

## Sacred Mountains of Cumbria

In many countries all around the world, certain mountains have long been held to be sacred and venerated as dwelling-places of the gods. Was this ever the case in prehistoric Britain? Do such beliefs persist - to a degree at least - even in our modern times?

Appleby Archaeology members listed intently to a talk by Peter Style of the University of Central Lancashire when they met for their November meeting earlier this month. Peter is currently working on a doctoral thesis designed to test the theory that ancient beliefs and religious practices may be inferred from a study of archaeological remains and their relationship to landscape features.

Looking first at the international scene, Peter began by describing Mt Kailas in Tibet which, to this day, is held to be sacred by both Buddhists and Hindus. Every year, thousands make the pilgrimage to the mountains following a tradition going back to prehistoric times. Wearing protective gloves and kneelers, devotees will circumnavigate the mountain performing full-length body-prostrations for the entire distance of some 32miles. The process may take a month!

Nearer to home, Mt Viso in the Italian Alps is associated with many myths and legends. In the Neolithic period, Mt Viso was the source of jadeite stone axes which have been found throughout continental Europe and also in the British Isles. Jadeite is a very hard material which needs to be sawn and polished rather than flaked and chipped, as is the case with flint axes. Jadeite axes are works of great beauty but their unwieldy size suggests that many may have been symbolic items rather than working tools.

Here in the UK, possibly the most likely candidate for mountain- veneration may be Pike o' Stickle, familiar to many Cumbrians as the distinctive dome-shaped mountain dominating the head of Great Langdale in the heart of the English Lakeland. Pike o' Stickle was of course extensively quarried during the Neolithic period for the greenstone which served the Langdale "axe factories".

Peter suggested a number of reasons why Pike o' Stickle might have been regarded as sacred. First of all, of course, there is its striking appearance but then he pointed out that the stone could have been obtained much more easily from other locations in Great Langdale. Yet the huge amount of flaked waste around Pike o' Stickle shows that its perilously-precipitous slopes were preferred.

Like the Mt Viso axes, the Langdale "Cumbrian clubs" are often far too large to have been of any practical use. This seems to suggest that they were symbolic in some sense and therefore that their source would also have been of ritual significance. The spiritual value of the Langdale axes is underlined by the fact that they have often been found hidden in crevices, submerged in bogs and buried under boulders. Were these in some sense "sacrifices" and offerings to the underworld?

Looking to the wider landscape Peter has recorded a concentration of prehistoric features in central Lakeland. Frequently associated with the hut-circles and ring cairns, which have long been remarked upon, he has identified curious features which he has christened "boulder cairns". These take the form of a large boulder with an attached ring of stone walling. Analysis of the orientation of the fellside location of these features shows that the boulder generally faces the associated mountain while the walling faces the valley. The purpose and date of these features is obviously open to many different interpretations, but their association with other features which are more clearly

identifiable as prehistoric suggests that they are indeed equally old. Do they then have some ritual purpose?

We shall, of course, never know, though it is pleasant to speculate. In the meantime it is worth noting that the mountains of the Lake District continue to hold a symbolic significance for our modern society. Consider, for example, the annual Remembrance Day pilgrimage to the war memorial on Great Gable and the frequency with which cremation remains are now encountered on summits. In some dim, instinctive fashion we still clearly regard our hills as very special places.

The next meeting of Appleby Archaeology will be held on the 10<sup>th</sup> December when Jeremy Bradley will be talking about Medieval Pottery in Cumbria.