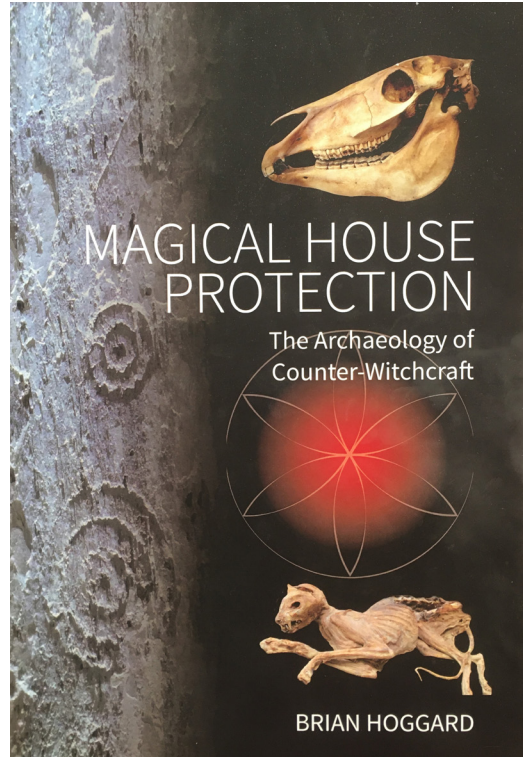


Brian Hoggard: *Magical House Protection. The Archaeology of Counter-Witchcraft*. Berghahn Books, New York 2019. ISBN 978-1-78920-205-2. 336 pp.

Brian Hoggard's *Magical House Protection* summarizes the results of two decades of research into the phenomenon of concealed charms and protection marks in the UK and beyond. It is a most welcome addition to the slowly growing body of literature on such practices and a comprehensive record of the author's endeavours to date. The book is divided into two parts. In the first part, Hoggard describes the most common types of material culture evidence used in house protection practices, discusses briefly their place in the worldview of the people who practiced them, and provides interpretations on these various items. The second part is devoted to example case studies and an extensive, 160 pages long, finds catalogue of previously unpublished discoveries from Hoggard's database.

In the UK, the most commonly occurring items hidden in buildings are so-called witch-bottles, concealed shoes, dried cats, and horse skulls. Witch-bottles first started appearing in 17<sup>th</sup>-century England. Originally, they were made of a specific type of German stoneware bottle with a round belly and a grimacing bearded face depicted on the neck (a Bartmann jug). According to contemporary written sources, the bottle was filled with the urine of a victim of witchcraft, then sharp nails or pins (and sometimes other ingredients) were added before sealing it and heating it on a fire to torture the witch. Later examples of witch-bottles were often made of glass. The archaeological evidence reveals that, in addition to the treatment described in literary sources, these bottles were concealed in buildings, especially beneath the hearthstone or within the construct of a fireplace. The practice has been recorded in all parts of Britain and in Australia and the USA, but only a few cases are known elsewhere.

The practice of concealing shoes in buildings is older and more widespread than that of



witch-bottles. The earliest examples mentioned date to the 13<sup>th</sup> century and the tradition seems to have continued up to the present day. In addition to the UK, cases have been recorded throughout Europe with others being found in the USA, Canada, North Africa, Indonesia, Australia, and New Zealand. The dried remains of cats found in roof spaces, under floors, and in sealed cavities are commonly encountered in the UK and Ireland, with cases also known in mainland Europe, USA, Canada, and Australia. Documented cases date mainly from the 17<sup>th</sup> century through to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Horse skulls concealed under floors and in walls are found throughout the British Isles, Europe, and the USA. The oldest cases discussed date to the 14<sup>th</sup> century whilst the most recent are from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In addition, Hoggard briefly discusses other common recurrent types of objects concealed in buildings, in the form of knife blades, garments, dolls, spoons, and clay pipes.

Chapter 7 considers 'protection marks', either carved, scratched, or burnt into all kinds of surfaces within buildings and other site types. These are often controversial since similar inscriptions have been used as carpenter marks or casual graffiti. Hoggard tends to favour magical interpretations for the different markings. For example, he mentions that soldiers would inscribe their initials within churches before heading off to battle and points out that this type of graffiti was most likely done to ask for protection whilst also leaving a personal mark. This is plausible, and the fact that one interpretation (protective magic) does not rule out other meanings (leaving a personal mark) is important.

On the subject of interpretations, Hoggard recognizes several different meanings for these concealed objects. According to written records, witch-bottles were used to counteract witchcraft and to punish the witch. However, there are few contemporary written or folklore sources available to explain the other practices discussed here. Concealed cats may have protected against witches' familiars and other bad influences trying to enter the house. The use of personal objects by individuals, such as shoes, garments, or clay pipes, may have functioned as decoy items; to confuse and lead astray any evil influences directed at them. Hoggard pays special attention to the idea of 'killing' an object. There are several cases where bending, slashing, or otherwise breaking objects seem to have been deliberate and the author suggests that this was done to activate them on a 'spiritual plane'.

In contrast to the title of the book, Hoggard also discusses the opposite of house protection in chapter 9. Cases of curses written on paper, lead tablets, or other media show the other side of the belief in witchcraft and negative influences. Included are cases of curse dolls with one having a concealed text revealing the dark intentions of the maker. In many cases, these written curses are directed at specific individuals named in the text. This aspect could have been highlighted when discussing the possibility that personal objects concealed in buildings may have acted as decoys since it does add strength to the interpretation.

What Hoggard has done here is to present us with a vast corpus of works reflecting the longevity of his research and his encyclopaedic

knowledge of the subject. However, perhaps it is a victim of its success due to the quantity of information available, where individual cases tend to be lost in the mass. Moreover, as Hoggard is one of the most experienced researchers on this subject, it would have been welcome to find more of his unique and extensive expertise and insight in the discussion. Occasionally, the interpretations of other researchers dominate the book. While it is important to take account of previous studies, more of the author's assessment of them could have been made explicit.

Brian Hoggard's *Magical House Protection* is a fascinating read for anyone interested in how fear of witchcraft and other dark forces have influenced the behaviour of people and therefore the archaeological record. Since it is not heavy on theoretical consideration, readers looking for accessible information on these aspects of past life can appreciate it. Those with a more academic interest will especially find the extensive material and finds catalogue quite useful. The book works well as a reference work for the subject, particularly for the UK and an excellent start point when considering the rest of the world. For the time being, the steep price of the hardback version of the book is one obstacle for its wider appreciation, but for readers comfortable with electronic resources the book is more affordable.

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