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The Ley of the Land: Sifting Through the Myths

What do old standing stones, mounds, hill forts, ancient moats, and old pre-Reformation churches have in common? They are all built along ley lines. What are ley lines? Ley lines are straight lines that crisscross around the globe. To most people, those are called lines of latitude and longitude, and they would be correct. But ley lines are not lines of latitude and longitude, they are lines across the earth that connect important and sacred ancient sites that are believed to be imbued with deep power and electromagnetic energy. I dare to prove that ley lines influence more than just the imagination and that they do, in fact, exist outside of Outlander. The idea of there being ley lines came to prominence in early 20th century England by an amateur archaeologist, photographer, and antiquarian by the name of Alfred Watkins, who theorized that "straight lines could be drawn between various historic structures and that these represented trade routes created by ancient British societies" (Watkins, 1927). The idea was warped in the 1960s by those that claimed that the lines were guides for alien spaceships, and alas, the theory became fodder for critics and brushed off as pseudo-archaeology and pseudo-science. But the fact that no less than seven monuments exist (whether in the form of a well, a church, or a natural earthwork) that are all connected to St. Michael in a straight line from Ireland to Israel is a statistical phenomenon that can’t be brushed off so easily as coincidence. I believe that our neolithic ancestors were a lot smarter and way more attuned to the natural world than most of the scientific community gives them credit for.

In September 1921, Watkins gave a talk about his investigations on these ancient trackways found in the west of England to the Woolhope Naturalists’ Field Club of Hereford. He stated that he believed there was a "connection between ancient forts, moats, mounds, churches, trees, and place names, which he had shown to produce straight lines running across the landscape" (Watkins, 1927). Watkins noticed that ancient sites all over Britain fell into alignment and that these tracks connected place to place in straight lines, which are not commonly found in nature and therefore imply human interference. He suggested that these lines were used for wayfinding by early Britons in lieu of more modern technologies such as compasses (Watkins, 1927). Whether these sites were natural or not, they all followed the pattern of being straight lines. Watkins, unknowingly opening up a whole world of paranormal and sometimes spiritual beliefs, named these straight lines ley lines. The idea is pretty simple for those enthusiasts who do fervently believe in ley lines. Ley lines are lines that carry along with them great amounts of energy that crisscross around the globe and are punctuated with man-made megaliths and natural terrain. It is believed by some that there are certain individuals who can harness this energy at the places these lines intersect (Heselton, 1999). Naturally, this has led to widespread skepticism.

Watkins explained the existence of ley lines by calling attention to the fact that there are monuments all around the earth that can be connected by a straight line and how these lines suggest certain routes that might impart a re-acquainting with our surroundings (Watkins, 1927). For instance, as stated above, seven different monuments that bear the name “Michael,” or some form of it (Burnham, n.d.), are connected by a straight line that stretches from Ireland all the way to Israel. When you take an in-depth look into their supernatural elements and what they connect you will see that the mystery of these ley lines intensifies. Machu Picchu, Easter Island, Chichen Itza, Stonehenge - all extremely significant historical sites that continue to enthrall archaeologists to this day, are all found along different ley lines. Their existence, which broke all the natural laws of architecture at the time, may be explained by their placement on the ley lines near these purported pockets of energy. Tom Williamson, Professor of History at University of East Anglia – Norwich, claimed that the concept was bogus and that in no way could they exist. He claimed that the only reason occultists believed in them was because of a reference to them in what he called “an occult book”. Williamson also claimed that the ley lines connecting all of these important monuments together was nothing more than coincidence, that “the lines that Watkins drew on his map could easily be explained as chance alignments” (Williamson, 1983). In the book Paranormal Encounters: A Look at the Evidence which discusses the supernatural significance of ley lines, author Jeff Belanger agreed, saying “the fact that the term could be used to describe a line of any length or location detracts from its validity and claimed that it was not specific enough to use” (Belanger, 2011).

No matter what their plausibility, the notion of ley lines has beguiled fans of the occult for almost 100 years and are frequently used as the rationale for supernatural events. There has also been research done on the idea that ley lines were used for ceremonial purposes or perhaps as trade routes, just like the cursuses that dot Britain. Cursuses are Neolithic structures, that resemble trenches or ditches, found in Ireland and Great Britain. Relics found within them indicate that they were built between 3400 and 3000 BCE, making them amongst the oldest structures on the islands. These cursuses are usually found very near Neolithic sites that are thought to have been used during ceremonies, as burial grounds, and as camps. These historical places may have been built by ancient Britons, but their exact uses remain a mystery (Doyle White, 2016).

Besides Alfred Watkins, there was Guy Underwood, who was also instrumental in the establishment of ley lines. Similar to Watkins, Underwood also thought that there was an unseen order of things and surmised that there was plenty of evidence of ley lines in the UK, and at Stonehenge especially. But, contrary to Watkins, Underwood wasn’t particularly interested in land-based tracks, but in the development of water-based tracks or pathways by water, an occurrence he coined the “Geodetic line”. Underwood explained that he classifies Geodetics as being within three different categories: the “track line”, the “water-line”, and the “aquastat” (Underwood, 1968). Underwood not only differentiated his Geodetic lines from Watkins ley lines by making substantially more evident connections with the occult and divination but also in terms of their roots. An assumed "power of intention, connections to the Earth mysteries movement and number symbolism are all debated with a direct mention of leys in Underwood’s writings, with the overall outcome leading to the confusion surrounding ley lines.

The prominence of Watkin’s leanings on field archaeology and the landscape of Britain has been noteworthy in the ideological veer towards the mysteries of the Stone Age seen during the so-named "Celtic Revival" of the 1960s and 1970s, and also to the growth of a number of place-based theories relating a secret understanding of the Earth to our neolithic ancestors. In fact, all of this led to what John Foster-Forbes said could only be described as “megalithomania”. And it was the archeological exploration work of Foster-Forbes himself, influenced by the considerable amount of work obtained from Watkins, that advanced within this period and appeared to be more obscure than archaeological. Foster-Forbes had taken up the more theoretical facets of Watkins’ work, along with the help of psychic Iris Campbell, and had conducted field studies of ancient sites across much of the UK. Foster-Forbes had established this theory on the idea that all of these ancient sites were important to the ceremonial cultures of the British people by weaving fantasy into the history of the formation of these spaces, proposing that it was the giants of mythology that built them.

T.C. Lethbridge, like Foster-Forbes, also had a more transcendental attitude towards Watkins’ work, looking at connections between the mythological aspects and the archaeological facts to try to come up with answers as to why these sites existed and how they were linked. Similar points of view can be found in the works of others, with each believing that there is an underlying mystical energy to ley lines (Shapiro, 2019). As a consequence of this, ley lines are studied and understood in two different ways. Firstly, there is a science-based practice that relies on physical evidence and the understanding of how alignments work through mapping; secondly, there is the belief that there is a correlation between leys and an inherently captivating and lost past indicating that there was a mystical “Golden Age” of human existence. This increasing inclination towards the more metaphysical aspects of the landscape presented an opportunity to revive old practices, such as land divination and folklore, parts of which were used by self-proclaimed soothsayers such as Underwood in order to be one with the deep, resonating energies of the earth.

While divining, or “dowsing”, the landscape shows no correlation to Watkins’ work on the origins of ley lines it is still extensively used as a method for finding linear land patterns. The practice of dowsing itself is a technique for searching for underground water, minerals, and invisible energies in the natural environment using a pointer or a pendulum that responds to unseen influences. Dowsing practice can also be used in much the same way as the Ouija or divination board, as there are dowsers who believe you need to ask questions of the spirits of the space, using the rods as a sort of go-between, where predetermined movements were established in order to answer “yes” or “no” (Shapiro, 2019). There are, of course, similarities between the two, and these were noted by Lethbridge when he claimed that both situations could be presented as times in which the dowsing rods were in tune. While Watkins never used dowsing rods himself in his search of ley lines, the more devoted followers of ley theory have not been discouraged from putting such practices to the test. Dowsers and ley hunters practice several different belief systems and procedures: archeological, water sourcing, and energy tracing; with each one using different sets of tools.

Both Watkinsian and post-Watkinsian understanding of ley lines call for a “getting back into place” (Casey, 2009). Ley lines are by their very nature existential and each experience is personal, you can look for both mystical aspects and archaeological evidence in the same place and both can be found within a somewhat short stretch of time. Due to this, ley lines allow for an extremely personal view of the environment. According to Watkins, once an enthusiast was out in the field, there was no technique of spotting ley lines that could not be practiced. The Ley Hunters Manual was published in 1948, where Watkins writes down the step-by-step instructions of ley hunting that was based upon a system of recognizing what he called “sight points” and the “mark points” that lay in-between. Watkins describes sight points as "points of archeological significance that correspond to a linear formation" and mark points as "including mounds, moats, mark-stones, castle keeps on mounds, and beacons". What he then asks is that the ley hunters “look for further evidence of a ley line in the form of confirmation points; i.e. churches, crosses, fords, tree rings, copses, camps, cross roads, and ponds, following the identification of mark points” (Watkins, 1948). The rules presented are substantial and define the exact practice in which you should go about finding a ley line. Watkins was also an amateur photographer and used photographic illustrations, along with the researching of place names as further instructions on identification in his guidebook.

But perhaps Watkins’ principal idea is that “experience and practice bring an insight, which quickly spots a ley. Often one can be first seen on the map, but I more often see it out of doors in the lay of the land itself, and this before the mark points are found” (Watkins, 1948). By seeing the past as an important feature of the present you can use ley hunting as a way to get us back into place. Watkins tells us to observe the material evidence found within sight points, like the moats, megaliths, trees, and rivers, making sure that ley hunting is closely tied to archaeology. As we have seen, the route of the ley line is fitting for the allowance of ancient histories. Dr. Robert MacFarlane, a Fellow of Emmanuel College at the University of Cambridge, commented on the notion of there being such a thing as ley lines as “promising events over the horizon”, who is to say that the ley line does not offer us a perspective beyond that point?

There is a ley line that crosses through Illinois, not far from where I live, so I decided to investigate. The ley line is part of the Gizeh Corridor Main Line and has four points of interest on it. First, there is Prawda, Manitoba. This place is well-known for being where the most UFO sightings have ever been recorded, with a record 2,000+ in the last 200 years, the first one being in 1792. I want to be clear, however, that I am using the term UFO to mean “unidentified flying object” and I am not trying to argue the existence of extraterrestrial lifeforms. Secondly, Elk River, Minnesota, where it seems to have interesting weather patterns in the form of “showers of reptiles”. The first recording of such a phenomenon was on July 3, 1873, when Edward Upham stated that he woke up to “thickly strewn bodies of strange creatures, none of which were discovered alive”. They are described as being somewhere around six inches in length and resemble fish but with four legs and claws. There are two sites in Illinois along this ley line. Sinnissippi Mounds, a Hopewell culture burial mound estimated to be about 2,000 years old, located in Sterling, and Smiths Mound located in Streator. Next, there is Mammoth Cave, Kentucky. Mammoth Cave is known for being the world’s longest cave system at over 405 miles. The system was formed by water slowly dissolving ancient Mississippian rock formations. And, finally, there is Mount Agung in Bali, Indonesia. Mount Agung is an active volcano and the highest point in Bali. Its name means “Paramount, The Great Mountain” in English, and is the home of the Pura Besakih Temple. The people of Bali believe that Mount Agung is a replica of Mount Meru, which is the sacred five-peaked mountain of Hindu cosmology. What these locations have in common, or if there is a connection between them is not immediately apparent. It could be a complete coincidence that you can draw a straight line from Manitoba to Bali where there are a couple of natural sites and places where not so natural phenomena occurred. Or it could be that there is an energy that follows this ley line, making strange events happen along the way and creating caves, mounds, and volcanoes where the energy pockets are the strongest.

Walking a ley line allows for freedom of movement, a right that includes the right to move freely in and out of and in-between places. It is, in a way, strengthening one’s connection to the environment. Like an expedition, of sorts. Searching for and locating ley lines allows us to investigate an idea and its correlations with time and place. It creates a "deep map" of our world; a map that has patterns that center around that idea. It is an exercise that gives us the chance to build upon our historical and geological knowledge and our cognizance of place by encouraging our intuitive connection with our surroundings. In performing Watkins’ methods, the surrounding environment becomes a key aspect of history, the landscape gives us a historical map of our ancestor’s activity. Whether ley lines actually exist, or whether there is any legitimate reason to believe in them is of little importance when what we are doing is questioning the soundness of our own understanding of the world we live in by moving between sites of historical importance using what was once considered an innovative system. Because “ley lines exist alright: in the imagination, on maps, and sometimes on the ground” (Charlesworth, 2010).

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