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## Reflecting Nature: water beings in history and imagination

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*One Sunday morn young Lambton went a'fishing in the Wear...*

### Abstract

Water beings are intriguing anthropological objects for several reasons. First, they reflect the ways that humans use water as an imaginative resource, employing its material properties to conceptualise movement, flow and change over time, and to articulate ideas about generative power. Second, historical narratives about water beings reveal critical transitions in religious beliefs and practices, in socio-political relationships and in human-environmental engagements. This chapter focuses on Durham's 'Lambton Worm', a serpent whose emergence from the River Wear is the subject of a folk song from the 1800s, but which, with related water beings, features in stories from the Middle Ages, intersecting with a critical period in which local nature religions were displaced by the influx of Christianity to the region. Though 'The Worm' (an Old English term for dragon) is now presented as a mere fairy tale, the song has retained its popularity, and – in a location where the vast medieval cathedral both physically and metaphorically dominates the city – the Bishop of Durham, on being enthroned, still performs a ritual about 'slaying the dragon'. Differences between the Church and subaltern religions remain, and key to tensions between them are divergent views about relations with the natural world, and the propriety of the notions of human 'dominion' that emerged with Christianity.

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### An Aaful Story

*One Sunday morn young Lambton went a'fishing in the Wear,  
An' caught a fish upon his heuk he thowt leuk't vary queer.  
But whatt'n kind ov fish it was young Lambton cuddn't tell,  
He waddn't fash<sup>1</sup> te carry'd hyem, so he hoyed<sup>2</sup> it donn a well.*

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<sup>1</sup> 'Couldn't be bothered'.

<sup>2</sup> 'Threw it down a well'.

*Whisht lads, haad yor gobs<sup>3</sup>, an' aa'll tell ye aall an aaful story,  
Whisht lads, haad yor gobs, an' aa'll tel ye 'boot the worm.*

This famous Geordie folk song, written in 1867 by C.M. Leumane, but referring to a medieval legend in the north-east of England, tells the 'aaful story' of the Lambton Worm,<sup>4</sup> the water serpent or dragon that a rebellious young nobleman, John Lambton, pulled from the River Wear near Durham while fishing instead of going to church one Sunday. Having cursed the river for failing to yield any fish, he felt a tug on his line, and pulled out the 'queer' black worm. As he couldn't be bothered to carry it home, he threw it down a well. Later, repenting his sinful ways, he joined the Crusades and became Sir John, a Knight of Rhodes. But while he was in Palestine the worm grew:

*Noo Lambton felt inclined to gan an' fight in foreign wars,  
He joined a troop ov knights that cared for nowther woonds nor scars.  
An' off he went to Palestine, where queer things him befell,  
An' varry soon forgat about the queer worm i' tha well.  
... But the worm got fat an' grewed and grewed, an' grewed an aaful size...*

As the serpent grew, local villagers found that the water in the well was poisoned. The creature began preying on local livestock – and worse:

*This fearful worm would often feed on caalves an' lambs and sheep,  
And swally little bairns<sup>5</sup> alive when they laid down to sleep.*

The worm returned to live in the river and, following a trail of slime from the well, people saw it curled around a rock. It was now so large that, when it 'craaled aboot' at night, it could '*lap he's tail ten times round Pensha Hill*'.

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<sup>3</sup> 'Be quiet lads, shut your mouths...'

<sup>4</sup> 'Worm' is an old English term for dragon, relating to the Germanic 'wyrn' and the Old Norse term 'ormr', which as well as describing the leviathans believed by the Vikings to inhabit the deeps, also refers to the serpentine prows of their longships.

<sup>5</sup> Children.



Fig. 1. *The Worm around Penshaw Hill. Drawing by Danny Parkinson.*

Living ‘i’ mortal fear’, they sent ‘news ov this myest aaful worm’ to Palestine. To cut a long story short, ‘brave and bowld Sir John’ returned and, of course, slew the dragon, thus joining the ranks of heroes that stepped forward in the medieval period to rid communities of the marauding serpents reportedly so prolific in Europe at that time.



Fig. 2. *Sir John Lambton slew the worm. Image from <http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/eng/efft/efft15.htm>*

But why were there so many serpents? Why were they associated with water? And why were they so ‘aaful’? Having researched human interactions with water in many parts of the world, I have found representations of water beings to be a valuable imaginative resource for anthropologists, providing a mirror of societies’ particular historical and cultural engagements with water and ‘nature’. I therefore employ the serpentine story of the Lambton Worm and similar classic tales of dragon slaying to reflect upon a key turning point

in human-environmental relationships. This is the juncture at which, with the coming of Christianity, other major monotheistic religions, and nascent scientism, European societies shifted from the relatively egalitarian bioethical position of 'nature religions', in which the material world was seen as an animate and agentive partner in events, to an engagement in which humanised deities prevailed, and material things and other species were recast as both the objects and subjects of hierarchically superior human dominion. My hydrological narrative is appropriately cyclical: it follows subversive undercurrents through time, and concludes by considering how water beings have resurfaced in contemporary efforts by neo-pagans and environmental groups to critique distanced and exploitative ways of being in the world, and to reconstruct more collaborative, emplaced environmental engagements.

The shift that occurred in relation to water beings in the medieval period allows us to consider the factors that led to these important transitions. Why was it deemed necessary to slay the serpents? Why then? And why in some, but not other, geographic and cultural contexts?

### **Materialising Water**

Water serpent beings were by no means a new phenomenon in the Middle Ages. They had appeared in every cultural and geographical context throughout human history, their form invariably reflecting the fluid properties of water. They were generally serpentine, shining and multi-hued; they lived in or near, or were related in some way to water. There were multiple variations: water beings regularly acquired forms echoing the creatures in their local environments: thus early Egyptian serpents, and those in Australia often had crocodile-like features; African water beings were described as being like giant boa constrictors; and South American ones were resplendent with colourful feathers. But despite the acquisition of elements of various other species (which, as Gilmore observes (2003), is intrinsic to the process of making monsters), and important variations in the cultural ideas and practices in which they were located, they invariably retained some formal compositional commonality. Always they reflected – one might say literally embodied – the material properties and behaviours of water, shimmering, glittering and winding through the world; circulating in rainbows between earth and sky; flowing and wriggling across and down into the land. This ubiquity and formal consistency highlights a core principle of cognitive development: humans 'use the world to think', making recurrent imaginative use of its material properties in composing concepts and metaphors (Levi-Strauss 1966, Lakoff and Johnston 1980, Strang 2005b).

Thus water imagery is used cross-culturally to articulate ideas about movement, flow and transformation over time (Strang 2004). Water's essentiality to life has caused all human societies to valorise its generative powers, as well as fearing its potentially destructive forces. For prehistoric societies, whose religious cosmologies often centred on totemic

animal beings, there may also have been important associations between serpentine silvery streams of water and the fluid, shining movements of snakes that, like water, also wriggle down into the earth. Thus, in early rock art and material culture, the water beings that manifest the properties and powers of water are often represented as snakes and serpents.

As well as being conceived through cognitive engagement with water's particular material properties, ideas about serpent beings were also carried in the imaginations of the human populations that flowed to all corners of the world. Emerging in different historical and geographic contexts, water beings became, in Australia, the creative Rainbow Serpent from which all life arose; in Africa, the anaconda-like *Mami Water* being; in Asia the cloud-born rain-bringing dragons and dragon springs; in India and Nepal, the similarly water-oriented *nāgas*; and in the Pacific, the river guarding *taniwhas* and sea-dwelling *marakihaus*.



Fig. 3. Bark painting from Western Arnhem Land, Australia. The Rainbow Serpent Ngalyod giving birth to Aboriginal people. Artist, Billinyara Nabegeyo.



*Fig. 4. Cloud Dragon screen in Kennin-Ji, 12<sup>th</sup> Century Zen Temple (Kyoto). Photo by author.*

There are numerous examples of early 'snake cults' even in the geographic areas from which Christianity arose. Joines notes, for example, archaeological evidence of Bronze Age snake worship in Canaan (1968).<sup>6</sup> And there is considerable agreement that the serpents demonized as Christianity gained ascendance had multiple – more positively regarded – pre-Christian antecedents:

The Egyptian crowned uraeus on a staff was a common emblem of divine goodness. When the priests of Thebes wished to ascribe the gift of life and the power of healing to the god, they twined the serpent around the trident of Jupiter Ammon. A staff wrapped by a serpent signified the Egyptian god Thoth or the Greek god Hermes Trismegistus, the author of medicine. It was probably Egypt who handed down to Greece the serpent-sceptre, or the caduceus, and the staff of Aesculapius, the god of medicine. The Greek goddess of health, Hygeia, could be represented by a serpent...'(Joines 1974: 86)

Huxley too records that households in ancient Greece typically had a guardian snake that had to be fed with offerings of milk and honey cakes (1979: 7).<sup>7</sup> In fact, there seems to have been no pre-agricultural or early agricultural society that didn't have sacred serpent beings of one sort or another, and as long as people saw their material environments as being animated and sentient, such beings retained a powerful and central role. This suggests a rather 'organic' relationship between humankind and the material world. Without the objectifying distance provided by scientific deconstruction and technological advancement, there prevailed (as there still does in some hunter-gatherer and small-scale horticultural societies) a more intimate relationship with the material environment, in which the properties and processes of other species and things were recognised as having their own agency.

In early Europe, animated land and waterscapes were inhabited by a range of sentient deities: tree spirits, generalised 'green' powers; and water beings. Because their generative and other powers were respected, these had to be dealt with reciprocally, leading to bioethical positions that, in principle, accommodated their needs as well as those of human

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<sup>6</sup> Joines (1974) observes that '

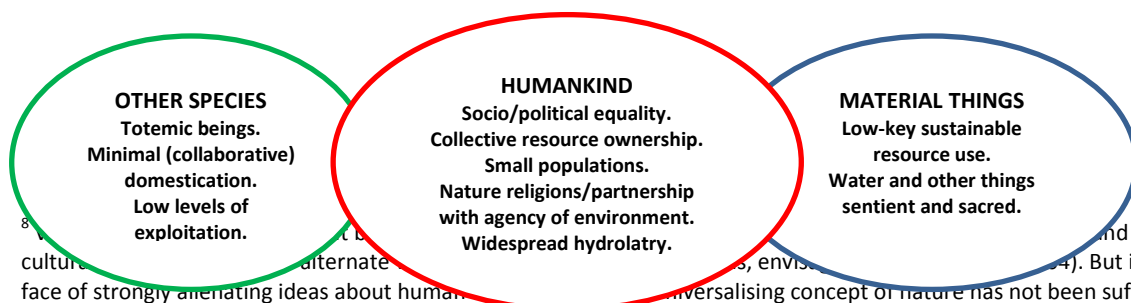
Huxley records that households in ancient Greece typically had a guardian snake that had to be fed with milk and honey cakes (1979: 7).

<sup>7</sup> The notion that marauding dragons could be placated if supplied with milk occurs frequently in medieval stories, and may link with earlier ideas about guardian snakes. These recurrent ideas may also explain the Lambton Worm's predilection for 'milking the coos' at night.

beings, focusing on and valorising the interdependencies between them. Descola and Palsson (1996) point to the differences between this closely integrated human-environmental relationship and the emergence of dualistic views of nature and culture. While contemporary Western science<sup>8</sup> is underpinned by a vision of all beings – including humans – as part of universal nature (Vivieros de Castro 2004, Latour 2009), religious developments placing humankind in a hierarchically different and superior position sparked a critically alienating process of ‘othering’ the non-human. This resonates with Ingold’s observation that some societies dwell ‘in’ the sphere of the world rather than taking a more objectifying view of ‘the globe’ (2000). It also highlights the relational implications of ‘identifying with’ nature in contrast to framing it as ‘other’ (Strang 2005a).

The fluid relationships between human societies and other species and things are too complex to be visually represented in a comprehensive or indeed comprehensible way, but (with the caveat that these are hugely reductive and unrealistically static) it is possible to offer simple heuristic diagrams highlighting the changes through which, over time, major societies have increasingly dominated material events, prioritised their own needs, and achieved hierarchical distance from the non-human.

It would appear from the archaeological evidence that human-environmental relationships in many small-scale hunter-gatherer or horticultural societies prior to the medieval period were characterised by notions of partnership and parity with the material world and its perceived agency, and by low-key and sustainable resource use.<sup>9</sup> If we also accept as indicative ethnographic accounts of contemporary hunter-gatherer and horticultural societies, this reciprocity with non-human agency was broadly coherent with relatively simple technologies, and relatively egalitarian social and economic structures: flat gerontocratic forms of governance; some degree of gender equality,<sup>10</sup> and limited common property regimes providing collective ownership and management of land and resources.



<sup>8</sup> While contemporary Western science is underpinned by a vision of all beings – including humans – as part of universal nature (Vivieros de Castro 2004, Latour 2009), religious developments placing humankind in a hierarchically different and superior position sparked a critically alienating process of ‘othering’ the non-human. This resonates with Ingold’s observation that some societies dwell ‘in’ the sphere of the world rather than taking a more objectifying view of ‘the globe’ (2000). It also highlights the relational implications of ‘identifying with’ nature in contrast to framing it as ‘other’ (Strang 2005a). But in the face of strongly alienating ideas about human-environmental relationships, a universalising concept of nature has not been sufficient to recreate the potential for co-identification – or assumed kinship – with the non-human that was (and in some contexts is still) enabled by totemic belief systems positioning human and non-human beings in reciprocal terms (Strang 2005a).

<sup>9</sup> The practices of larger imperial societies in the pre-medieval period were somewhat different, although (as illustrated by the votive offerings at holy wells and by the naming of many rivers for Roman water goddesses) pre-Christian Romans certainly continued to valorise water serpent beings, as did the early Greeks. However, these serpent-oriented religious ideas and practices receded as their societies began to urbanise and develop scientific ideas and new forms of technology.

<sup>10</sup> This is a complex issue, which there is insufficient space to explore here, but if we take as key indicators things such as joint ownership of land and resources and direct participation in religious and political governance, then societies governed by their elders – though they might contain specific gender roles and other forms of inequality – are structurally and thus quite possibly socially more egalitarian than most.



*Fig. 5. A configuration of early human-environmental relationships.*

In a collaborative relationship between human societies and a 'sentient' material world, hydrolatry, the worship of water and the beings believed to manifest its creative energies, was an obvious outcome. Water beings were seen as both nurturing and authoritative, providing generative power as well as potentially destructive force. Thus in Mesopotamia and across Europe pre-Christian Canaanite, Celtic, Greek and Roman societies worshipped – and propitiated – river gods and water beings with votive offerings, libations, sacrificial rituals and well-dressings.

Such beliefs and practices continue in societies that have maintained nature religions or elements of these: thus in Aboriginal Australia, key sacred knowledge and ritual focuses on the Rainbow Serpent that, through a hydrotheological cycle, generates all life and upholds Ancestral Law (Strang 2002, 2009). In India, contemporary ethnography reveals water beings who must be dealt with respectfully if they are not to send punitive floods (Butcher 2013); in Africa they dispense wisdom and, again, punish wrongdoing (Bernard 2013), and in the Pacific, *taniwhas* guard the rivers and cause trouble when angered by developments insensitive to their well-being or that of local *iwis* (tribes) (Strang 2012).

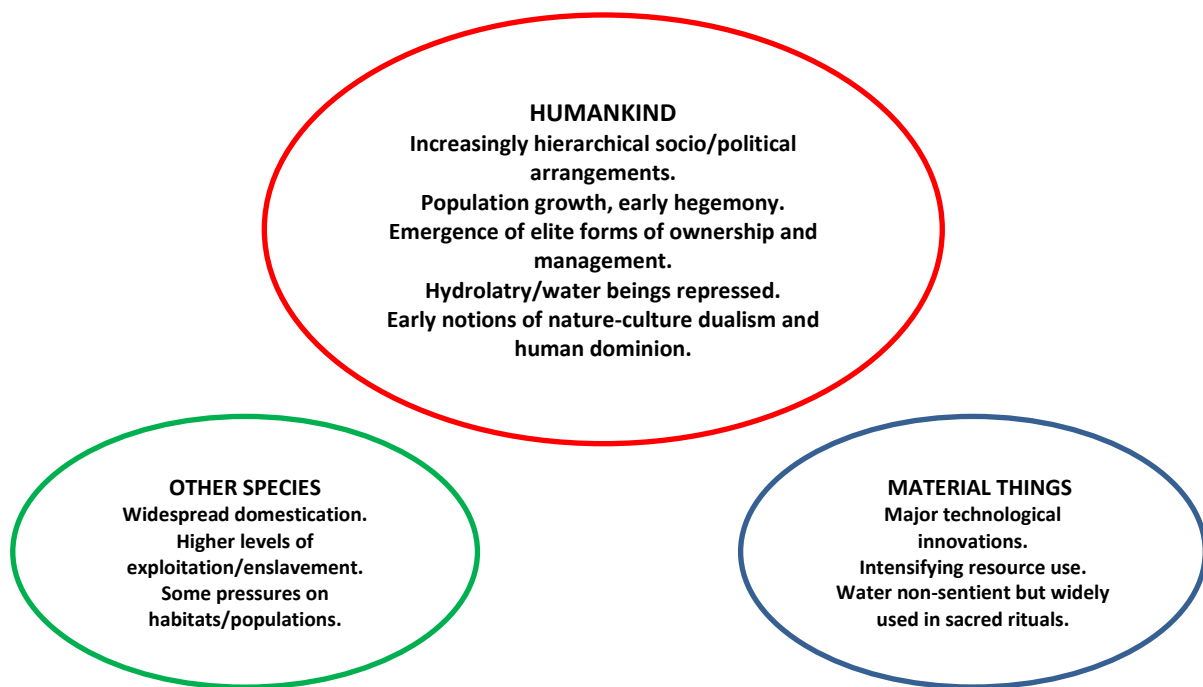
Historically, though, the trajectory of water serpent beings in the Levant and across Europe took a different turn. I suggest that this was related to critical changes in material practices: the development of irrigation and other forms of technology offering much greater human control over the physical environment. These developments articulated with related transformations in human-environmental relationships and in societies' political arrangements. A brief background sketch of these changes highlights the connections.

### **New Directions in Water Power**

From about 3000 B.C.E., rather than working with the natural rise and fall of rivers, societies in Mesopotamia developed water wheels, canals, and ways of impounding and directing water. Between 2950 B.C.E.-2750 B.C.E., for example, the Sadd El-Kafara 'dam of the Pagans'... 'sometimes called the oldest dam in the world', was built in the Wadi el-Garawi 18 miles south of Cairo (Biswas 1970: 5).

The development of agriculture also brought related Durkheimian changes in religious forms (Durkheim 1961). The totemic water beings and animal gods of nature religions were replaced by pantheons of human or semi-human deities who, rather than animating local

rivers, trees and landscapes, inhabited alternate worlds such as Olympus and Valhalla. With greater investment in crops and infrastructure, land and resources were enclosed both physically and with new, less equal, forms of property. Societies became more hierarchical and non-human species were defined as 'other', separating previously co-identified human and non-human kinds. In the process, water was redirected into human socio-technical systems as something to be controlled – to be acted *on* rather than acted *with*. These changes brought a new configuration to human relationships with water and the environment.



*Fig. 6. A more hierarchical and human-centred configuration of relations with water and 'nature'.*

Representations of water beings altered accordingly. Although the earliest images of water serpent gods, the Egyptian *nommos*, had provided inspiration for multiple cultural manifestations around the world, and early Greek and Roman mythology had framed them in positive terms, there came a point – coinciding with the emergence of cities and their central water supply fountains in Greece ca. 7-600 B.C.E. – when humanised deities began to compete for power with those in other forms.

Fountains illustrated then – as they have done throughout the ages – an ideological and cultural notion of the triumph of civilization over nature: water, the giver and taker of life, in the fountain appears at the control of human beings. (Tvedt and Jacobsson 2006: ix)

Gilmore observes that 'in the classical Mediterranean world, monsters first appear in literary form in the Homeric legends by 700 B.C.' (2003: 37). There were some early serpent slayings: for example the triumph of Perseus over the sea monster in the port of Jaffa; the Herculean slaying of the many headed Hydra at Lerna.



*Fig.7. Hercules slaying the Lernean hydra, c. 525 B.C.E. Collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, California. Digital image courtesy of the Getty Museum's Open Content Program.*

The emergence of major monotheistic religions had an even greater impact. Like the earlier Greek and Roman cosmologies, Christian representations of serpents in the preliminary Biblical texts were laudatory, with Moses' 'bronze serpent' and the fiery Seraphim being depicted positively.<sup>11</sup> But as other writers have observed (Batto 1992, Joines 1974), later texts contained increasingly negative images, culminating in the demonization of the serpent in the Garden of Eden, and the assurance to Christ that 'the dragon shalt thou trample under feet' (King James Bible, Psalm 91:13). Thus Harte describes how baptism came to be linked with 'victory over the old dragon' and notes 'Psalm 74:13-14 in which the Lord breaks the heads of the dragons in the waters and crushes Leviathan' (2011:7). He suggests that this produced 'a mythical analogue of baptism as dragon-combat' (Ibid.8), and it is reasonable to suppose that this provided the seedcorn for the myriad dragon slaying stories – such as the Lambton Worm – that sprang up, like the classical vision of dragons' teeth, as Christianity's battle to subdue the pre-Christian nature religions spread across Europe.

The demonization of previously valorised water beings coincided with further technological change in the Middle East and Europe. Urbanisation in Greece, as well as initiating new social and material processes, created educated upper classes able to build on the scientific

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<sup>11</sup> In Biblical narratives Moses uses a sacred object, a snake of brass upon a pole (a *Nehushtan*) to cure the Israelites from snakebites (Numbers 21:4-9).

forays initiated by earlier Egyptian elites. This scholarship led to theories about hydrology, and to deconstructions of the material properties of water that were demystifying, opening up divergent notions of nature and culture that proved central to the shaping of contemporary human-environmental relations.

Egyptian and Greek scholarly progress was taken up by the Romans and translated practically into new technology – aqueducts, roads and harbours – which marched with its armies across its Empire, and so into Britain. At that time ‘Britannia’ was still inhabited by Celtic tribes who combined hunting and gathering with low-key agricultural trade and, like the first waves of Roman invaders, worshipped water beings and conducted propitiatory rituals at thousands of sacred water sites across the British landscape.

### **The Island Hill**

Around Durham, there is evidence of human settlement dating back to ca.2000 B.C.E. The Roman legions were strongly resisted, most particularly by the Scots, who continued to harry them and subsequent invaders for centuries, making the north-east one of the most contested regions in Britain. However, the Romans made a stand at Hadrian’s Wall and eventually subdued the populations south of it. As Christianity spread through the Roman Empire, Celtic holy wells were renamed after Christian saints who also appropriated their miraculous and healing powers.

An important exception was Coventina’s Well at Carrawburgh near Hadrian’s Wall, and so not far from Durham. This retained its identification with this major pre-Christian water being, the Celtic/Roman ‘Queen of the Water Goddesses’, whose cult extended across Gaul and into north-west Spain. The spring and well, contained in a cistern in about 130 C.E., continued to be a major focus for pilgrims, receiving about 16,000 coins and numerous other votive offerings – jewellery, bronze masks, animals figure etc. (Green 1995, Hingley 2012). However, this propitiation ended in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century C.E., following a stern edict by the Roman Emperor Theodosius in 391, that Nicene Christianity was to be the official Roman religion, and pagan practices must cease forthwith. A massive destruction of pagan sites followed, which elevated Theodosius to sainthood. The Church fathers in this period also focused their disapproval on hydrolatry, with Tertullian, for example, stating that water was particularly attractive to demons and the Devil (Oestigaard 2010: 24). The devotees of Coventina therefore hurriedly placed building stones over the well to hide and protect it.



Fig. 8. Stone marker from Coventina's Well. Photo by author.

By the early Middle Ages a number of Christian centres had been established in Britain, one of the earliest and most important being the order of monks that came with Saint Aiden to Lindisfarne, often described as the cradle of British Christianity. Their first monastery in 635 C.E., (supported by King Oswald in nearby Bamburgh), acted as a centre for missionaries keen to convert the pagans of Northumbria to Christianity, and thus to instil its particular beliefs and values. That is not to suggest there was a sudden shift to environmental 'dominion': indeed, there is evidence that the early Christians expressed concern for the well-being of other species, but even then (as now) this was framed paternally. St Cuthbert provides a well-known example, instituting the first known bird protection laws to safeguard the friendly eider ducks and other seabirds in the Farne Islands.<sup>12</sup>

Lindisfarne was not safe for humans though: the community suffered a major blow from a Viking attack in 793 C.E. and a number of monks were killed. Such depredations were common in Britain's north-east, and it is worth noting that the Vikings, with their serpent-prowed longships, were also regarded as pagans who worshipped these *ormr* or 'worms'. The ferocity of their attacks led the monks to flee the holy island, carrying with them the 'miraculously undecayed' body of St Cuthbert.<sup>13</sup> Their peregrinations in avoiding Viking raiders brought them, eventually, to Durham<sup>14</sup> where they found a readily defensible high

<sup>12</sup> Eider ducks are therefore known as 'Cuddy' (Cuthbert's) ducks in the Pitmatic dialect specific to Northumberland and Durham. They are curious birds, seemingly unafraid of humans (Chris Watson, pers. comm.)

<sup>13</sup> Archaeologist David Petts notes evidence that some may have remained there, or that the island was not entirely abandoned (pers.comm.).

<sup>14</sup> The name is possibly a combination of Dun (the old English for hill) and Holme, an old Norse word for island, attesting to local Viking influences.

peninsula in a loop of the River Wear. Here they built a cathedral, and in doing so laid the foundations for a major religious power base in the region.

The Norman conquest of 1066 further embedded Christianity in Britain, and the production of the Domesday Book in 1086, under the orders of William the Conqueror, highlights the advancements made by then in subduing the material environment to human needs. It records multiple water mills along every river<sup>15</sup> and the carving and enclosure of land into tightly managed 'hides' and shires. There was now a sharply hierarchical class system, in which an aristocracy and its manorial holdings shared governance of the *hoi polloi* and of land and resources with equally powerful religious orders and their great Abbeys. This development highlighted the perennial relationship between political power and the ownership of water, although this might not be as inevitably despotic as Wittfogel claimed (1957).<sup>16</sup> But it appears that the Abbeys were frequently the major controllers and suppliers of water to the local peasantry, and their monks were renowned for their expertise in water management (Magnusson 2006).<sup>17</sup>

Water was therefore reconfigured again, becoming the gift of powerful elites and an expression of their political control, and being more closely harnessed to drive new technologies of production. The Abbeys were also major centres of scholarship, promoting ideas in which water was represented as the gift of God and – as scientific understandings increased – part of a hydrotheological cycle of water movement according to His plan.

Northumbria had long been central to this scholarship and religious authority, being the home of the Venerable Bede, who, in the late 7<sup>th</sup> and early 8<sup>th</sup> century, lived at an Abbey in Monkwearmouth which, as its name suggests, lies at the mouth of the River Wear. One of the earliest British scholars, Bede engaged with Greek philosophers in speculating about the sources of the Nile and helped to lead a transition, during the latter centuries of the first millennium from looking to the Scriptures for all instruction about 'inexplicable' phenomena to formulating scientific explanations that further crystallised a dualistic view of culture and nature.

Durham itself does not appear in the Domesday Book, as it was administered independently by the Bishop of Durham. St Cuthbert had been granted territory between the Tyne and Wear by King Ecgfrith of Northumbria, and this independence was further reaffirmed by the King of York in the late 800s. Durham was therefore ruled for several hundred years by powerful Prince Bishops, who instituted the building of the current cathedral in 1093. Begun under the direction of William of St Carilef, (Bishop of Durham 1081-95), this took 40 years

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<sup>15</sup> The Stour, in Dorset, for example, had 66 mills in 70 miles of river.

<sup>16</sup> As I have noted elsewhere, while the control of water is fundamentally empowering, much depends on how it is owned: for example, collective forms of water ownership are closely linked to democratic powers, and may indeed be essential to the maintenance of democracy (Strang 2010).

<sup>17</sup> This was drawn upon, for example, in the building of London's 'Great Conduit' in 1237.

to complete. A Norman castle was also built on ‘the Island Hill’ in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century to provide an outpost of governance and a bulwark against the persistent rebellions in the north. But, far from the southern centres of royal power, in a region recognised by the Normans as a County Palatine, the Durham Bishops’ authority was said to be equivalent to that of the King, with an independent right to muster armies, hold court, and to raise taxes. Crucially, these militaristic holy men were also expected to deal with the troublesome ‘worms’.



Fig.9. Illumination from the beginning of St Matthew’s Gospel in a Bible bequeathed by William of St Carilef. Image courtesy of Durham Cathedral Library.

### Slaying the Dragon

The end of the first millennium coincided with a major effort by the Church to achieve ascendancy over the nature religions that continued to flow subversively underground, especially in conquered Celtic nations. This was simultaneously a contest for religious leadership and for political and economic control. It was equally concerned with enforcing the supremacy of culture over nature, being a period in which nature came to be regarded as not only feminine in gender, but also as ‘uncivilised’ and distasteful. New and punitive forms of asceticism encouraged a horror of ‘base nature’ and its untrammelled fecundity.

Religions celebrating the generative power of water and nature therefore became even more abhorrent. Water was reclassified: ‘good’ water arrived via God’s beneficence, in timely and sufficient (but not excessive) amounts amenable to human technological management, while the ‘primeval’ water of nature was recalcitrant and uncontrollable. Holy water was also reframed symbolically as the substance of spiritual being, thus retaining its generative meanings and its longstanding capacities to act as a metaphor of time, connection, wisdom and so on, but this too became a gift from God. Meanwhile, recycling earlier ideas about water’s potentially destructive powers, it was felt that water could be



polluted by evil, including pagan 'heresy'. All of these negative potentials were represented by the water beings of earlier religions.



Fig. 10. Russian icon of St George and the dragon, ca.1450. Image courtesy of National Museum, Stockholm.

Ideological battles were therefore manifested in contests between the now thoroughly demonised water serpent beings and the Christian male culture heroes whose sacred task it was to subdue them. Medieval Britain was plagued with serpents, most particularly in the areas of highest 'pagan' resistance: in Wales, for example,<sup>18</sup> and in the North-East. Parish churches commonly exhibited 'dragon skins', and there is a plethora of reports of dragons and worms, with several in close proximity to Durham. The tale of the Laidly Worm, like the Lambton Worm, is recounted in ballad form: *The Laidly Worm of Spindleston Heugh*. Its snake/worm princess (returned to human form by a Prince, naturally), appears to be based on an older Nordic saga *Hjálpés saga ok Ölvis*. The Linton Worm, in Roxburghshire near the Scottish Borders, lived in a place still called the Worm's Den. This wyvern<sup>19</sup> was 'in length three Scots yards and bigger than an ordinary man's leg - in form and callour to our common muir edders'<sup>20</sup> (Scott 1815: 6-8). The monster was dispatched by a local hero,

<sup>18</sup> Though Christianity subsumed paganism in Ireland and Wales (with St Patrick famously driving the snakes out of Ireland in around 432 C.E.) there was considerable absorption of Celtic religions into Christianity in these areas.

<sup>19</sup> 'Wyvern' is a term for dragon coming from Middle English *wyvere* (13<sup>th</sup> century) via old French *wivre*, originally from the Latin *vipera* (viper) (Hoad 1993: 546). It became a popular heraldic device, most particularly in strongly Celtic areas such as Wales and Wessex (the golden wyvern being the symbol of the ancient kingdom of Wessex). A wyvern usually has two legs, a long serpentine body and a barbed tail, while sea wyverns are typically portrayed with fish tails.

<sup>20</sup> 'Sharing form and colour with our adders'.

(William or John) de Somerville, the Laird of Lariston, and in its dying throes it toppled a nearby mountain, creating an unusual topography of hills consequently named 'wormington'. De Somerville was rewarded with an appointment as Royal Falconer, and became the first Baron of Linton, adopting the wyvern as his heraldic device.

The most important local dragon, however, was the Sockburn Worm, possibly the model for the Lambton story. Sockburn is near Durham, on a peninsula near Darlington. As the most southerly point of the Durham diocese, it was an important site in the Middle Ages: Higbald, a Bishop of Lindisfarne was crowned there in 780 or 781 C.E., and Eanwald, Archbishop of York, in 796. The area suffered heavily from Viking raids and there are traces of several Viking settlements in the area. Local historians (eg. Hutchinson 1823) have speculated that the 'worm' was a name for a particularly savage Viking who made a number of forays into the district.

The medieval Sockburn estate was held by the Conyers family, and it was Sir John Conyers who was said to have slain the marauding dragon.<sup>21</sup> In doing so, he used a falchion, a curved machete-like sword, common in Europe between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, which could be wielded with one hand like a meat cleaver. The Conyer falchion was subsequently presented to each new Bishop of Durham when he first entered the diocese at a nearby ford or via the Croft-on-Tees bridge, and the falchion (or probably a later copy)<sup>22</sup> is now held in the Treasury at Durham Cathedral.

Such stories were repeated across Europe. Inspired by legends of St George and St Michael, pestilential dragons were slaughtered by (usually but not invariably male) heroes, many of whom went on to become saints or were otherwise elevated in social rank (Riches 2000). This coincided with an intensely military period in Church history, as Christian leaders struggled to suppress not only the rebellious 'pagans' under their direct governance, but also to fend off competition from the other monotheistic religious movements and expand their control of other people, land and resources.

Images of dragon slayers were therefore interchangeable with those of saints killing the pagans who, by the late 11<sup>th</sup> century, were no longer merely an alternate barbaric religion, but had been redefined as 'heretics'.

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<sup>21</sup> The stone under which the dragon was buried is reportedly still visible.

<sup>22</sup> The present falchion is believed to date from the 11<sup>th</sup> Century.



Fig. 11. Church carving: crusaders slaying 'infidels', Acca, Israel. Photo by author.

Pope Urban II, a committed reformer, made passionate speeches against the evils of paganism. He encouraged a series of Crusades: the 'taking of the cross' in which, incentivised by a promise of remission of sins, cohorts of militia travelled to Palestine to assert the supremacy of the Christian Church over foreign 'infidels'. Homegrown pagan groups also had to be dealt with: there was the *reconquista* in Spain and, in 1209, an Albigensian Crusade was sent to eliminate the 'heretic' Cathars of southern France. Numerous Papal Bulls were issued: in 1184, Lucius III condemned heresy; and in 1198 Innocent III defined it as treason. In 1252, Innocent IV issued an edict that heretics could be burned alive, and this was followed, in 12<sup>th</sup> century France, by the inquisition, guaranteed to terrify the recalcitrant.

The dragon slaying around Durham, a vital centre for evangelical Christianity, can therefore be seen as part of a much larger effort to erase the nature religions regarded as subversive to the normative order defined by the Church. And this order was not purely religious: as noted previously, its ideas, beliefs and values articulated with new social and economic practices, new technologies, and new configurations of people's relationships with water and the non-human world. These relationships were also influenced by the Crusades which, as well as engaging combatively with Levantine cultures, opened up both physical and metaphorical roads to the East and its scholarship. As Riley-Smith points out (2005), travel to the Kingdom of Jerusalem, and the governance of it, required cultural innovation and encouraged a more cosmopolitan worldview. It exposed Europeans to Islamic and Classical Greek ideas and their sophisticated developments in algebra, architecture, medicine, engineering and science. Such scholarship further deconstructed ideas about sentient land and waterscapes, replacing them with scientific notions of materiality that repositioned nature as being both physically and imaginatively the subject and object of human culture.

For this to succeed, however, the pagan beings manifesting the power of nature had to go, in particular those embodying the most fluid and uncontrollable, the most feminine part of nature. In this context, it makes perfect sense that Sir John Lambton went to Palestine; that he joined '*a troop ov Knights*'; and that this appears to have been the Knights of St John: the Hospitallers who provided a Christian power base in Jerusalem.<sup>23</sup> This order was served by the Benedictine monks who were to become such a strong presence in Durham.

A historical context also illuminates the other elements of the Lambton story: for example, the representation of the worm as something that emerged from the river because Young Lambton went 'a'fishing' instead of going to Church. Its growth in the water of a formerly pagan well nicely expresses a pre-Christian notion of the generative powers of water, but reframes it in 'monstrous' terms. The poisoning of the well represents the pollution of subversive ideas, and the worm's trail of slime reflects the ascetic repugnance for the ambiguity of slime – neither water nor land – which recurs in medieval and subsequent descriptions of underworlds and regions of Hell.<sup>24</sup> Its reported imprint, in the form of the spiral marks still visible on Penshaw Hill,<sup>25</sup> not only recalls the topographical legacy of the Linton worm, but also carries a faint echo of older origin myths about the creative capacities of water beings to shape the landscape.

In many versions of the story, Sir John is advised by a wise woman that he must kill the worm in the river, so that its severed body parts will be carried away before they can reknit themselves. The idea that snakes and serpents could remake themselves runs through many such legends (for example that of the Lernean hydra), articulating fears that, though repressed, subversive religions could merely slide underground, like water, to reform and resurface later on. And indeed they did. Though the dragon slayings eased somewhat in the mid-12<sup>th</sup> century, as the building of cathedrals and abbeys replaced the Crusades as a way of earning holy 'indulgences', efforts to assert the religious leadership of the Church continued.

In Durham, the castle played a key role in defending its interests, most particularly in the Battle of Neville's cross in 1346, though by this time the Scots army was no longer pagan, merely resistant to the religious and political rule of the English. But Shakespeare's Henry V tells the Archbishop of Canterbury that the Scots poured southwards 'like a tide into a breach':

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<sup>23</sup> The Hospitallers retained a Christian power base in Jerusalem until Arab military forces regained the area and they had to retreat to Rhodes and then Malta.

<sup>24</sup> This antipathy intensified over time, emerging in Bunyan's 'Slough of Despond'; in the foul water and mud of Hell in Dante's 'inferno'; in Sartre's horror of slime; and in Freud's analysis of the ambiguity of water bodies and fluidity.

<sup>25</sup> Archaeological interpretations describe Penshaw Hill as a triple rampart Iron Age fort.

...the Scot on his unfurnish'd kingdom/ Came pouring, like the tide into a breach, /  
With ample and brim fullness of his force; / Galling the gleaned land with hot essays.  
(Henry V. Act 1 Scene 3)

The invading army almost reached Palace Green, but once again the military advantages of the 'island hill' were demonstrated, and the castle and cathedral remained secure.<sup>26</sup> The Scots King was incarcerated for 11 years, reasserting the power of the Prince Bishops.

Further afield, new seafaring vessels and navigational instruments assisted efforts to expand the territories under Christian rule. In the 1400s, Papal Bulls supported missionary conquests of new regions by Portugal and Spain, and in 1521 Leo X issued a statement permitting the use of violence in evangelising. Christian nations sought to gain control of previously Islamic colonies. Early Muslim states had appeared in the 1300s as beliefs had spread along trade routes, creating enclaves in Java and Sumatra and achieving conversions in Malacca. There were the Mughals in India, the Safavid dynasties in Persia, and the Ottoman Empire in Iraq, Syria and Egypt. And Muslim expansions continued to make ground until the critical Portuguese conquest of Malacca in 1511 (Sutherland 2007).

This was also a period in which scholars such as the Hugonaut Bernard Palissy and – more famously – Leonardo Da Vinci began to articulate scientific ideas about hydrological cycles. Da Vinci's *Treatise on Water* described water as the driving force of nature, presciently drawing connections between the enlivening flow of water in biological, ecological and hydrological systems:

The same cause which moves the humours in every species of animate bodies against the natural law of gravity also propels the water through the veins of the earth wherein it is enclosed and distributes it through small passages... Where there is life there is heat, and where vital heat is, there is movement of vapour. (Pfister *et al* 2009)

Religious control within Christian nations also remained critical. In 1484 Innocent VIII condemned 'witchcraft', the change in terminology suggesting that this was now more of an isolated problem rather than the cohesive countermovement implied by 'heresy'. The rise of Protestantism and the Reformation (1517-1648) rejected the 'magical' works of the medieval Catholic Church, including its more instrumental perceptions of holy water (Oestigaard 2010). By 1586, alternate 'magical' beliefs had been further downgraded, with Pope Sixtus V condemning 'judicial astrology' as just 'superstition'. However, even in the late 1700s, a period of major post-medieval scientific advances, 'witch trials' continued in Europe.

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<sup>26</sup> Prior Fosser of Durham reported that, before the battle, St Cuthbert had appeared, instructing him to take the corporax cloth which had been found in his coffin in 1104 and carry it to the battlefield.

Early the following day, the Prior, in obedience to the saint's wishes and accompanied by a number of his monks, took this sacred relic to a site within a few hundred yards of the two opposing armies. There, he and the monks knelt and prayed while the battle raged around them. (Gunn 2013)

But these were mere flashbacks. By this time, enabled by both religious and scientific developments, ideas about human dominion over and distinction from nature were deeply entrenched and social class systems were similarly well embedded. The previously ‘primeval’ seas were traversed; ‘heathen’ peoples were conquered and converted; and their lands and water resources had been made amenable to the great dam building and irrigation projects of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. With the latter came an intensifying effort – which has continued apace – to enclose water resources in increasingly privatised forms of property ownership, thus completing its subjection to human will.

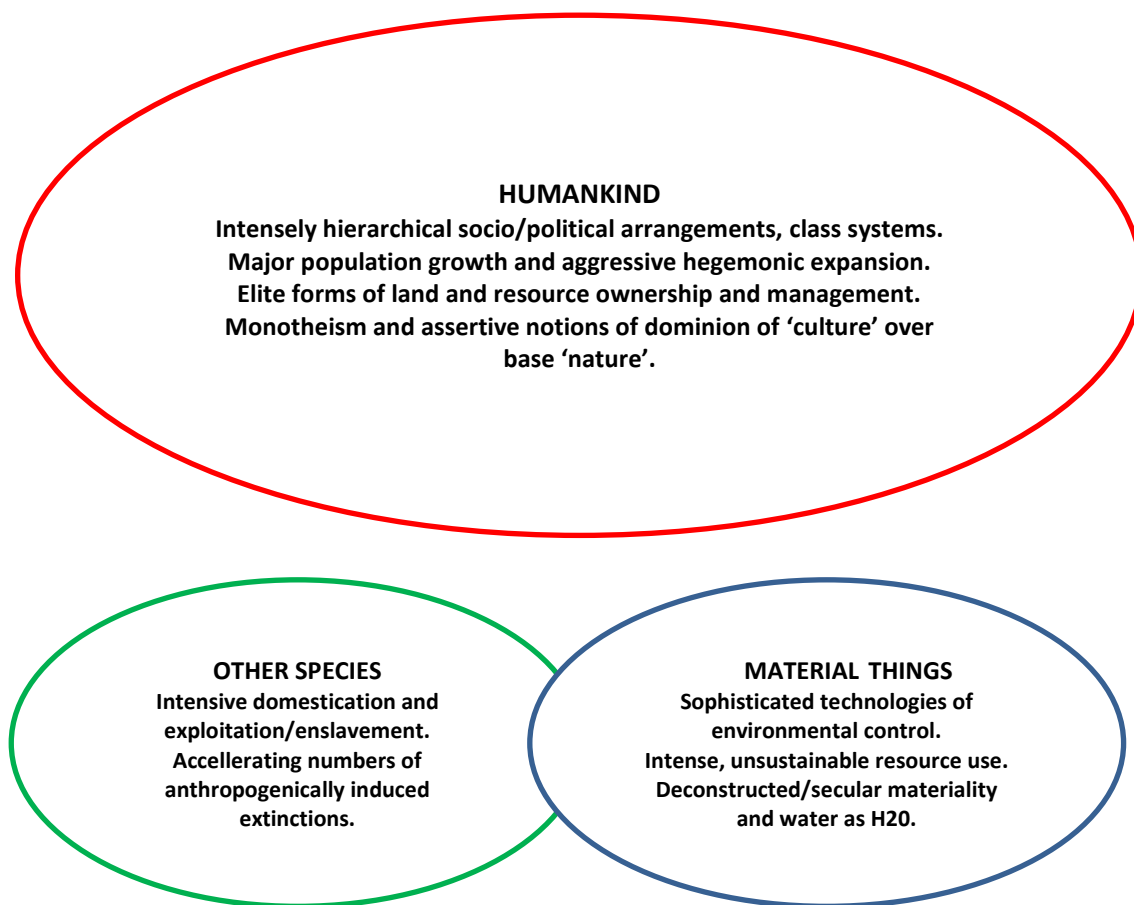


Fig. 12. A contemporary configuration of human-environmental relations.

In Durham, the cathedral had ceased to be a Benedictine monastery with the Reformation, but the local powers of the Prince Bishops pertained until all such authorities were abolished by the British government in 1836. Even now, the Bishop of Durham is a member of the House of Lords, escorts the sovereign at the coronation and is not merely ‘installed’ but ‘enthroned’.<sup>27</sup> A recent appointee, Justin Welby, observed that:

<sup>27</sup> The most recent incumbent, Justin Welby, was selected in 2012 as the next Archbishop of Canterbury, Britain’s most senior Anglican.

To become Bishop of Durham is a huge privilege... It is an ancient Diocese, going way back before England itself existed. The heritage is extraordinary; Bishops of Durham stand on the shoulders of some of the greatest Christians that Europe has produced, from the 7th century to the 21st. (Durham Diocesan web site, 2.6.2011)

In the early 1800s, the falchion waving and promises to slay the dragon were dropped from the rituals accompanying the Bishop's arrival in the Diocese, but the custom was revived by David Jenkins in 1984. As the Conyers family is no longer in the area, contemporary presentations are usually made by the Mayor of Darlington. In 2011, Justin Welby, raised the falchion on the Croft-on-Tees bridge, being greeted as he crossed the river by a local rector, Adele Martin:

'My Lord Bishop,' she said, 'I here present you with the falchion wherewith the champion Conyers slew the worm, dragon or fiery flying serpent which destroyed men, women and children'. (Lloyd 2011, see also Hutchinson 1823)



*Fig. 13. The Bishop of Durham, Justin Welby, being presented with the Conyer Falchion in 2011. Photo by Keith Blundy/aegiesPR.*

In 2014, after Justin Welby became the Archbishop of Canterbury, the same ritual greeted the appointment of the new Bishop, Paul Butler. Asked what the dragon meant to him, he replied: 'that which we see as evil in our world' (Strang, field notes 2014).





*Fig. 14. The newly-appointed Bishop of Durham, Paul Butler, being presented with the falchion in Croft-On-Tees in 2014. Photo by Keith Blundy|aegiesPR.*



*Fig. 15. The Falchion presented to each new Bishop of Durham.*

## **Conclusion**

Today the Lambton Worm is seen as just a fairy tale, a marvelous monster in a popular folk song. The legend is regularly performed by primary school children in venues around Durham, including churches. So why have a ritual in which the new Bishop of Durham swears (or at least implies) that he will slay the dragon? This could be interpreted as an effort to enliven and popularise contemporary Church rituals, but perhaps, in a diocese whose motto is ‘Helping to grow God’s Kingdom in every community’, it should be considered seriously as a regular reaffirmation of the dominance of a particular religious perspective.<sup>28</sup>

Given the long history of religious contention in this region, this latter purpose is by no means obsolete. The serpent remains demonically present in Christian religious discourses, as a powerful metaphor of a negative ‘other’. These connotations are reflected in multiple secular representations of serpent beings in visual and literary media. The Lambton Worm alone has provided inspiration for numerous artistic efforts, including Bram Stoker’s *Lair of*

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<sup>28</sup> One might similarly interpret contemporary engagements with Coventina’s Well. Now reopened as a ‘heritage site’, the well attracts visitors who, at times, leave Christian symbols on the altar, though it is unclear whether these are meant as religious challenges or as (rather ambiguous) votive offerings to the Celtic Goddess (Hingley 2012).



*the White Worm* (1911); which formed the subject of Ken Russell's film of the same title in 1988. It appears in Ian Watson's fictional novel, *The Fire Worm* (1988); Thomas Pynchon's novel, *Mason and Dixon* (1998); a graphic novel, *Alice in Sutherland*, by Bryan Talbot (2007); and an opera *The Lambton Worm*, composed by Robert Sherlaw (1978). Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem *Love* (1799) refers to the Sockburn church and the dragon, and there is Andy Goldsworthy's *Lambton Earthworks* sculpture near Chester-Le-Street. Perhaps most famously Lewis Carroll, whose father was the rector in Croft-on-Tees, was inspired to invent the Jabberwocky: the '*slithy tove*' that '*did gyre and gimble in the wabe*'.<sup>29</sup>

*And, has thou slain the Jabberwock?  
Come to my arms, my beamish boy!  
O frabjous day! Callooh!  
Callay!' He chortled in his joy. (1871)*

So, dragon slaying continues in multiple fora, and the persistence of these ritualised reenactments of the slaughter of the most powerful of the pre-Christian nature beings is telling. Placed in a historical context, they serve as a reminder that water beings are symbols of alternate religious ideas which continue, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, to valorise subaltern – and subversive – ideas about human relationships with water and with nature.<sup>30</sup>

At his enthronement in the Cathedral, following the ritual in Croft-on-Tees, Bishop Justin Welby noted that 'the idols of the present age have been toppled and fallen' and called upon Christians to adopt a 'revolutionary lifestyle'. Their mission, he said, was 'to rekindle the Christian faith in the north-east and reconvert the region' (Tallantire 2011: film).

Meanwhile, founded in 1971, the British Pagan Federation's north-east district holds meetings in Durham and surrounding towns. Its contiguous Cumbrian district notes that 'religious impulse and fulfilment have often been allied to a sense of closeness to the splendour of nature', and describes 'a flourishing population of adherents to the Old Religion: Druids, Shamans, Heathens and Wiccans'. The Federation says that there are at least 50,000 and possibly up to 200,000 pagans in Britain, and it seeks to support all of them:

To ensure they have the same rights as the followers of other beliefs and religions. It aims to promote a positive profile for Pagans and Paganism and to provide information on Pagan beliefs to the media, official bodies and the greater community. (Pagan Federation 2013)

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<sup>29</sup> There is also Terry Gilliam's film, *Jabberwocky* (1977).

<sup>30</sup> The most extreme version of this subversion lies in the Satanic Bible, which adopts 'leviathan' directly as a representation of opposition to Christianity. Though not at all representative of the majority of pagan religions, this could be described as being akin to the outliers of religious fanaticism loosely connected with other belief systems.

The 2011 census for England and Wales records 48,000 people eschewing affiliation to the major monotheisms and noting affiliation to 'other' religions. In a total population of 56.1 million, this represents a rise from 3 to 4% in the last decade. About a quarter of the population now claims to have 'No religion'. Christians still compose 59% of the whole, but in the same period that pagan numbers have grown by 25%, there has been a 13% decline in people defining themselves as Christian (Office for National Statistics 2011).<sup>31</sup>

There is considerable intellectual and moral common ground between neo-pagans and the 'deep green' environmental groups also seeking to challenge humankind's assumed rights of dominion over other species however purportedly 'benign'. These counter-movements question the model of nature-culture dualism and intentional distance from 'nature' that emerged with greater technological control over the material environment. Both countermovements hope to promote more egalitarian, less anthropocentric bioethical positions in which humankind is socially and morally relocated within ecological systems.

These groups have drawn inspiration from the many indigenous societies around the world whose nature religions are commonly represented as enabling more harmonious and sustainable relationships with their environments. While such representations have undoubtedly been romanticised at times, this should not obscure fundamental differences between contemporary Western, Christian modes of engaging with the material world and those retaining beliefs in non-human sentience and agency. For indigenous communities, environmental groups and neo-pagans, it is not the serpent, but the human-environmental relationships exported by Western societies that is the 'aful story': a story of excessive impositions on delicate ecosystems; of the overuse of resources; of cumulative environmental damage; of the enslavement or extinction of other species and less powerful human groups.

It is no coincidence that these contemporary challenges to a normative global order are heavily focused on water. Subaltern concerns have regularly been expressed in (sometimes violent) protests against water appropriation and privatisation, and against dams and other diversions of water into human interests at the expense of the non-human (Strang, 2013a). Hydrolatry has also resurfaced, with the reinvention of water rituals and increasing valorisation of water's generative power and agency in religion and the arts. For example, in the *Splash!* festival that takes place bi-annually in Australia, on the north Queensland coast, groups from the surrounding water catchment area bring water from local streams and pour it into a central vessel to celebrate of the fluid connections between their communities and their collective connections to the local environment (Strang 2005c). In Britain, well-dressing ceremonies reviving pre-Christian hydrolatry rituals are increasing in popularity. In Durham

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<sup>31</sup> This shift may be due, in part, to strong feminist critiques of a patriarchal Church, encouraging women in search of spiritual expression to revive goddess cults and join more egalitarian, nature-oriented religious groups (Raphael 1999, Strang 2014).

itself, May Day celebrations – traditionally affirming the spirit and power of nature – remain low key, but a few aficionados gather on Prebends Bridge at dawn, mere steps from the looming towers of the cathedral, to dance and sing above the waters of the Wear.

This serpentine journey suggests that current representational contests are the product of long-term historical flows of ideas, and that ancient dragons continue to animate moral debates about how human societies should conduct themselves in relation to the non-human. While the Lambton Worm may be slain on a regular basis in Durham, Britain has more successfully resistant serpents, for example the Red Dragon on Welsh banners continues to fly over the highest density of pagan groups in Britain. Further afield, indigenous communities, particularly in Australia and New Zealand (but also in the Americas, Africa and parts of Asia), regularly bring their water beings into play in legal and political arena, to promote their own beliefs and values and to critique the ways of life imposed by political and economic colonialism (Strang 2012, 2013b).

To conclude our hydrological cycle, there is also the point at which this story began. The material properties of water continue to flow into the human imagination, carrying ideas about its powers: its capacities to generate life; its potential to carve landscapes and transform itself and other things over time; its ability to subsume events and to disappear. The deep influence of being immersed in these material events is a constant in human lives, continually stimulating, in one cultural form or another, ideas about the agentive powers of water and of nature itself. Ever greater religious and technological hubris on the part of humankind has failed to subsume or completely control these powers: one might say, instead, that it has merely raised the level of the dam.

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## **Figures**

*Fig. 1. The Worm around Penshaw Hill. Drawing by Danny Parkinson.*

*Fig. 2. Sir John Lambton slew the worm. Image from <http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/eng/efft/efft15.htm>*

*Fig. 3. Bark painting from Western Arnhem Land, Australia. The Rainbow Serpent Ngalyod giving birth to Aboriginal people. Artist, Billinyara Nabegeyo.*

*Fig. 4. Cloud Dragon screen in Kennin-Ji, 12<sup>th</sup> Century Zen Temple (Kyoto). Photo by author.*

*Fig. 5. A configuration of early human-environmental relationships.*

*Fig. 6. A more hierarchical and human-centred configuration of relations with water and 'nature'.*

*Fig.7. Hercules slaying the Lernean hydra, c. 525 B.C.E. Collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, California. Digital image courtesy of the Getty Museum's Open Content Program.*

*Fig. 8. Stone marker from Coventina's Well. Photo by author.*

*Fig.9. Illumination from the beginning of St Matthew's Gospel in a Bible bequeathed by William of St Carilef. Image courtesy of Durham Cathedral Library.*

*Fig. 10. Russian icon of St George and the dragon, ca.1450. Image courtesy of National Museum, Stockholm.*

*Fig. 11. Church carving: crusaders slaying 'infidels', Acca, Israel. Photo by author.*

*Fig. 12. A contemporary configuration of human-environmental relations.*

*Fig. 13. The Bishop of Durham, Justin Welby, being presented with the Conyer Falchion in 2011. Photo by Keith Blundy|aegiesPR.*

*Fig. 14. The newly-appointed Bishop of Durham, Paul Butler, being presented with the falchion in Croft-On-Tees in 2014. Photo by Keith Blundy|aegiesPR.*

*Fig. 15. The Falchion presented to each new Bishop of Durham. Photo by author.*