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CONCEALED SHOES

The practice of deliberately concealing shoes in buildings is probably the most common superstitious practice of the post-mediaeval period. The earliest known shoe concealment dates to the 13th Century, and the superstition reached its height in the 19th Century, with about 45% of known concealments dating to that century.

There is no utilitarian reason for this practice, yet all the shoes are in inaccessible places, often necessitating building work for them to be hidden. Examples are usually discovered when people start repairing or renovating old houses. The most common places are chimneys, walls, under floorboards, and in roofs. Other hiding places are bricked-up ovens, around doors, windows and staircases. One reason for hiding shoes in chimneys and around doors may have been because these were 'openings' where evil spirits could enter the home, and the shoe - as a good luck symbol - should warn them off. The high number of shoes hidden in chimneys and ovens, together representing over a quarter of concealments, can be attributed to the fact that these were central places in the home, providing warmth and used for cooking food. Therefore it was important to protect them.

There are various reasons why shoes should be chosen as a good luck symbol. One can draw parallels with earlier practices in trying to ascertain why people hid shoes. The Romans were known to have hidden neolithic axes in roofs to ward off lightning. Merrifield has given an example of this occurring in England at a Roman villa in Beddington, Surrey (1987, 10). As nearly one fifth of concealed shoes are found in roofs, it could be a variation of the earlier custom, with the original reason having been lost in time.

Almost without exception, the hidden shoes have been well worn, often beyond repair. This is almost certainly an important part of the custom. Unlike other items of clothing, shoes retain the shape of the wearer's body - showing the foot shape, the fit of the shoe, and even foot deformities. Because of this, many people think that shoes contain animism, or the spirit of the wearer. Therefore, one can see why the custom grew around shoes.

Men's, women's, and children's shoes are all represented, but it is significant that at least half are children's (one-fifth are men's, and nearly a third are women's, but some examples could not be placed definitely in any category because of condition, or insufficient information). The owner of a mid 19th century child's shoe found in a house in Montrose said it had been the custom for Montrose women to put the first shoes of a baby, once worn, in the roof as a luck token. Certainly, women often keep a baby's first shoes for sentimental reasons, and this probably accounts for the high number of smaller size children's shoes found hidden.

There have been some suggestions that hiding shoes may have links with old fertility customs. For example, in Lancashire an old custom called 'smickling' involved young, childless, married women trying on the shoes of a friend who had just had a baby, in the belief that they would quickly become pregnant afterwards. It may be that these were then the type of shoes that were hidden.

For most people, for much of this century and in previous centuries, shoes were the most expensive item of clothing and were made to last a long time. Concealed shoes are usually heavily worn and often show evidence of multiple repairs; those who could not afford them went barefoot. Often those of the working classes that did buy shoes did not wear them all the time. In living memory, children have walked to school barefoot, only wearing their shoes in the classroom and at church, in order to make them last. It is significant that nearly all concealed shoes are working class wear, probably kept hidden because they were highly valued. (This is also important to those of us who study old shoes, since working class shoes so rarely survive.)

Shoes are often found with other objects. Just as the shoes are heavily worn, the objects found with them are usually damaged. For example, a shoe found in Bucknall, Shropshire, had with it a broken knife, spoon, and incomplete purse, along with some chicken bones. Such incidences suggest shoes being used as more than a luck token, appearing more like a sacrifice, especially when animal bones are included. The well known example at the Museum of London, of shoes being concealed with apparently live chickens, suggests more malevolent connotations to the practice. Of the animal bones found with shoes nearly all are from chickens, but some cat remains have also been hidden with shoes, for example at Lindley, in Yorkshire. Cats are traditionally associated with witches as their 'familiars' and there may be magical elements to the concealed shoe practice. The finder of one shoe in Devon, said that his elderly father said locally the hiding of shoes in buildings was thought to 'have something to do with "witching"'.

Some shoes themselves suggest ritualistic practices. A pair found in Oxfordshire had a cross cut into the vamp of one shoe and a symbol (I have yet to ascertain its meaning) cut into the other vamp.

In most examples the concealment of shoes seems to be as a luck token. Some concealments seem to have more malevolent or magical connotations. Certainly, it is an interesting practice which provides a wealth of information about human behaviour and superstition. For those of us who are interested in old shoes, the shoes themselves are valuable for the evidence they provide (with the added bonus that concealed shoes present virtually no conservation problems). So perhaps we ought to go away and hide a few ourselves to provide discussion for the A.L.G. meetings of the future!

The information and figures in this article were gathered together as part of a project under for the University of Leicester Department of Museum Studies. The figures were based on concealed shoe information held in Northampton Museum and examples known from other museums.

Bibliography

Merrifield, Ralph: The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic, Guild Publishing, London 1987