

Is the Skirrid Mountain sacred? An exploration of myth in Welsh landscape

by *Natalie Niblett*

This paper discussed the idea of the sacred and explores the idea of a sacred mountain using the Skirrid Mountain in South Wales as an example. I've heard stories of the Skirrid from my father from a young age and was able to explore the landscape once again while completing this work looking for evidence of the stories I have known and the effect they have had on the local peoples. The mythology of the mountain has created an idea of sacredness in the local community and this suggests that sacred space may not be exclusively a national or international phenomenon but may exist at a local, community level.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore myth in Welsh landscape and to explore the meaning of sacred space and landscape using the Skirrid mountain as an example. The questions to be answered by this paper are; is sacred space a human construct? Is the Skirrid a sacred landscape? If so how and when did the Skirrid become sacred and who is it sacred to? These questions are important to this project and I will be researching local myths and legends in order to determine if it is a sacred place and why it has become known as the 'Holy Mountain'¹. The Skirrid mountain is located outside of Abergavenny in South Wales and is well-known to local people in Wales and around the UK. The methodology used to answer the proposed questions will include a field trip to the landscape itself to find any evidence of the various myths and stories surrounding the location. This project will use material that will include works by theorists such as Christopher Tilley and Belden C. Lane in regards to defining what sacred landscape is and how it became sacred. The work of Mircea Eliade will be utilised to suggest a definition of sacred space. These books and articles will compare the meaning of sacred mountains as Belden C

¹ Palmer, R. The Folklore of (old) Monmouthshire, (Chippenham, Logaston Press, 1998) p. 105

Lane suggests that 'mountains have power-however one perceives it'.² This study will suggest that the Skirrid mountain is an example of a sacred mountain and that it fits as an exemplar location. I will then draw upon the arguments as to why the Skirrid has become a sacred landscape. Does humankind make it sacred?

Methodology

This paper is going to contain several phases of research: a literature based examination of the study of both sacred space and sacred mountains specifically, as well as the history of this area of Wales. It also contains an ethnographical element as I will be recounting the stories told to me by my father as well as reflexive work as I walk the landscape. Being born and bred in Wales all of my life for 34 years I have grown up with Welsh legends and myths of the countryside and landscape. Living in Wales and not being a Welsh speaker it is fascinating understanding about the stories behind the Welsh names of places.

In order to explore if the Skirrid was a sacred landscape I took a field trip and walked the route from the base of the mountain to the summit. During this expedition I studied in details the landscape looking out for evidence of and the features described in the stories that I have been told of the location. I also examined the local area to see what impact, if any, the landscape has had on the local peoples.

I took my camera with me and recorded the mountain and other evidence by way of photographs to document the surroundings.

Academic Rationale and Reflexive Consideration

In order to study sacred space it must first be defined. This has been discussed by academics over many years. It has been observed by Eliade that sacred can be described as 'the opposite of the profane'.³ He goes on to note that the sacred 'always manifests itself as a reality of a wholly different order from

² Lane, B.C. *Landscapes of the Sacred*, (Baltimore, The John Hopkins University Press, 2002) p. 97

³ Eliade, M. *The Sacred and the Profane; The Nature of Religion* (New York, Harcourt, Inc, 1959) p. 10

“natural” realities.⁴ This is not a universal definition as it suggests a duality that something can either be sacred or not which does not take into account that some people may differ on whether or not a location is sacred. The majority of studies examine sites of religious importance meaning that, as Spicer argued, sacred space may only become so only through this religious connection.⁵ For the purpose of this paper sacred space will be considered an area of difference where that difference is described in myth. There are numerous examples of sacred space around the world and mountains are frequently represented. One of the most famous would be Mount Sinai, where allegedly Moses received the Ten Commandments from God. (*New Revised Standard Version*, Exodus 19)

Mircea Eliade explores the idea that mountains have always been the primal place of divine encounter by describing the religious significance of high places and their proximity to holy beings that live in the sky.⁶ Belden Lane goes on to say that ‘Mountains have always absorbed the imagination in one way or another’⁷ Here Eliade and Lane suggest that the mountains themselves are sacred landscapes. As Eliade notes:

Mountains are the nearest thing to the sky, and are thence endowed with a twofold holiness: on one hand they share in the spatial symbolism of transcendence—they are high ... and ... they are the especial domain of all hierophanies of atmosphere, and therefore, the dwelling of the gods.⁸

As a young girl growing up in South Wales in the late 80s and early 90s, I was drawn to the concept of mountains being sacred and having grown up in Wales, I am used to this mountainous region. I used to spend a lot of time when I was young walking with my father around these mountains without taking the time to marvel at the beauty, I just took it for granted that these mountains have always been here and were made the way they are. I decided to choose

⁴ Eliade, M, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature Of Religion*, p. 10

⁵ Hamilton, S, Spicer, A. *Defining the Holy, Sacred Space In Medieval And Early Modern Europe*, (Ashgate, 2006) p. 25

⁶ Eliade, M. *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York, Sheec & Ward, 1958) pp 99-102

⁷ Lane, p. 96

⁸ Eliade, M. *Patterns In Comparative Religion*, p. 99

this as my research project as the myths and legends that my father told me of this area fascinated me and made the mountains feel more magical.

The familiarity that I have with this landscape is going to have an impact on my study as I seek to find evidence to back up the stories that I know. I was drawn to the idea of a sacred landscape, particularly a mountainous landscape, as Tilley and Lane both describe the religious significance that mountains have.⁹ I have chosen this as my research project as I believe that mountains may be sacred both in a religious context and as part of local mythology, but I have chosen the Skirrid intentionally as it does not have a high profile as examples such as Mount Sinai. However, it holds many myths and has a religious connection that many are not aware of. As Lane states, 'the holy mountain is one of the most ancient and appealing of all sacred sites – from the thunderous cliffs of Sinai to the Delectable Mountains of Bunyan's dream'¹⁰

The Skirrid

The Skirrid, Ysgyryd Fawr (Big Rough) in Welsh, mountain is located in the area around Abergavenny in the county of Monmouthshire which is in South Wales and has a height of 486m above sea level.¹¹ This area and mountain is part of the Brecon Beacons national park, and is well known and used by keen walkers as part of the three peaks challenge which includes the Sugarloaf and Blorengge mountains. Abergavenny is surrounded by seven hills, Skirrid Fawr (Big Skirrid), Ysgyryd Fach (small), Blorengge, Deri, Rholeen, Llanwmerth Brest and Sugarloaf. As a challenge mountain walkers aim to climb all seven in one day. These mountains dominate the landscape of Monmouthshire. The Skirrid and its neighbours all have an interconnected mythology¹². The location of the Skirrid in the local landscape is shown in figure one.

⁹ Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, Tilley, C. *Places, Paths And Monuments: A Phenomenology Of Landscapes*, (Oxford, Berg Publishers, 1994)

¹⁰ Lane, p. 96

¹¹ Abergavenny, *Gateway To Wales*, Skirrid Fawr, (Abergavenny) <http://www.abergavenny.org.uk/skirrid.htm> [accessed 3.01.2016]

¹² Palmer, p. 103-106

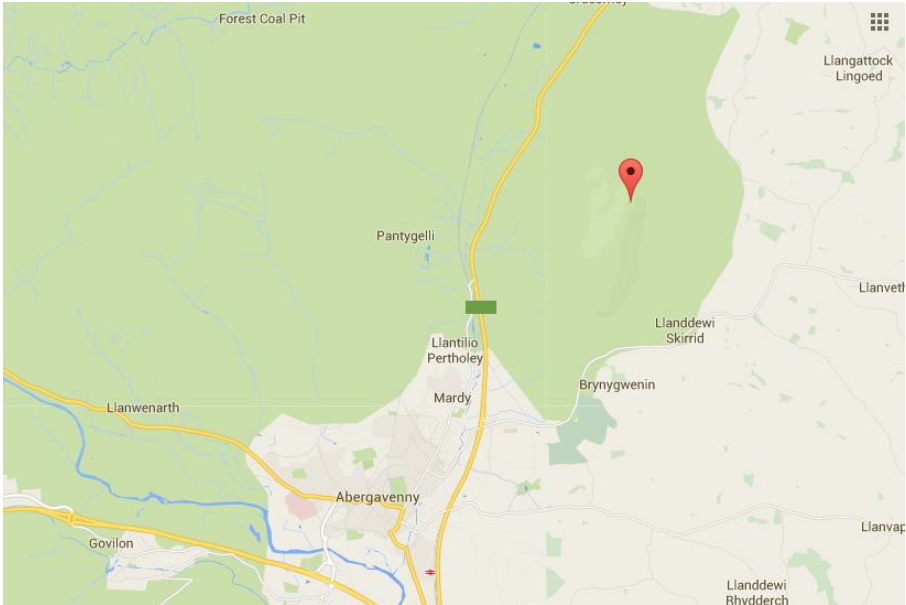


Figure 1: Google Maps, NP7/@51.8414584,-3.0411773,12.75z (Map View), 2016, Digital Image, Image: Google Maps/Google Earth Terms Of Service

The writer and scholar Alan Garner has written extensively about his childhood and stories that he was told growing up. He has said that ‘it was imperative that I should know my place. That can be achieved only by inheriting one’s childhood landscape.’¹³ In his 2010 article, *By Seven Firs And Goldenstone*, Garner describes his exploration of the landscape where he grew up in the context of a story he was told by his grandfather.¹⁴ This is similar to this study in that I am examining a landscape local to my childhood in the context of the stories that I grew up hearing. In this way I am completing a complementary study into a different location using a similar methodology which may reinforce Garner’s study and find ‘my answer in the land, because the land itself is a narrative, paths and waymarkers its stories.’¹⁵

¹³ Garner, A. *The Voice That Thunders*, (London, The Harvill Press, 1997) p. 4

¹⁴ Garner, A. ‘By Seven Firs and Goldenstone: An Account of the Legend of Alderly’. *Temenos Academy papers*. No 31, (2010) 1-20

¹⁵ Garner, p. 19

Literature Review

In order to discuss whether the Skirrid is a sacred space there must be an agreed 'general theoretical perspective on the significance of spaces, places and landscapes'.¹⁶ Mircea Eliade has suggested that for persons of a religious leaning the world itself is sacred due to belief in a religious origin.¹⁷ However, it has been observed that for the religious and non-religious space is not homogeneous; he experiences interruptions, breaks in it; some parts of space are qualitatively different from others'.¹⁸ If true then that poses the question as to what, or who, makes these places sacred. Bokser suggests an answer: 'Although these places are not inherently holy and cannot become holy on their own, they may yet become holy or sacred through human action'.¹⁹ Tilley builds on this by suggesting that 'A social space, rather than being uniform and forever the same, is constituted by differential densities of human experience, attachment and involvement'.²⁰ According to this statement landscapes only become sacred because of human sentiment and attachment with that particular landscape. Tilley discusses the idea of landscape utilising an argument from Cosgrove:

landscape is a uniquely valuable concept for a human geography. Unlike *place* it reminds us of our position in the scheme of nature. Unlike *environment* or *space* it reminds us that only through human consciousness and reason is that scheme known to us, and only through technique can we participate as humans in it. At the same time landscape reminds us that geography *is* everywhere, that it is a

¹⁶ Tilley, pp 7-34

¹⁷ Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature Of Religion*, p. 29

¹⁸ Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature Of Religion*, p. 20

¹⁹ Bokser, B. M. 'Approaching Sacred Space'. *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol 78, No 3/4, (1985) pp 292-293

²⁰ Tilley, p. 11

constant source of beauty and ugliness, of right, and wrong and joy and suffering, as much as it is of profit and loss'.²¹

Lane makes a brief discussion of mountains in Christianity and various other religions. He suggests that there are 'mythical mountains assuming far more grandeur than any found on map or chart.'²² He goes on to describe examples from Christian literature such as the following from Revelations 'and he carried me away in the spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.'²³ As Eliade states, 'the sacred mountain is an *axis mundi* connecting earth with heaven.'²⁴ This suggests that mountains themselves are holy in the Christian faith.

Bender describes landscapes of Britain and suggests three types: London, the English countryside and upland areas of Britain which includes Wales.²⁵ The landscape surrounding the Skirrid matches her description of the third type. As Bender states 'it is here that the monuments and symbols of 'ancient' Britons are located...areas to be preserved rather than protected'²⁶ Bender goes on to describe the 'brutish and bestial' peoples that are to be found in this upland landscape, of which the Welsh peoples could be considered an example.²⁷ If this stereotypical and negative view of the residents is true then it calls into question the stories that these persons tell of their surroundings. This then poses the question of just who are these landscapes sacred to. If the myths surrounding upland regions are stories told by brutish residents then are these areas only sacred to these peoples? Does the sacredness only go as far as the story?

Mythology of the Skirrid

The stories of the Skirrid are those told to me by my father whilst out walking the mountain and its surroundings as a young girl. These stories were

²¹ Tilley, p. 25

²² Lane, p. 98

²³ Lane, p. 98 referencing Revelations 21:10

²⁴ Eliade, p. 38

²⁵ Bender, p. 299

²⁶ Bender, p. 299

²⁷ Bender, p. 299

an attempt to explain our surroundings. I had no idea that these stories had their origin in the past.

The most famous legend surrounding the Skirrid and the origin of its reputation as the 'Holy Mountain' is that of the fissure found at the summit. The story goes that this fissure opened at the same time that Jesus Christ was crucified. A bolt of lightning allegedly impacted the top and cracked the mountain creating a fissure which is the main focal point of the landscape which we see today. At the same time, a spring of holy, healing water sprang forth from the mountain.²⁸

As Garner states, 'the technical definition of a legend is: "a fanciful story associated with a place and believed to be true by the people that live there"',²⁹ This legend has been believed by local people as Palmer reports that 'people set great store by earth from the Skirrid.'³⁰ This earth was used for many reasons, some religious, such as the foundations of local churches and funeral rites and others were for good fortune, such as farmers to scatter on their fields.³¹ The local people would, and still do, make pilgrimages to the mountain on September 29th, Michaelmas Eve. All of this led to or was reflected in the construction of St. Michael's Chapel at the summit of the mountain, around the start of the 17th century, although the exact date is unknown.³²

This proximity to heaven associated with mountainous regions may account for the story of St. Michael the Archangel appearing at the summit to St. Dyfrig at what later became the site of a chapel.³³ St. Dyfrig was a late 6th century priest and later archbishop who is known in Welsh and English mythology as the man who crowned King Arthur in Silchester³⁴. This appearance reinforces the idea that the Skirrid is a holy place in the Christian

²⁸Palmer, p. 105

²⁹ Garner p. 6

³⁰ Palmer, p. 105

³¹ Palmer, p. 105

³² The Glamorgan-Gwent Archaeological Trust Historical Environment Record, St. Michael's Chapel, (Swansea)
<http://www.cofiadurcahcymru.org.uk/arch/query/page.php?prn=GGAT01473g>
[Accessed 13/08/16]

³³ Palmer, p. 9

³⁴ Palmer, p. 9

faith. It also suggests that mountainous terrain may be more susceptible to appearances from figures from heaven, similar to Mount Sinai.

A local tale tells of a giant known as Jack O'Kent. The giant had a disagreement with the Devil over which was bigger, the Sugarloaf or the Malvern Hills in England. Jack's argument was that Sugarloaf was bigger and this proved to be right. In anger the Devil collected an apron of soil to tip over the Malvern Hills in order to make them the higher. As he was crossing the Skirrid the apron strings broke, forming the lump on the northern end of the mountain.



Figure 2: Bowring, Alan, View from landslip on Ysgryd Fawr towards Sugarloaf, 2007, Digital Photograph, Image:Creative Commons Licence

The devil appears again in another story of the Skirrid, that of the Devil's table. The story goes that this outcropping of rock, see figure 2, played a part in

another story of Jack O'Giant. According to the legend, the Devil and Jack made a bet playing cards on the table. The bet was that the giant Jack would not be able to jump from the top of the Sugarloaf to the Skirrid. In attempting it, he made the jump and his foot created the landslide fissure. This is an alternative story to the fissure being caused by a reaction to the crucifixion of Christ. These stories are an example of an oral tradition that is neither true nor false, rather than a reporting of fact and are a good example of how conflicting mythologies can exist surrounding the same location. The use of the devil in describing a strange landscape is not abnormal: 'Devil' is used frequently in the naming of strangeness, especially of early works in the landscape. The sense is that they are 'other': unsafe things from long ago and a different form of time'³⁵

The mythology of the Skirrid is noteworthy in many ways. Of the three mountains surrounding the town of Abergavenny it is not the highest, which may mean that its connection to the religious aspect of height is not the only reasoning for its significance. Figure 3 shows its position in the surrounding countryside north east of Abergavenny. The mountain itself sits on the eastern edge of the Brecon Beacons national park and stands slightly alone in comparison to others. Due to its position it can be seen from a great distance from several directions. It may be that this visibility is what has caused its significance as more people are influenced by the presence of this singular mountain.



Figure 3 Google Maps, NP7 @51.8414584,-3.0411773,12.75z (Earth View), 2016, Digital image, image Google Maps Google Earth Terms Of Service

³⁵ Garner p. 11

Fieldwork Results



Figure 4: Image by Natalie Niblett taken on 13.10.2015 at the bottom of the Skirrid

On October 13th 2015 I completed my own pilgrimage to the Skirrid in order to examine the site for evidence of the stories that I have been told. The mountain itself is a National Trust site and there is a marked walking route to climb it, see figure 4. On the day I embarked on this trek the weather was clear giving a good view of the landscape surrounding the Skirrid, putting it in context.



Figure 5: Image by Natalie Niblett taken on 13.10.2015 at the top of the Skirrid

When approaching the summit the peak is at the northern end and the footpath travels across a plateau before reaching it. On a clear day, such as the one in which I travelled, it gives a clear view of the surrounding mountains. Figure 5 shows a view of Sugarloaf which, taller than the Skirrid, dominates the skyline to the west. Sugarloaf itself features in the mythology of the Skirrid and with its size and proximity it is understandable that the two will be irrevocably linked, both through its location and the story of Jack O'Kent.

Figure 6 shows the fissure at the top of the mountain. This fracture has caused a rockslide down the mountain and has left a permanent scar. It is clear from observation that this feature has been present for a great deal of time. However, there is no evidence that the mountain cracked at the time of the crucifixion of Jesus. Garner explained the idea of a legend developing to explain a natural feature when he said that 'Legend, I have found, can be, in its origins, an attempt to retain perhaps to explain, a reality: news that time has warped: a game of Chinese Whispers passed from generation to generation, until the

meaning may be lost³⁶ Like many geographical features, as no human being was around to witness its formation, a legend has developed surrounding its origin.



Figure 6: Image by Natalie Niblett taken on 13.10.2015 at the top of the Skirrid

The summit of the Skirrid is rocky and flat. The site of St. Michael's chapel has all but gone. There is no indication that the chapel was on the site if you did not know that it was there. The summit itself has a view of both the English and Welsh countryside. Once there you cannot help but consider the journey that you have taken to reach the top and the stories that surround where you are. With my Welsh upbringing, this site is sacred and puts oneself in a contemplative mood, considering my position amongst the landscape. Figure 7 shows me enjoying the summit.

³⁶ Garner, p. 8



Figure 7: Image by Natalie Niblett taken on 13.10.2015 at the top of the Skirrid



Figure 8: Image by Natalie Niblett taken on 13.10.2015 at the top of the Skirrid

The Devil's Table was more difficult to identify. The landscape of the Skirrid is strewn with rocks, many of which have the flat platform associated with a table. Figure 8 shows an object that resembles the description and location of the Devil's Table but may or may not be the feature.

This difficulty shows the drawback of fieldwork of this type. Figure 9 shows another feature, found at the top of the mountain, that could be described as a table. These features are plentiful in this landscape. The story of the Devil's Table, could be describing any of these features and depending on who is present it may be a different example at different times. Due to the extensive human activity surrounding the summit, such as ramblers exploring the National Trust site and the previously present chapel, the geography of this landscape changes over time and makes it difficult to study as what may provoke a story or myth one day may be gone or altered in years to come.



Figure 9: Image by Natalie Niblett taken on 13.10.2015 at the top of the Skirrid

After the trip up the mountain I examined the local area to see what effect the mountain had. Figure 10 is the sign of The Skirrid Inn, which claims to be Wales' Oldest Inn. The sign shows the image of the lightning striking the

summit of the mountain and creating the story that the mountain cracked at the time of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. If it were not well known in the local area, and believed by some, then this sign would not have been used here. This shows how the mythology has had an impact on local people.



Figure 10: Image by Natalie Niblett taken on 13.10.2015 at the Skirrid Inn

Discussion

In the introduction I proposed several questions on the landscape surrounding the Skirrid. Is the Skirrid a sacred landscape? How and when did the Skirrid become sacred and who is it sacred to? Garner describes Alderley Edge, a hill in Cheshire, as 'liminal, a *temenos* if you will, a special, a holy or haunted place...dependent on the historical view of the observer'.³⁷ This is similar to my feelings on the Skirrid. To myself, and other observers, the Skirrid is itself a holy place, a place of myth and a sacred landscape.

³⁷ Garner, p.17

Some of the features of the Skirrid described in the mythology are easily found, such as the fissure at the summit and the mound on the northern end of the mountain, whereas others, such as the Devil's table, are more difficult to find even though they are identifiable geographical features. Although these features are in the landscape there is no evidence present to support the stories of their origins. The Skirrid has become sacred in order to explain some of the geographical features of the mountain. These stories have endured through many years even as the scientific understanding of the mountain has increased.

In this way the local peoples surrounding the Skirrid have created a sacred landscape to explain their surroundings, making the Skirrid a sacred landscape created by human action. The sacred nature of the mountain has not extended beyond the local region. These stories have formed a mythology surrounding the mountain that will linger long after the reasons for their origins have been explained and passed. These stories will be told from father to daughter, in the same way that my father told them to me, and beyond maintaining the Skirrid's status as a sacred landscape in years to come. In this way the Skirrid can be seen to have an oral history in a similar manner to Alan Garner's experience with Alderley Edge³⁸

As an ethnographic study it is difficult to generalise from this work. The fieldwork I undertook was in order to find evidence of the stories that I had already been told. These tales have formed and evolved over a long period of time, whereas my fieldwork occurred on an individual day. Geographical features change over time; meaning the fieldwork may have different results at different time periods. As these features evolve over time, it may be that evidence of mythology on the Skirrid may be lost, leaving the stories themselves without any evidence. The same is true of any human-made objects as well, such as St. Michael's Chapel.

It has been concluded that the Skirrid is an example of the sacred mountain and the idea that less well known examples of sacred mountains exist in local communities throughout the world. The study of sacred mountains in a religious context tends to focus on those with a higher profile which has given this paper a different focus than those referenced here. This has led to an understanding of sacredness that has come to include a community or local

³⁸ Garner, p. 7

level rather than the national or international recognition of higher profile locations.

Conclusion

The aim of my work was to examine the position of the Skirrid in the context of sacred landscape in order to propose whether or not it fitted into the category of a sacred mountain. In order to do this several questions have been proposed and subsequently answered.

The Skirrid itself does fit the definition of a sacred landscape as suggested by the work of Lane, Tilley and others. It does not, however, have the same profile of other sacred mountains as the stories surrounding it have not had as widespread a cultural impact, only spreading to the surrounding area. It has been suggested that the mythology and stories have arisen in order to explain certain geographical features of the mountain. These stories have become so widespread in the local area that they have become a mythology that has endured, even as the scientific knowledge available has managed to explain the physical features of the mountain.

The Skirrid fits into the definition of a sacred mountain and the stories that make it to have arisen to explain the physical features of the mountain and their changes over time. These stories have been believed by local people for a great many years and have meant that the mountain has become sacred to them. Being as these stories have not spread beyond the local surroundings this sense of sacredness has not spread beyond those people who live in the surrounding landscape or know it well, but this does not diminish its sacredness. This shows how a sacred landscape is made so by the persons whom consider it sacred, creating a local, rather than national, sacredness.

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