

NRGCA

Notional Research Group for Cultural Artefacts

SUPPLEMENT ONE



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March 2016

Haining Stones

















Haining stones are, as far as we have been able to ascertain, previously undocumented — which would seem to indicate their questionable status. They appear to be connected to ‘dobby stones’ — a common enough feature of many farms and dairies a century ago. Dobbies, boggarts or brownies, were genii locorum, thought to be malevolent and therefore worth placating. In Scotland, the Celtic analogue was the ùraisg, who ‘had the qualities of man and spirit curiously commingled. He had a particular fondness for the products of the dairy and was a fearful intruder on milkmaids, who made regular libations of milk or cream to charm him off or to procure his favour’.¹

Hence a doobby stone is a hollowed-out or vessel-like stone which received a propitiatory offering of milk prior to the process of butter-making. The Museum of Lakeland Life and Industry in Kendal holds two such artefacts in its collection, one of which (ref: 85/752) was featured in Richard Skelton’s ‘ritual assemblages’ in the NRGCA’s **Unindex Volume One**.²

There follows a speculative reconstruction of the function of haining stones. We are particularly indebted to Peter Hill, who drew to our attention to their twofold nature: a small ‘hand’ stone and a larger ‘field’ stone, both referred to undifferentiatedly as ‘haining stones’. We are also grateful to Mr. Hill for allowing us to photograph artefacts from his collection.

‘Haining’ itself is related to the practice of leaving a region of farmland fallow,

[1 / 2]

‘Hand haining stone’

private collection, Cumbria

[3 / 4]

‘Hand haining stone’

private collection, Cumbria

[5 / 6]

‘Hand haining stone’

Museum of Lakeland Life and Industry,
Cumbria

[7 / 8]

‘Field haining stones’

Dunnerdale, Cumbria

as Dickinson noted in his Cumberland glossary, 'Hain, n. to preserve grass, &c., untouched.'³ The practical aspects of crop-rotation aside, there is considerable ritual evidence surrounding the ancient belief that the genius loci resided in the 'last sheaf' of harvested corn, which became transmuted into a so-called 'corn dolly' in order to preserve the cycle of death and re-birth. A analogous principle can be seen at work in relation to the sidhe, the 'faerie folk' of Celtic mythology: 'Traditionally a small portion of a field was left fallow, so that the sith could hide in the long grass.'⁴

Haining stones are therefore thought to be an embellishment of this propitiatory function within the context of a vaccary or sheep farm. A field, or portion thereof, was left ungrazed and an offering made at the haining stone – possibly a libation of milk, bread or butter. We can only speculate as to the utility of the smaller 'hand' stone. Perhaps it was used to strike the 'field' stone in order to summon the genius loci itself. Or perhaps it functioned in some similar way to the corn-dolly, as a symbol or receptacle of 'the other'. The hand stones documented here bear little resemblance to each other, and do not evidence significant wear or use. One of them [5 / 6] is categorised as a 'weight stone' (ref: 77/393) in the inventory of the Museum of Lakeland Life and Industry. There is no evidence to suggest that this categorisation is incorrect.

The 'field' stones were photographed high in the Dunnerdale Fells – an area of commons beyond the boundary of any

particular farm. One of them [7] is upright and heavily grooved on its crown, but this could easily be the work of natural forces. The other [8] is recumbent. Both stones are heavily covered with lichen. Significantly, a large area surrounding each site is clear of any other stone or object. Given the generally boulder-strewn aspect of the broader terrain, this therefore appears the work of human intervention, and there is a palpable atmosphere to each that is difficult to define. Of course, it is quite possible that they are simply 'gray stones' – markers or way-finders in a landscape where paths and walls are not easily maintained.

NOTES

- 1 Edward Dwelly, *A Gaelic-English Dictionary*, 1901
- 2 NRGCA, *Unindex Volume One: Ferae Naturae*, 2004
ISBN 978-1-906043-17-9
- 3 William Dickinson, *A Glossary of the Cumberland Dialect*, 1878
- 4 Alec Finlay, *Gathering, Reliquiae Volume Three*, 2015
ISBN 978-0-9934310-0-5

