

The place beyond time and space – on the ritual circle in British Traditional Wicca

This year's editions of CESNUR conference was dedicated to holy land and sacred histories – and although in British Traditional Wicca no established temples can be found, this does not equal the lack of sacred space. My paper concerns the circle cast during Wiccan rituals, a circle that creates a place beyond space and time. I base my analysis on the narrations of the prominent witches, as well as on my on-going research among Polish Traditional Wiccans (semi-structured interviews and observational study held during open rituals, workshops and less formal meetings).

The circle itself is an ideal sought since the ancient times, an “archetypal symbol of wholeness”, as put by Vivianne Crowley (*Wicca*, p. 43). Doreen Valiente in *Witchcraft for Tomorrow* calls the magic circle “a fundamental requirement of all kinds of occult ceremonial” (p. 66). She points out its role as a spiritual fortress throughout the ages, as it was believed to be a perfect geometrical figure. We are familiar with a legion of magical, ritual and legendary circles, but it is the ritual circle in British Traditional Wicca I would like to present¹. Throughout the paper, three questions will be answered: when and where do you cast the circle, what for and how?

When and where?

The answer to the first question is relatively simple – the circle is cast whenever the whole coven meets for celebration. It can be done either for the celebration of sabbats (the festivals of the Wheel of the Year), esbats, rituals of initiation etc. As for my respondents, the adjusting to the strict date of a sabbat may be problematic, especially when a coven consists of people living in different parts of country – the most convenient date, like a weekend closest to the actual festival, can be chosen instead.

When it comes to where, the situation may be a little bit more complicated, especially when a coven wishes to practice outdoors. The rituals in British Traditional Wicca are mostly carried *skyclad*, “dressed in heaven”, hence, it is crucial to find a place quite secluded to avoid meeting any accidental passers-by. The weather conditions should be favorable – it might be

¹ By saying British Traditional Wicca I mean those modern witchcraft traditions which date back to Alex Sanders or Gerald Gardner.

demanding to do a *skyclad* ritual for Yule in the middle of winter. This is one of the reasons why a coven would rather choose a place under a safe roof, for example a specially designed room in High Priestess or High Priest's apartment, or just a room arranged for the occasion. Such a place, when it is designated as the coven's permanent ritual area, is sometimes called "covenstead".

What for?

This might sound very obvious, but the purpose of a ritual circle is strictly connected to the ritual itself: to design and isolate the space in which the ritual will be held. Referring to Gerald Gardner himself – in *Witchcraft Today* he wrote that the circle is "between the worlds", that is, between this world and the next, the dominion of gods (p. 26). Vivianne Crowley notes that by entering the sacred precincts of a circle witches enter a place "where our sometimes warring conscious and unconscious minds can meet in harmony" (p. 44). Thus, a circle becomes a very unique meeting place. A safe and sacred ground, where the participants of the ritual can meet with the gods and do some magic work as well. The circle functions also as a safe bubble, in which it is easier to focus on the ritual itself – as one of the priestesses I talked to said, that within a circle „you can focus, nothing disturbs you" (priestess, 33 years old).

How?

First, the chosen place needs to be cleaned and prepared. The furniture should be moved, outside the wood for the fire can be gathered – all those slow preparations which will allow to slowly switch off from the mundane world. The size and range of a circle can be drawn previously, in a traditional diameter of nine feet or otherwise, as needed. Doreen Valiente in *Witchcraft for Tomorrow* underlines that "whatever you do, remember that you must consecrate and visualize the magic circle afresh each time you work. It is you effort and visualisation that make a magic circle, not material things like twine or carpet" (p. 156).

The physical and symbolical cleansing of the space is crucial: Gardner reminds the reader that "within the circle is the gods' domain" (p. 26). Both the place and the participants are purified – with salt, water, incense. The four elements are visible here: obviously Water, salt representing the Earth and the censer representing both Air and Fire.

The actual casting could be done with the essential witches' tool, *athame*, the ritual knife, but other tools, like sword – or even witch's hand – can be utilized, too. The priestess walks around the circle, pointing the athame and visualising a barrier with the whole coven. A proper formula is also said, for example:

We conjure thee, O Circle of Power,
that thou beist a boundary
between the world of men and the realms of the Mighty Ones
a Guardian and a Protection
that shall preserve and contain
the power which we shall raise within thee;
in the most sacred and powerful names
of (the God) and (the Goddess). (Crowley, p. 61)

To give just a short outcome of what comes later: within the circle the elemental quarters are called upon, the cone of power is raised using various techniques and finally, the Gods are invited to come. When the ritual is done, the circle is thought to be dispersed – it is rarely 'uncast' in a manner opposite to the initial casting. The ritual ends thus with bidding farewell to the elemental quarters – as Janet and Stewart Farrar note, "it would be bad manners not to thank the entities you had invoked to guard it" (p. 55).

Two more remarks on the dos and don'ts of the circle casting. Firstly, the direction of moving inside the circle matters as well – Valiente notes that one should move deosil, to the right. The opposite direction, widdershins or to the left, is "generally regarded as belonging to the realm of sinister, averse magic and cursing" (p. 156). Secondly, one should not leave the circle while the ritual is ongoing, but when a necessity occurs, a gateway may be opened with an *athame* (with a sweep anticlockwise, as noted by the Farrars, p. 38) and then properly closed (with a clockwise sweep).

In the end I would like to introduce a few thoughts on the ritual circle which I encountered during my research among Polish Wiccans. Apart from entering the ritual circle with the whole coven, some of them cast a small circle for their own protective purposes or while doing magic. Some reported that the circle is a bubble in which they forget about the outside world, and even the pace of time is different. For example, Sheila (29 years old) said: "We think that the ritual takes places in time beyond time and place beyond place. Sometimes it happens than you think thank only 20 minutes have passed, you step out from the circle, look at your watch, blimey, it's been two hours".

Selected bibliography

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