, which, he said, “signifies *to turn*”. More recent researchers have suggested that this place-name is derived from the Scandinavian *vedr*, or Old English *weder*, both meaning ‘sheep’—implying that Wetherby was formerly a sheep farm. There seems to be no evidence for this, though, and the town’s name—which has been variously recorded as *Wargebi*,

9. Biggs, p. 242

10. Brogan, p. 191

11. Fossati, ‘Water, Weapons and Birds in the Iron Age Rock Art of Valcamonica’

12. Collyer & Turner, p. 26

13. See Robert Unwin’s work on Wetherby for sources of the following information.

Werebi, *Wederby* and *Wedderby*—most likely derived from ‘turning’ words like the British root *uerb* (‘wind, turn’) and/or the Anglo-Saxon *wer* (‘a fence of stakes or twigs set in a stream for taking fish’). The Wharfe has been an important fishing river through the ages, and *le Heckes* (signifying the same fishing device as *wer*) is in the earliest existing list of family names in the Wetherby township. “Given its location on a bend, and if it is accepted that it was a *mansiones* (or posting station) during the Roman period, it is not inconceivable that the original place-name of Wetherby may have had within it the elements *uerb* or *Verbeiae*.”¹⁴

To try and clarify precisely how all this British, Roman and Anglo-Saxon etymology fits together historically around *Verbeia* would be a veritable nightmare, so all I will do here is give you the evidence. The jigsaw puzzle may be pieced together someday by more capable historians, but, given the complexity of the situation, this seems unlikely. It is enough for me to allow my imagination to appreciate the poetic truth of this etymological matrix.¹⁵

(An important point to make here is that although most writers accept ‘Olicana’ as the name of the Roman fort in Ilkley, the most authoritative study on the subject—*The Place-Names of Roman Britain* by A.L.F. Rivet & Colin Smith—disagrees. They believe that Ptolemy’s reference to ‘Olicana’ actually refers to the fort at Elslack.¹⁶ They further assert that the goddess altar we are studying here, the Roman fort where it was situated, and the river which flowed past it, all shared the same common name: *Verbeia*. Further, they trace the origins of this title to “a British base **Uerb-* ‘to turn, twist’, cognate with that found in Anglo-Saxon *weorpan* ‘to throw’, Latin *verbena*, etc.” This reference, together with their mention of “Gaulish names such as *Verban(n)os*”,¹⁷ will become more significant later on.)

Although the river’s name and the goddess’ name seem to be closely connected, historians Collyer and Turner argued against Camden’s simple equation of ‘*Verbeia*’ and ‘*Wharfe*’, and associated ‘*Verbeia*’ with the Goidelic *guerif*, ‘to heal’. They noted that Camden’s last editor recorded an Ilkley tradition that the female figure holding snakes is *Verbeia*, and “was antiently [sic] placed on her altar”.¹⁸ The two snakes could correspond to the two streams that once ran past either side of the Roman fort from the moors into the river (snakes are associated with water, especially flowing water, in countless mythologies). From this, and the *guerif* derivation, Collyer and Turner deduced that *Verbeia* was originally associated with the healing springs on the moor, and is “the first precious hint of the Ilkley Wells.”¹⁹ The present White Wells, a short walk up the side of the moor from Ilkley town (SE 1182 4678), became famous in Victorian times for the therapeutic qualities of its waters. It is indeed in the area where the two streams that once flowed past the fort originate, and one of these water courses seems to be remembered in the name of the road that has replaced its former path—Brook Street, which goes down past the All Saints’ church to the bridge

14. Unwin, p. 8

15. Julian Cope, in his megalithic odyssey *The Modern Antiquarian*, proposes the term ‘etymosophy’ for etymological investigations that fully appreciate the mercurial, mutable nature of language in ancient history, prior to widespread ‘literacy’ and desacralisation of everyday life. The reader is referred to this work for more wide-ranging and speculative material on the *ver* root.

16. Rivet & Smith, p. 431

17. *ibid*, p. 493

18. Collyer & Turner, p. 26

19. *ibid*, p. 27

over the Wharfe.²⁰ (See also Appendix 1)

An anonymous Wharfedale resident, in correspondence with David Clarke and Andy Roberts, remembers being taken to the stone by her mother and being told that she was the goddess of the Wharfe, so this association is very strong locally (see Appendix 2). However, she also says something very important which should be borne in mind when trying to ‘nail down’ archaic pagan associations: “People talk glibly today about specific god and goddesses connected to rivers and water, but we never really had such distinctions or limitations. The river and its sources were expressions of the one power and that was that.”²¹ She recalls being taught to respect and revere the life-giving (and sometimes life-taking) river, and says that her family is part of a long local tradition involved in simple May Day celebrations held at the source of the Wharfe. On May eve they light a bonfire, gather offerings (mostly of flowers), make their way up to the source at Cam Fell, and give thanks to the waters as they wait until dawn and welcome the return of spring.

Verbeia and Gaul

ANNE ROSS, AN expert on the Celtic world who has done more than most to recognise the significance of Verbeia, says that “springs, wells and rivers are of first and enduring importance as a focal point of Celtic cult practice and ritual.”²² Rivers are frequently associated in Celtic lore with divine mother goddesses. In Ireland, the River Boyne is said to owe its origin to the goddess Boand, who, like Sinann the originator of the River Shannon, defied the magical powers of a well, which rose in anger against the goddess and rushed towards the sea, forming a river. The Irish triple goddess Brigid is closely associated with the healing powers of her holy wells, and is equated by Ross with Brigantia, goddess of the Brigantes: “It may be that in the goddesses *Brigid* and *Brigantia* we have a divine concept stemming from a common source...”²³ Ross notes that the River Braint in Anglesey and the Brent in Middlesex probably derive their names from Brigantia.

An important area for evidence of Celtic aquatic cults is Gaul (now France). The River Marne here takes its name from the Gaulish goddess Matrona, ‘Divine Mother’, and the Seine derives from the goddess of its sacred source, Sequana. Over 140 cultic carvings were found in the marshes at the source of the Seine, including a representation of the goddess, and many carved human heads. It is thought that the Celts (like the Greeks) saw the head as the source of life-force in the body, and the head’s association with water sources persists in our expression describing the origin of a stream or river as its ‘head’. The Celts frequently cast offerings to water spirits and deities into rivers, wells and lakes, and sometimes these offerings included actual human heads.

It seems to be highly significant that the Roman troops stationed in Ilkley who carved the

20. Jake Kirkwood, editor of local earth mysteries magazine *Earthed*, has suggested that the snakes may relate to the Wharfe and the Aire, which flow past Rombald’s Moor to the north and south respectively. Apparently when the two dales are mist-filled, the view from the top of the moor reveals them clearly winding past on either side. This seems less likely than the correspondence to the two streams flowing past the Roman fort, but adds to the mass of poetic associations between Verbeia and this awe-inspiring moor. It could also be relevant that Miranda Green, in her essay ‘The Gods and the Supernatural’, says that triple-headed deities were particularly prevalent among the Lingones in Celtic Gaul. The woman and the two snakes makes three heads, even if two are animal heads.

21. Clarke & Roberts, p. 88. Also see Appendix 2.

22. Ross 1967, p. 46

23. *ibid*, p. 456

altar stones were only Roman in political allegiance. The Second cohort were actually Celts of the Lingones tribe, recruited from the region of the upper Marne in Gaul. Verbeia is usually referred to as a ‘Romano-Celtic’ or ‘Romano-British’ deity, but she may have had very little to do with the strictly Roman world. As Edmund Bogg writes: “In the nationality of the Lingones we have an interesting circumstance. As inhabitants of the champagne district of France, they themselves were Celts, and would doubtless return the sympathy of the British tribesmen.”²⁴ As mentioned before, although there was a strong anti-Roman faction of Brigantes, led by Venutius, there were only sporadic uprisings against the ‘Romans’ stationed at Olicana. It may well have been that the Gaulish Lingones were more friendly with the local Celts than their position as Roman troops required. Verbeia’s nature reflects many of the ways in which the Wharfedale Brigantes probably revered their environment, and she could represent a fusion of existing Brigantian and imported Gaulish (and superficially Roman) influences.

There is in fact evidence that she owes her origins predominantly to Gaul. Ross compares the altar stone in Ilkley to a relief on the side of an altar stone found in Mavilly, France (about 30 or so miles from the source of the Seine). It depicts a goddess with a pleated robe, a torch (?) in one hand and two serpents in the other, surrounded by rising vegetation (fig. 5). She is described by Ross as a “mother-healing type of goddess”,²⁵ and given that Mavilly is in the area where the Lingones were recruited from, she may be the most direct suggestion of Verbeia’s origins we have.

There is another, quite intriguing Gaulish connection to Verbeia. We have already seen how Rivet & Smith relate the title ‘Verbeia’ to Latin *verbena*, and to Gaulish names. According to Roman historian Pliny the Elder, in his *Natural History*, the plant verbena (also known as vervain) was very popular among the magi of ancient Gaul, and was used by them in medicinal concoctions, salves, and for divinatory purposes.²⁶ The name ‘Verbena’ was “the classical Roman name for ‘altar-plants’ in general, and for this species in particular. The druids included it in their lustral water, and magicians and sorcerers used it largely.”²⁷ Perhaps the design depicted to the left of the Mavilly goddess is a stylized representation of verbena bloom (fig. 6). This plant is notable for its medicinal properties, and is recommended for melancholia or for those convalescing from an illness—values which tally admirably with



Figure 5. The Mavilly goddess



Figure 6. *Verbena officinalis*

24. Bogg, p. 134

25. Ross 1967, p. 430

26. Information supplied by Jan Fries, personal correspondence.

27. Grieve, p. 831

the healing/springtime aspects of the Mavilly goddess and Verbeia.

Further, there is another bas-relief found in Cirencester, Gloucestershire (fig. 7), which bears a striking similarity to Verbeia. Anne Ross argues that this altar stone depicts a stag-god, possibly related to the Gaulish Cernunnos, with ram-horned serpents forming his legs—supposedly depicting the traditional ‘squatting’ posture of Cernunnos. Ross speculates that the two objects either side of the head may be purses filled with coins (viewed from above), or ‘cornucopiae’ filled with grapes.²⁸ I find these ideas hard to believe, especially when the designs are exactly the same as the potential ‘verbena flower’ on the Mavilly stone. I would add that the figure seems to be of indeterminate sex, rather than definitely male. The probable derivation of Verbeia from the Mavilly goddess, her possible association with verbena, strengthened by the floral design on the Mavilly stone, together with this figure associated with the same design, also holding two snakes, all add up to an inconclusive but fascinating constellation of circumstances, that has yet to be resolved into a clear picture.



Figure 7. Altar carving from Cirencester, Gloucestershire

Stones and Water

THROUGHOUT MY RESEARCH into Verbeia’s origins, I have been intrigued by her connections to the spiritual history of the neighbouring moors. This may suggest a Celtic continuation of much more ancient regional pagan beliefs, though it is most likely simple testament to the power and universality of spiritual ideas rooted in elements of nature.

We have already seen Verbeia’s possible association with the healing waters flowing from the moors. She also seems to be ‘poetically’ connected, through a dense associative network of mythic/folkloric themes, with the petroglyphs on the moors.

The Swastika Stone carving is almost identical to the so-called ‘Camunian Roses’ (see fig. 8) in Valcamonica, a valley in northern Italy that is particularly rich in Bronze and Iron Age rock art. There are over 80 different carvings here related to this basic design, with many variations. Italian archaeologists are perplexed by this link, and are currently looking into the possibility of prehistoric cultural exchanges between Italy and Yorkshire. Regarding water associations, Angelo Fossati’s thesis (kindly sent to me by Paola Farina at the University of Milan) makes it clear that in Valcamonica the engravings are often linked with aquatic themes. We have already noted that on the Naquane hill (one of the most important sites for rock art in the region), there are a lot of water sources, and that the name of the hill is connected with the ‘Aquane’, mythological fairies of rivers and lakes. There is also the ‘Valzel de Undine’ in Borno,



Figure 8. An example of a ‘Camunian Rose’ carving in Val Camonica, Italy

28. Ross, p. 139

where there are engraved rocks. This name means ‘Valley (or Stream) of the Ondine’, and the Ondine are aquatic nymphs similar to the Aquane. In another nearby region there are the ‘*Clap des Aquanes*’ (‘rocks of the Aquane’), “which bear engraved footprints (most likely cup marks) which are related to the legend of the Aquane.”²⁹ Folklore surrounding cup-and-ring marks in the British Isles (and on the continent³⁰) suggests that water collecting in the cups used to be valued as a cure for all manner of ailments, particularly eye diseases.³¹ Since British cup-and-rings are often placed to overlook a river valley or the sea, their connection with water seems likely. We shall look further into Verbeia’s connections with the moors as we go on.

THE SPRING, SNAKE & FIRE GODDESS

THE BEGINNING OF the sun’s return after the dark, cold winter months was hugely important for rural pagan communities. The first festal celebration of this happy process is Imbolc, usually dated as 1st February. It is unlikely that ancient pagans adhered strictly to a calendar date for their celebrations, though. Spring doesn’t pay such heed to human time measurements!

Imbolc traditionally began with the time when sheep and other animals began to lactate, and was associated in Ireland, Scotland and the Isle of Man with Brigid (or Bride), an association that has survived into living memory. It is *Laa’l Breesby* (‘Bridget’s Feast Day’) in Man, and Wive’s Feast Day in northern England. On Bride’s Day in Scotland, Bride in the form of a serpent was believed to emerge from the hills. Marija Gimbutas says that “one of the most curious customs of Bride’s Day was the pounding of the serpent effigy”,³² and records an occasion when “an elderly woman put a piece of peat into a stocking and pounded it with fire-tongs while intoning: *This is the day of Bride, The queen will come from the mound, I will not touch the queen, Nor will the queen touch me.*” This legend may be rooted in the upsurge of spring waters from the hills as snow melts and rains fall in spring. Serpents in many myths and folk-tales are seen as being related to fire and water, seemingly connecting the fiery heat of the sun with the waters that result from the melting of winter snow and ice. The snake’s fire associations can be seen clearly, for example, in the ancient Basque language, where the root *su*, ‘fire’, forms the words *suga* or *suge*, ‘serpent’.³³ Brigid presides over fire, and was appropriated by Christianity in Ireland through her transformation into St. Bridget, whose nine nuns in County Kildare kept her sacred flame burning until the Reformation.

The role of animals in pagan mythology often stems from archaic peoples’ close observation of the creatures that inhabited their environment. It seems obvious that the snake’s association with spring, renewal and rebirth comes from the fact that snakes regularly shed their skins, revealing a new skin beneath. An even closer connection to springtime in this respect is given by the

29. Fossati

30. See Gimbutas, p. 61

31. Bennett 1998

32. Gimbutas, p. 135

33. *ibid*, p. 136

specific behaviour of snakes in milder climates: “In temperate species that go through a resting period, or hibernation, during the winter, shedding often takes place early in the spring almost as soon as they become active. Sexual activity is often heightened during the days immediately following this ‘vernal’ shed.”³⁴

We have seen that Verbeia, whose realm lies at the heart of Brigantia’s kingdom, is closely associated with Brigid via Brigantia herself, as well as by aquatic cults and serpents. The importance of Brigid/Brigantia in Yorkshire is suggested by the many stones, hills and wells with ‘Bride’ in their name, but none have suggestive folklore associated with them.³⁵

The Latin *ver* means ‘spring’, from which we get ‘vernal’, ‘verdant’ and ‘vernation’ (a botanical term for the arrangement of leaves in a bud). This last word stems from Latin *vernatio*, which refers to the flourishing renewal of plants in spring, or the snake’s sloughing of skin in spring. All these words derive from the Indo-European root **wes*, meaning ‘to shine’. This speaks of a deep-rooted—because obvious!—association between the return of the sun’s heat and the renewal of nature in spring. It is likely that Verbeia, like Brigid, is a seasonal goddess heralding the coming warmth and life of springtime.

Brigid’s name comes from *brigh*, ‘strength’. Welsh *bri* likewise means ‘power’, and *brig* means ‘hill-top’, hence the fact the ‘Brigid’ and ‘Brigantia’ are often translated as ‘The High One’. It is intriguing to recall that in our search for the Latin roots of ‘Verbeia’ we found *vertex*, which can mean ‘summit’. The tangle of associations with height, as well as with fire, around these goddess names possibly reflects an ancient—and again pretty obvious—perception that hill-tops are closer to the venerated sun.

Pagan fire-festivals like Beltaine (1st May) are frequently commemorated with hill-top bonfires, and it is no surprise to find possible remnants of such a tradition in Wharfedale. We have already heard of the local woman who speaks of a long-standing tradition of bonfires held near the Wharfe’s head around May Day. During the 19th century, when the English feared a French invasion, beacon fires were tended across the dales in this region. The beacon signal was sent from Ingleborough Hill, close to the sources of both the Wharfe and the Ribble. (It may be relevant that Ptolemy associated the Ribble with the Celtic lake or river goddess Belisma,³⁶ a name which also suggests fiery etymological origins.) The signal reached Wharfedale via various intermediate hills, and was passed on via Beamsley Beacon, north of Ilkley, and the Otley Chevin, across to Almescliffe Crag.

The Victorian explorer and chronicler of Wharfedale, Harry Speight, who mentions this tradition, doesn’t say that the famous Cow and Calf rocks near Ilkley³⁷ (fig. 9, SE 131 468) were part of the network of beacon fires, but does mention a connection (perhaps spurious) with rites of fire. “Both the ‘Cow’ and the ‘Calf’ have cups and channels on their surfaces, which were conjectured by Messrs. Forrest and Grainge in 1869 to be connected with Druidical priestcraft, and that

34. Mattison, p. 32

35. Bennett 1997, p. 31

36. Farrar, p. 203

37. The name of the Cow and Calf rocks suggests some form of influence, direct or indirect, from Scandinavia. In *The Viking Legacy*, John Geipel writes: “The figurative use of *kalf* (calf) by the Northmen to describe a small island lying near a larger one (as at Strynø and Strynø Kalv in Denmark) has been retained in Britain at, among other places, the Calves of Eday and Flotta in Orkney, the Calf of Man and Scotland’s Calf of Mull.” (p. 156)

their purpose was ‘to retain and distribute the liquid fuel which fed the sacred flame on grand festivals of the year.’”³⁸ He also says that when Queen Victoria was crowned in 1838, “a great fire blazed on these famous stones, and Ilkley I am told, was ‘illuminated.’”³⁹ The Cow and Calf rocks lead us further into the mysteries surrounding Verbeia.



Figure 9. The Cow and Calf rock, Ilkley Moor, looking northwest

(We should also note before going on that in Valcamonica, too, there are traces of pagan springtime fire ceremonies. Near the Naquane Park there is a small church dedicated to two ‘Saints’, “women who lived as hermits in small caves in the Medieval period . . . In the crypt of the church one can still, in fact, find a large rock with the deeply engraved prehistoric figures of hands and cup-marks, which legend would connect with the two Saints. The site is also connected to the Christian celebrations which take place in May (the Ascension) and preclude a long nocturnal vigil with extravagant use of candles. It is quite possible that the ceremony has transplanted an earlier pagan rite of Spring, so-called March (maggio), closely related to fertility rites.”⁴⁰ The festival was abolished by the Church, who deemed it “immoral.”)

THE COW GODDESS

CATTLE WERE HIGHLY venerated across the ancient world, as they still are in places like India. The Indo-Europeans, a hypothetical ancient culture—postulated to account for linguistic common ground between many important Celtic, Germanic, Latin and Sanskrit words—left many clues to the high value they placed on cattle. They valued them in the ‘everyday’ as well as the ‘sacred’ sense; it is probable that the distinction between these two areas of life was less rigid in ancient times than it usually is now. The Indo-European root **peku* accounts for Old English *feoh*, ‘cattle, property, treasure’, Old High German *fehu*, ‘cattle, beasts’, Old Icelandic *fe*, ‘property, wealth’, and Sanskrit *pacu-* and Latin *pecu*, both meaning ‘cattle, wealth’. As the Indo-Europeans were semi-nomadic agriculturalists, and migrated frequently, they valued cattle for their cart-pulling as well as plough-pulling and milk-giving powers. Hence we find Old English *faru*, ‘to travel’ and Old

38. Speight, p. 230

39. *ibid*, p. 202

40. Fossati

High German *faran*, ‘to travel, to go’.⁴¹

Ross suggests, although she admits that the idea is “in question”, that ‘Verbeia’ may derive from the Old Irish root *ferb*, ‘cattle’, making her ‘She of the Cattle’.⁴² This tallies with her association with the Irish water goddesses Brigid and Boand. The legends around St. Brigit, which were taken from her pagan predecessor, say that she was reared on the milk of a white, red-eared cow.⁴³ Churn-staffs in Ireland were fashioned into the likeness of a woman called *Brideog*, ‘Little Bride’.⁴⁴ Boand’s name means ‘She of the White Cattle’.⁴⁵

The connection between cows and water is deep in Irish folklore, and there are many stories of sacred cattle who emerge from lakes, “under which they dwell in the otherworld domain of some supernatural owner.”⁴⁶

Cows are often linked to fire as well. Ronald Hutton mentions a record from about 900 CE that in every district of Ireland at Beltine, all fires were extinguished and two new ones were lit by Druids, who intoned spells over them and drove cattle between them.⁴⁷ This divinely protected the cattle from disease. Hutton doubts some of the details of the account, but nevertheless states that “the driving of the cattle is a rite which survived into relatively modern times, not just in Ireland but in other parts of the British Isles and at other festivals. The ‘new fire’ was still made on 1st May in Gaelic Scotland in the last century. Here we do seem to have evidence of a genuine and important calendar custom, even if it is not absolutely certain that it occurred everywhere in Ireland and always at Beltine. We are also considerably less certain how far it extended into Britain.”

Could it have reached Wharfedale? There are tentative suggestions that it may have. Speight found that in 1807 the Cow rock at Ilkley was known as the “Inglestone Cow”.⁴⁸ The Scottish dialect word *ingle*, ‘fire burning on a hearth’, comes from the Gaelic *aingeal*, ‘fire, light’. And *Ingleborough*, near the heads of the Ribble and Wharfe, was where the 19th century beacon signal began. I have often looked at the land surrounding the Cow and Calf with this cattle-driving rite in mind, and there seems to be no topographical reason why it could not have once been the site for such practices; but more information about the history of cattle farming in the area would be useful.

It may seem odd that cattle would be associated with water and fire. Perhaps this relates to the traditional signal for the approach of spring, time of increasing heat and flowing waters—pastoral animals beginning to lactate.

Anyhow, Verbeia’s possible connection to cows and their milk once more brings up folklore surrounding cup-and-ring marks. In Scotland, a minister at the turn of the century told folklorist W. Evans-Wentz that cup-marked stones were rocks of the faerie folk. The minister said, “An elder in my church knew a woman who was accustomed, in milking her cows, to offer libations to the fairies. The woman was later converted to Christ and gave up the practice, and as a result

41. See Barber, p. 75 and Fries, p. 202 for these derivations.

42. Ross 1967, p. 279

43. *ibid*, p. 455

44. Ross 1996

45. Ross 1967, p. 389

46. *ibid*

47. Hutton, p. 178

48. Speight, p. 230

one of her cows was taken by the fairies. Then she revived the practice.”⁴⁹ A similar tale is related by rock art researcher Ronald Morris. Regarding a large cup on Seil Island, western Argyll, he wrote that the “widow of the late farmer there states that in her youth, one day each spring the basin had by custom to be filled with milk. If it was not so filled, the ‘wee folk’ (fairies) would see that the cows gave no milk that summer. The Kerrara ferryman, to whom I told this, said that on Point of Sleat Farm in Skye when he was a boy there had been exactly the same custom. An Islay resident tells me that the same custom existed there, too.”⁵⁰ These folk practices seem to echo the Celtic cattle-protection rite of driving herds between fires, both activities evidently stemming from rural people’s intense concern with the welfare of their livestock—upon which their own welfare depends. Paul Bennett describes many instances of milk libations being poured into cup marks in the Scottish Highlands, usually for the *Gruagach*, female elementals “whose principal action was to look over and protect cattle.”⁵¹ Milk libation traditions seem to be scattered around some Yorkshire cup-marked stones as well, which are sometimes known as ‘cat troughs’; but their pedigree as genuine pagan traditions (and their connection to the protection of cattle) is in much more doubt than in the case of the Scottish *Gruagach* stones.

As a final note on this subject, given that Verbeia holds snakes, it is interesting that snakes are associated with milk and milk-producing animals in many mythologies. “Milk has often been an offering to sacred snakes and is still practised in many countries. . . . In central Europe, in Greece since antiquity, and until recently, milk has been left for snakes in exchange for protection.”⁵² Gimbutas compares Verbeia to the cow goddess Marsa (or Mara), who is preserved in Latvian mythological songs, and is also associated with snakes. “She is called the Mother of Milk, the Mother of Cows, or the Old Shepherdess of Cows. Her own source of milk is a miraculous well. The Cow Marsa, or as she is also called, the Fate (Latvian *Laima*) of cows, appears in animal stalls as a black snake, bug, or hen. Her presence brings fertility to cows; she is responsible for the easy birth of calves and an abundance of milk.”⁵³ The widespread connection between snakes and milk appears to have no basis in nature. The only possible association seems to be the fact that as snakes shed their skin, including the transparent scales over their eyes, the thin layer of air that comes between the opaque old skin and the new skin beneath gives the snake a milky colour.

THE SWASTIKA STONE

THE SWASTIKA STONE (fig. 2) has attracted much attention, not least from ‘neo-Nazis’, who have scant historical sense and infinitely less sophistication and intelligence than the stone’s original carvers. It is due to the unwelcome attention of such people, as well as your average “I woz ’ere” vandal, that the stone is now sadly surrounded by iron railings. Be careful not to mistake the carv-

49. Quoted in Bennett 1998

50. Quoted in Haddingham, p. 92

51. Bennett 1998

52. Bauchot, p. 193

53. Gimbutas, p. 134

ing at the front, which is a 19th century copy, for the original, which is further back and slightly fainter.

The swastika, or fylfot as it is sometimes known in northern Europe, was a common religious symbol across the globe long before the German National Socialists decided to appropriate and abuse it. It is found in Hinduism, Buddhism, Aztec hieroglyphs, Bronze Age Greece, Celtic Britain, Swedish and Italian rock art (fig. 8), and in many other cultures.⁵⁴ It can be seen as an elaboration on the basic cross, or crossed circle \oplus , an almost universal cosmological symbol used by people as diverse as Celts, Christians, and ancient African tribes. The cross or crossed circle often represents the Earth or the sky, with the four cardinal directions. When the arms of a cross are bent or curved to form a swastika, cyclic motion is suggested. As such it usually represents the turning of the heavens (which is of course due to the turning of the planet). It can thus be associated with the sun or moon and their voyages across the sky, or with the rotation of the stars around the Pole Star. Indeed, René Guénon states plainly that the swastika is “essentially the ‘sign of the Pole’.”⁵⁵

This assertion is given considerable weight by Joscelyn Godwin’s fascinating book *Arktos*. Fig. 10 shows the seasonal positions of the constellation of Ursa Minor during one year around 4000 BCE, as it rotates around the then Pole Star, Thuban. (Polaris, our present ‘Pole Star’, only moved into the area of the Celestial North Pole around 1400 CE.) You may notice that the orientation of the arms of this ‘stellar swastika’ in the prehistoric northern skies, which spins anti-clockwise around the Pole, is opposite to that of the Swastika Stone, which gives the impression of a clockwise motion. However, imagine that the glyph on the stone is the base of a pole connected to the sky’s pivot (an image that will be explored later). Looking up this pole, one would see the stars turning anti-clockwise. Trace this motion with a finger. Now, without ceasing the motion of your finger, bring it downward so you are now tracing the same motion, but looking ‘down the pole’ instead of up it. The motion of your finger will appear to change from anti-clockwise to clockwise. This is why, in fig. 10, I have mapped a mirror-image of the Swastika onto the Ursa Minor mandala. Well, this transformation may be slightly convoluted; but it will be agreed that the shape formed by Ursa Minor and the dead-north orientation of the Swastika make for a compel-

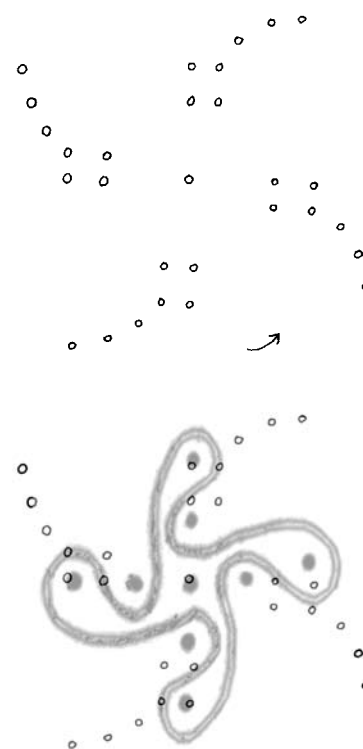


Figure 10. Above: Seasonal positions of Ursa Minor around the Pole Star (Thuban) c. 4000 BCE (after Godwin, 1993) Below: The mirror image of the Ilkley Swastika mapped onto the constellation’s positions

54. I have also been informed by Andrea Arca, an Italian archaeologist working with The Footsteps of Man project in Valcamonica, that a design similar to both the Ilkley stone and the ‘Camunian Roses’ in the Italian Alps is to be found on “Gallo-Roman” coins (personal correspondence). He says that an example is held in the St. Germain en Laye Archaeological Museum in Paris, though I have not yet seen it. This further connection with Romano-Celtic Gaul is intriguing. Also, artist and author Jan Fries has told me that a “strange collection of petroglyphs has been discovered on the edges of China which look amazingly like the Alpine stuff.” (personal correspondence) Again, I have yet to see these, but it seems we have yet more testimony to the archetypal nature of these designs.

55. Guénon, p. 50

ling ‘polar’ theory of this petroglyph.

The swastika is often a fire symbol, indicating solar worship.⁵⁶ A possible connection between the Swastika Stone glyph and the sun is the cup mark off its eastern arm, which is surrounded by a hooked groove. This cup, in relation to the central cup, is only about 2° off the summer solstice sunrise around 2000 BCE–100 CE (the position of the sunrise only changes by about a degree during this time). If seen in this way, the rotating motion suggested by the flow of the design appears to haul the cup/sun across the southern skies.

All this only poetically associates with Verbeia, through her connection to fire and the sun, to the turning cycle of the year and springtime, and possibly to the ‘turning’ words *hwerfen* and *vertere*. But a somewhat more interesting connection arises due to her being an equivalent goddess to Brigid. A favourite form of Brigid’s cross suggests a swastika (fig. 11); and, according to Janet and Stuart Farrar, this device is still central to Imbolc folk-rituals in Ireland.⁵⁷ Further, in Nigel Pennick’s booklet, *The Swastika*, he presents an illustration of a shrine to St. Bridget in Co. Sligo which incorporates a much more obvious swastika design (fig. 12).

The Isle of Man (interestingly positioned between Ireland and Yorkshire) retains much evidence of widespread worship of Brigid. Of course, the symbol of Man, the Three Legs, also suggests the basic impulse behind swastika design.

This is a loose array of evidence, more suggestive than conclusive, and perhaps we do not have enough to affirm that Verbeia, like Brigid, was associated with swastika-like symbolism. The proximity of the Swastika Stone and the altar stones is intriguing nevertheless. The greatest argument against drawing links between the two is the probable gap of time between them. The altars to Verbeia date back no earlier than the 1st century CE, but the Swastika is thought, because of its use of cup marks, to date back to at least the Bronze Age, and could have been carved in the Neolithic or earlier (supported by the ‘Ursa Minor’ theory of the design’s genesis). It has been shown that Verbeia is probably rooted in the cultic practices of the Celts, either those of the Brigantes or the Gauls, or both, so in the Swastika Stone we have a great enigma. Perhaps early Celts carved it, and their cults, directly or indirectly, had an influence on the importance of a Brigid-type goddess to the Roman troops stationed by the Wharfe.⁵⁸ If it was carved by the moor’s Mesolithic, Neolithic or Bronze Age inhabitants,

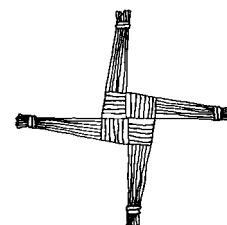


Figure 11. Brigid’s Cross

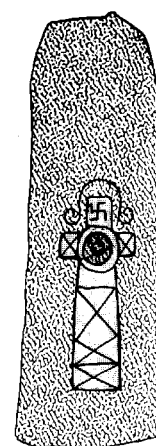


Figure 12. Carved stone at St. Bridget’s Fountain, Cliffony, Co. Sligo, Ireland

56. More updates from Italy! Guiseppe Brunod has apparently written a thesis disagreeing with the interpretation of the ‘Camunian Roses’ as solar symbols, arguing that they are connected to the moon. This would fit in with the general association of the Val Camonica petroglyphs with water (due to the obvious moon-water links), but I have yet to read Mr. Brunod’s writings.

57. Farrar, p. 100

58. I mentioned above (note 54) that a design similar to the Swastika Stone appears on Gallo-Roman coins. Could it be this simple? That Wharfedale was host, via the Roman invasion and the establishment of Olicana, to an influx of Gaulish Celtic nature-based religion that left us with Verbeia and the Swastika Stone? This possibility must be balanced against the arguments for a Neolithic, ‘Ursa Minor’-based origin of the Swastika Stone.

we have in Wharfedale a truly baffling convergence of mytho-symbolic complexes from entirely different cultures. Or perhaps a great many regions could yield such ‘baffling’ convergences when investigated, due to undetectable cultural cross-fertilization between prehistoric peoples. Another factor may be our inter-disciplinary approach here, which reveals a greater depth of connections than any specialist would become aware of. Evidently much more research need to be done.

SHAMANIC ECHOES & REFLECTIONS

VIRTUALLY ALL HUMAN relationships to divinity in nature can be seen to derive from the phenomenon known as shamanism. The term comes from the word *saman*, used by the Tungus people of Siberia, meaning one who is “excited, moved, raised.”⁵⁹ Generally (and the term has become *very* general), shamanism is not a codified or dogmatic religious tradition, but a set of techniques for inducing changes in consciousness, through which interaction with the spirits inhabiting the natural environment, and the ‘otherworlds’ may occur. This interaction is commonly undertaken for the purpose of gaining knowledge from the spirits, as in prophecy and divination, or, most importantly, for enlisting their help in healing: ‘soul-retrieval’ and combating spirits of disease. In any case, it is undertaken for the general benefit of the community. Some form of shamanism is practised by most surviving tribal peoples in the world, and is thought to be a good model for ‘religious’ practices among prehistoric humans.

Despite (or because of?) it being non-codified and non-dogmatic, shamanic traditions across the globe share many similarities. One almost universal feature is a many-levelled map of the cosmos, which most frequently consists of three levels or worlds: the upper world, the sky, realm of the gods; the lower world, inside the Earth, realm of the ancestors and of chthonic spirits; and the middle world, this world. The levels are connected by, and accessed through, an *axis mundi*, a world axis, which can be a cosmic mountain, tree, pillar or ladder. During trances or in dreams, the shaman’s spirit leaves his or her body, finds this ‘centre of the world’ and travels up or down it to journey into other worlds.

The Pole Star has come up in our investigation a couple of times: once in the search through Latin for the possible origins of ‘Verbeia’ (*vertex* = Pole Star); and again in relation to the swastika, which may describe the rotation of the night sky around this stellar axis. One of the axes of the carving is aligned to less than a degree off magnetic north, pointing straight at the Celestial North Pole.⁶⁰

A great many tribes and cultures across Siberia, Scandinavia, and the European continent hold the star that occupies this pivotal area of the northern skies to be important. Shamanic cultures like the Turko-Tatars, who live in yurts, imagine the sky to be a vast tent, the wind entering like a draught through unsealed edges, the Pole Star acting as a stake to hold it together.⁶¹ The Buryat see the stars as a vast herd of horses, and the Pole Star as the stake to which they are

59. Walsh, p. 8

60. Bennett 1997, p. 53

61. Éliade, p. 260

tethered. The Turko-Altaians, the Mongols, the Kalmyk, the Buryat, the Kirgiz, the Bashkir, the Siberian Tatars, the Teleut and the Lapps all conceive the Pole Star as the summit of a pillar, i.e. a shamanic *axis mundi*. For Chuckchee and Altain shamans, the star is a hole (like the hole in the top of a tent that lets out smoke) through which they may pass on their journeys to the upper world in the sky.

It is not implausible, then, that the carvers of the Ilkley Swastika held similar beliefs, and that this stone was the base of their *axis mundi*—the connecting medium between humans and the spirits of the land or the gods in the sky. The use of cup marks, especially on this horizontal surface, suggests that they may have been intended to contain a liquid of some sort,⁶² a notion reinforced by the ‘healing water’ and ‘milk libations’ folklore surrounding so many cup marks and hollow basins in stones. Perhaps the stone served a similar function to the ‘sacred pillars’ found in the centres of the houses of herdsmen in numerous African and Indian tribes. “Everywhere, sacrificial offerings are brought to the foot of this pillar. Sometimes they are oblations of milk to the celestial God (as among the African tribes . . .); and in some cases, even blood sacrifices are offered (for example, among the Galla of Kenya).”⁶³

Those who find all this pagan nonsense a bit far-fetched and exotic would do well to read the Bible, specifically Genesis 28:10. Here, Jacob spends the night in a place where he uses some stones for pillows. During the night he has a very ‘shamanic’ dream, where a ladder reaches from the earth to the heavens and angels travel up and down it. He wakes the next morning and, deeply impressed by this dream, sets his pillow-stone up as a pillar. He anoints it with oil and names the spot *Beth-el*, ‘sacred stone’.

This image of the cosmic ladder, found in tribal shamanism as well as Judaic mythology, calls to mind the ladder-like images on some of Rombald’s Moor’s cup-and-ring carvings (see fig. 1, and notes for ‘Prehistoric Yorkshire’). Could cup-and-rings also relate to the shamanic *axis mundi*? The central cups in these designs could relate to the Pole Star, surrounded by the orbits of the stars. It has become a pretty much orthodox notion in contemporary rock art research that much of this art is associated with the practise of shamanism, and with imagery seen during trance-states, so this suggestion may not be consigned to the waste-basket of ‘fringe’ ideas as it may have been ten years ago.⁶⁴ Richard Bradley, a respected archaeologist at the University of Reading, has suggested that cup-and-ring designs could have derived from tunnel-like imagery experienced during altered states of consciousness.⁶⁵ To me, this associates the basic cup-and-ring more deeply with the Swastika glyph, which could be seen as a much more controlled and elaborated expression of the same vision that may lie behind cup-and-rings—a tunnel-like vortex/passage into the sky, or indeed down underground. There can be no singular, final interpretation of these obviously ‘multi-meaninged’ glyphs, though, so we should keep an open mind (but have fun!) as we speculate.

What has all this to do with Verbeia? Well, while looking at Brigid, I came to see that her

62. One of the most consistent features of all cup-and-ring rock art in the British Isles is that the designs are predominantly carved on horizontal or near-horizontal surfaces. Where there is a slope, and the glyph includes a ‘tail’ groove running from the central cup, the groove usually runs downhill (see Morris 1977). The cups on the Swastika Stone are quite shallow, though, a possible argument against them being used to hold liquids.

63. Éliade, p. 262

64. See Trubshaw, ‘The Altering State of Rock Art Research’

65. See Trubshaw, ‘Many levels of significance’

significance is very likely to be connected to archaic shamanic traditions. She is held to preside over fire, which is the most important of the natural elements to most shamanic cultures. As Mircea Éliade says, “Mastery over fire . . . is a magico-mystical virtue that . . . translates into sensible terms the fact that the shaman has passed beyond the human condition and already shares in the condition of ‘spirits.’”⁶⁶ Brigid is goddess of blacksmiths, a profession associated with esoteric transformative knowledge (transformation of metals and/or psychic transformation) and shamanism by many peoples. She is goddess of poets, artists and writers, again professions with deep links to shamanism. The shaman’s visions are often the source of his or her tribe’s art, myth and song. Brigid is also patroness of doctors and healers, and healing is probably the core aspect of shamanic practice. Shamans can be many things, but at root they are ‘witch-doctors’, sacred healers. In Brigid, then, it seems we find a symbolic distillation of the shamanic complex; and Verbeia is almost certainly a Brigid-type healing and fire goddess.

Of course both deities have accumulated a lot of late pagan associations, like the cycle of the seasons and cattle myths, which may, strictly speaking, have little to do with shamanism as such. But the traces of shamanism in these goddesses are very vivid and strong. It may well be that no one who worshipped Verbeia was involved in anything that resembled classical shamanism, and that her connections with the (probably) shamanic rock art on the moors are purely due to ‘chance’. The Swastika Stone may have been the work of Celts, either Gaulish Roman troops who revered the verbena plant, or the Celts already settled in these lands (who originated on the continent anyhow). Would this mean that the above speculations about its significance are reading too much into a more general religious symbol, or that the Celts had a deeper connection to ‘shamanic’ traditions than previously suspected? Or did a Pole-worshipping Stone Age culture carve the Swastika which came to be revered and associated with tutelary goddesses by the Celts who superceded them?

Whatever conclusion is reached, this mythologically resonant region will surely continue to baffle and inspire those who are compelled to delve into her mysteries.

I HOPE THIS densely compacted trail of discoveries and musings has been absorbed. This is not to say that anything here is particularly ‘brilliant’ or ‘difficult’; it’s just that I’ve had to condense so much non-linear thought into such a short piece of prose. It would have been nice to relax into a book-length work; but perhaps there just aren’t enough people out there interested in this small region to make a whole book worthwhile. Or are there?

People often want grand, sweeping tomes about vast cultures, and mythologies that encompass huge spans of history. And rightly so! We need a ‘big picture’—a framework, to use as a tool in dismantling the prejudices about the past that we were brought up with. One of my aims with this work is to convey the idea that some of the best windows with views onto this ‘big picture’ may seem, at first, to be quite small—and are often closer to hand than we expect.

66. Éliade, p. 335

APPENDIX 1: VERBEIA'S BODY?

ONE DAY I finally got round to trying to trace the two streams that flowed past the Roman fort at Ilkley—which may well be 'Verbeia's snakes'—back up onto the moors. The westerly stream, which originates just east from the Barmishaw Wood, seems to disappear into the grounds of the Bradford Community College. The easterly stream, as mentioned above, can be found flowing under Brook Street, its final exposure to us being a lovely oasis of vegetation among the streets on the moorside. Tracing it uphill, it winds east under the road onto the moor, and back into a small concrete pool. Then it carries on through the area downhill from the White Wells house, and, before you reach it, it becomes obvious that it is flowing from the waterfall to the west of White Wells.

Behind this fall is a curious mound, known as Willy Hall Wood, which presents itself all the more forcefully due to being isolated by its covering of trees. Clambering up past the ford that the waterfall creates, and onto the mound, I became gradually but powerfully astounded at the situation. Two streams flow from further uphill and converge at the southern end of this mound. They immediately part again, flowing down past either side, only to reconverge at the bottom of the mound, where the water cascades down towards Ilkley. Perhaps the fact that the trees here are an isolated huddle had something to do with it, but for me the sense of this mound being some sacred grove was palpable. Indeed, high up at the head of the mound is to be found a grand boulder carved with cups and rings. And in case it's not obvious already, I'm not using terms like the 'bottom' and 'head' of the mound as purely mundane figures of speech! For here I saw a natural analogue of the Roman fort's situation, with its two enclosing streams that may have been the inspiration for the snakes in Verbeia's hands. The feeling of it being an 'analogue' is strengthened by the fact that we're actually dealing with the same flow of water from the moor into the Wharfe.

Was this mound associated with Verbeia, perhaps seen as her prone form in the land? Was it a sacred place to the Brigantes or the Gaulish troops, as it evidently was to the Neolithic or Bronze Age folk who carved the petroglyphs here? It became more tempting to link the mound to Verbeia when I went down to the waterfall again, and saw that it created the image of a flow emanating from the lower regions of this 'recumbent goddess'! Note that the snakes in the altar stone image converge near the goddess' cunt—this is the situation with the mound's streams, but not with the fort's. I urge anyone interested in Verbeia to explore the place for themselves, to make up their own minds; or to let their minds wander in the odd peace and vibrancy of this suggestive mound.

APPENDIX 2: THE RIVER

This is an extract from David Clarke & Andy Roberts' Twilight of the Celtic Gods (Blandford, 1996). In this book they attempt to show how some apparently archaic pagan traditions have survived in the more rural areas of Britain. Included in it are many letters sent to the authors by people who relate their experiences of family traditions. This letter is from a woman living in Wharfedale, and relates directly to some of the suggestions in this booklet. Many thanks to Andy Roberts for permission to reprint this fascinating document.

I CAN WELL remember one spring day when I was about nine years old. My grandmother took me on the bus to Ilkley to the church there, and right in the darkness at the back of the building pointed out a carving which she said was the goddess of the river. To me it was just a stone with wavy lines being held by a figure in some kind of dress. I've visited it many times since she passed over and have come to see it as one of the few representations of the mother which manages to capture her with any degree of success. And it's in a church, which goes to show what I wrote earlier about churches and the tradition.

My family have always been with the river. In this part of the Dales you can hardly get away from it, when every slope and fellside is alive with streams and pools which feed into the river. No matter what part of the year we are in, the river remained constant. In winter it helped sweep away the detritus of the year which had gone and in the spring and summer it brought the dale to life again. I was always taught to respect water—that it was the source of everything. It helped create and also, by washing away, to destroy, and was never the same.

People talk glibly today about specific gods and goddesses connected to rivers and water, but we never really had such distinctions or limitations. The river and its sources were expressions of the one power and that was that. The power of creation is, as I've said before, beyond being male and female, although it can show itself as those distinctions. We treated the river and its power with the utmost respect and, like other points on the land, there was a time when its power should be 'acknowledged'. For the river May Day was the right time. And it always had to be May Day, and like most of our practices it was simple yet demanded energy and commitment. Just the effort of gathering on one specific day was enough, with people often returning from quite some distance.

On the eve those of us who lived in the dale and who had time to spare would spend time in the fields and fells gathering tributes to the May and the river. Anything we found beautiful and appropriate would fit the bill—organic or inorganic, it didn't matter, although we tried to keep a balance between the two. Sometimes stones and bones, but always flowers, and considerable time could be spent making posies from those available at that time of the year.

Late on the eve we would gather together at a farmhouse within a few miles of the source of the river and have, I suppose, a bit of a wake or party. No strange rites or anything like that! Just a gathering and a good time. A bonfire could be lit in the yard, and we knew that the people who couldn't be with us for one reason or another would also be marking the occasion with a fire, even if it was just a candle placed in their window bottom. It didn't matter how it was done, so long as

it was done.

At first when I was young, all this was just treated as a bit of a game. But as I grew up the understanding came, just clicked into place, and I would miss this event only if I was working away and couldn't manage to get back in time. Part of the tradition involved a walk to the source of the river, about seven miles away at Cam. The bonfire was always left to burn itself out. When we arrived, the time before dawn would be spent in quiet contemplation. No one spoke at all and it could be very eerie, just the sound of the water and the wind. At this time and place there was a point in the night when we were all hit by a certain sense of an in-coming rush of life and then we knew the year had turned once more and the warmth of summer was on its way back. And we were all part of that cycle in some mysterious way. As dawn came, we would busy ourselves around the the head of the water, arranging the flowers and offerings we had brought with us. When this was completed, we would eat and drink, again usually in silence, although one of the older people might say a prayer of some sort, a blessing of thanks for the river's continuing benevolence and to the coming summer season. Then we returned to our homes to carry the May festivities on in our own family way.

The Wharfe had quite a reputation for demanding and taking life in the past, and this still carried on, although people see it in a different light now. One location our tradition held in great respect was the Wharfe near Bolton Abbey, and in particular the part near it where it plunges beneath the rocks at the Strid. This is a spectacular and beautiful place and here the gap from one side to the other is only a matter of feet wide. It is here that the river takes its sacrifices. I suppose at one time it might have been an organized thing and the victims were the old or the sick who chose to give themselves, but that was in a more primitive time and really there was never any need for it.

The challenge of trying to jump across what seems an easy gap is too much for many people and sacrifices come this way. I suppose the act of leaping across a powerful river in full spate is some people's idea of conquering the power of nature in some small way. Most of the people who have been foolish enough to try manage it, but over the years many have failed and are sucked out of sight into the swirling pit that lies beneath the waters. As my grandmother said, the Wharfe could represent both the creative and destructive powers of the mother. Although all water sources were considered special by our tradition, a bit of competition must have existed at one time, for the Wharfe was compared with the nearby River Aire in one old couplet: 'Wharfe is clear and the Aire lithe. Where the Aire drowns one, Wharfe drowns five.' One old book I have on the dale described how parties of people would visit the Strid with the intention of jumping across, and it says of one guide, 'Two or three times he had brought parties to the Strid and gone back with one short, and he seemed to feel the futility of it.' My grandmother also used to tell me how a white horse was to be seen rising from the Strid, always just before or after a sacrifice had been taken.

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Astronomical data in this essay was gathered using the desktop planetarium SkyGlobe. Somewhat dated now, it can still be found with a quick web search.