

Fire

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Sacred Geography



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Aim

to consider the role of fire and its ability to capture and create mythology in a landscape.

The possession of fire was unique and set human apart from the rest of the created world and so there are many myths about how fire was acquired.

Typically, the proto-humans are helpless. Typically, some culture hero—a daring animal, a Titan, a cunning youth, a pitying god—steals fire from a ruler who hoards it as an expression of his own power.

Through the writings of Hesiod and Aeschylus and Plato, the myth of Prometheus, a Greek god who steals fire from Olympus to give to humanity on earth, eventually became the myth that dominated western thought. With fire, humans begin to act for themselves.





Regardless of the particulars, the myths make clear that **fire is power.**

It is not given freely,

its presence **joins humanity to nature,**

its possession distinguishes humans from the rest of base creation,

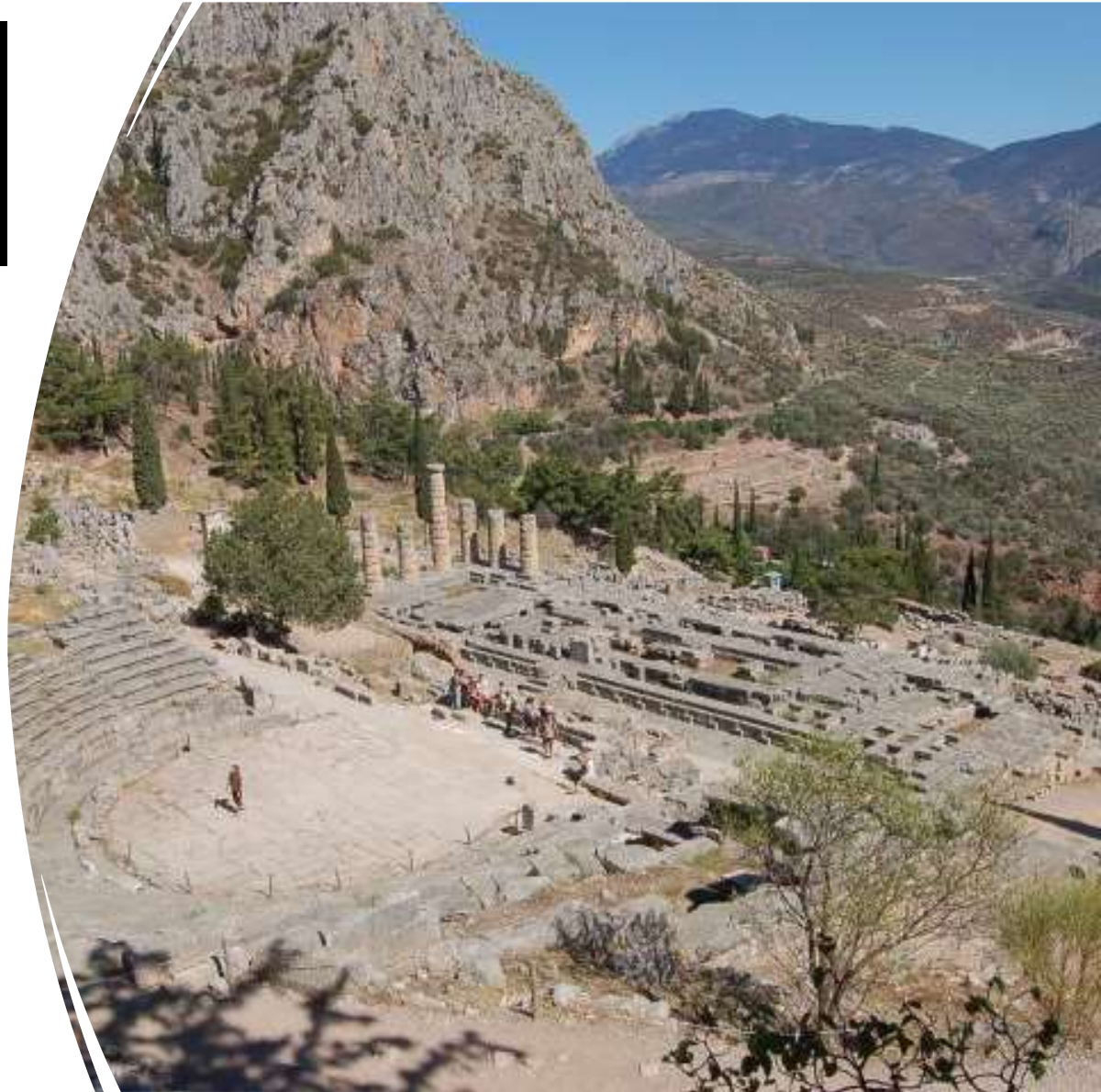
and it **unites the human with the divine.**

Pyne, Stephen J. 'Fire in the Mind: Changing Understandings of Fire in Western Civilization.'
Philosophical Transactions: Biological Sciences 371, no. 1696 (2016): 1-8, p.1.

Fire from within
the earth

The Temple of Apollo at Delphi

Established around the
8th century BCE





5. They say that the seat of the oracle is a cave that is hollowed out deep down in the earth, with a rather narrow mouth, **from which arises breath** (πνευμα, πνεῦμα) **that inspires a divine frenzy; and that over the mouth is placed a high tripod, mounting which the Pythian priestess receives the breath and then utters oracles in both verse and prose**, though the latter too are put into verse by poets who are in the service of the temple. They say that the first to become Pythian priestess was Phemonoê; and that both the prophetess and the city were so called from the word Pythesthai, to inquire, (πυθέσθαι), though the first syllable was engthened, as in āthanatos, ākamatos, and diākono (ἄθάνατος ἀκάματος διάκονος).

Strabo (c.64 BCE-c.25 CE)

Strabo. *Geography Volume IV: Books 8-9*. Translated by Horace Leonard Jones. Loeb Classical Library 196. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927, 9.3.5, pp.352-353.

John Collier, *Priestess of the oracle at ancient Delphi, Greece*, 1891, oil on canvas, 160 cm x 80 cm, Art Gallery of South Australia. Image: Wikimedia Commons

Fire from within
the earth

Mount Vesuvius
and Pompei





François-Joseph Bosio, *Heracles battles Achelous*, 1824, Museo del Louvre, Paris, France. *Image:* Wikimedia Commons /Juan Eduardo De Cristofaro.

Heracles then moved on from the Tiber, and as he passed down the coast of what now bears the name of Italy he came to the **Cumaean Plain**. Here, the myths relate, there were men of outstanding strength the fame of whom had gone abroad for lawlessness and they were called Giants. **This plain was called Phlegraen ('fiery') from the mountain which of old spouted forth a huge fire as Aetna did in Sicily; at this time, however, the mountain is called Vesuvius and shows many signs of the fire which once raged in those ancient times.**

Now the Giants, according to the account, on learning that Heracles was at hand, gathered in full force and drew themselves up in battle-order against him. The struggle which took place was a wonderful one, in view of both the strength and the courage of the Giants, but Heracles, they say, with the help of the gods who fought on his side, gained the upper hand in the battle, slew most of the Giants, **and brought the land under cultivation.**

Diodorus Siculus (fl. 1st century BCE)

Diodorus of Sicily, *The Library of History*. Translated by C.H. Oldfather. Loeb Classical Library 303. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956, Book IV, 5-6, pp.410-411



Pierre-Jacques Volaire, *Eruption of Vesuvius*, 1769, oil on canvas, Naples, Museo di Capodimonte.



Guillaume Coustou the Elder, *Hercules on the pyre*, 1704, marble, 74 cm x 63 cm x 56 cm. Louvre Museum, Paris.
Image: Marie-Lan Nguyen/Wikimedia Commons.

Fire from the sky

The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah

Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah **brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven;**

And he overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground.

Genesis 19: 24,-25, Old Testament, King James Bible.



Lucas van Leyden, *Lot and his Daughters*, 1520, oil on panel, 48 cm x 34 cm, Museo del Louvre, Paris, France. *Image*: : Web Gallery of Art.

Fire from the sky

The miraculous flight of the Israelites from Egypt and their wandering through the wilderness for 40 years guided by a pillar of fire by night.



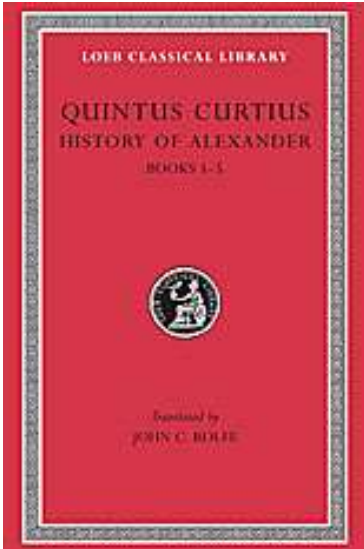
21 And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud, to lead them the way; **and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light;** to go by day and night:

22 He took not away the pillar of the cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people.

Exodus 13:21-22, King James Version

William West, *The Israelites Passing through the Wilderness, Preceded by the Pillar of Light*, 1845, oil on canvas, 4111.7 cm x 167.6 cm. Image: Bristol Museum & Art Gallery.

Fire from the sky



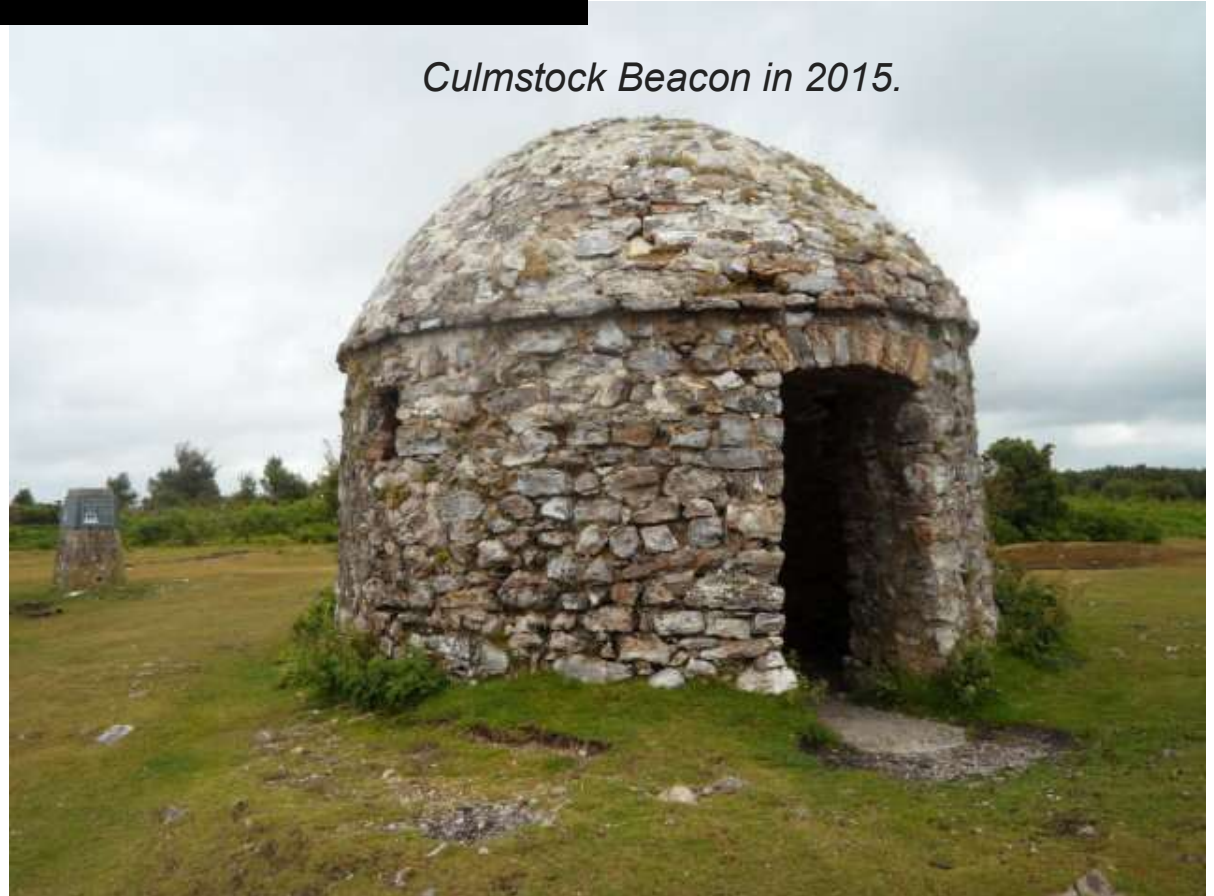
When he wished to move his camp, he used to give the signal with the trumpet, the sound of which was often not readily enough heard amid the noise made by the bustling soldiers; therefore he set up a pole on top of the general's tent, which could be clearly seen from all sides, and from this a lofty signal, visible to all alike, was watched for, **fire by night, smoke in the daytime.**

Quintus Curtius, *History of Alexander*, Volume 1, Books 1-5,
Translated by J.C. Rolfe, Loeb Classical Library 368, Cambridge, Mass.;
London: Harvard University Press.

Created fire - Beacons

Fire Beacons in Devon

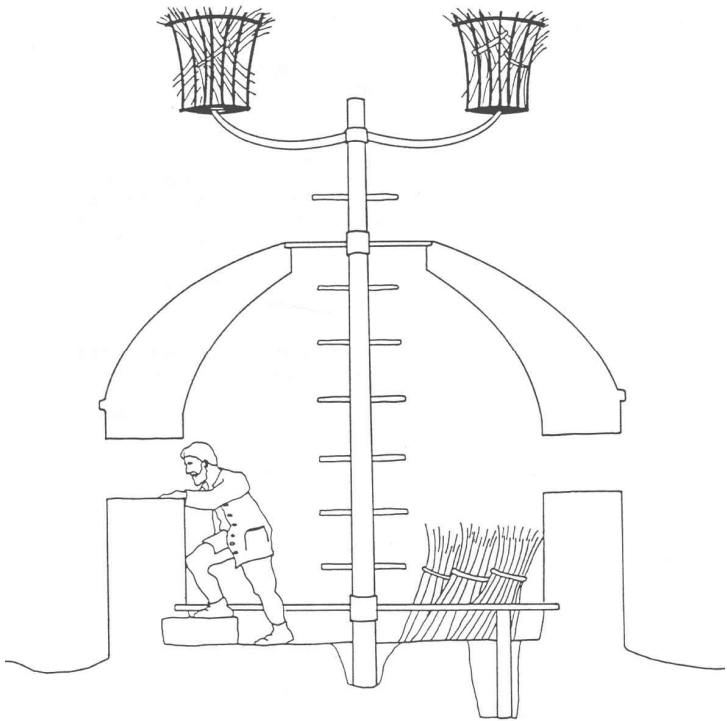
Fire beacons were fires which were lit to give warning to local people of the approach of an enemy. They were sited on high hills, usually as part of a defensive signal system, or chain, stretching back from the coast to inland areas. **The signal was given by smoke during the day and light by night.** Upon seeing the signal, men from the countryside would gather and march to defend whichever coastal landing place was threatened.



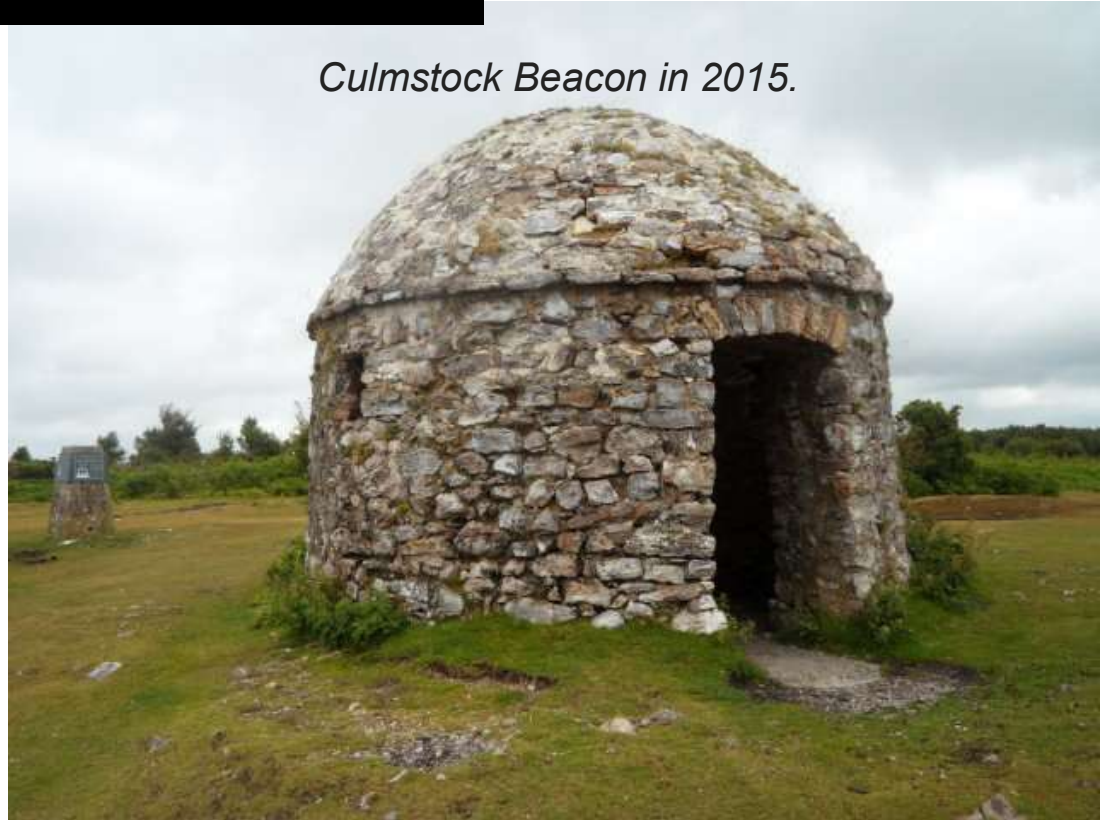
Culmstock Beacon in 2015.

Devon's long coastline made it vulnerable to attack, and 89 beacon sites are believed to have existed here, dating from the Roman period through to the Napoleonic wars.

Created fire - Beacons



Culmstock Beacon in 2015.

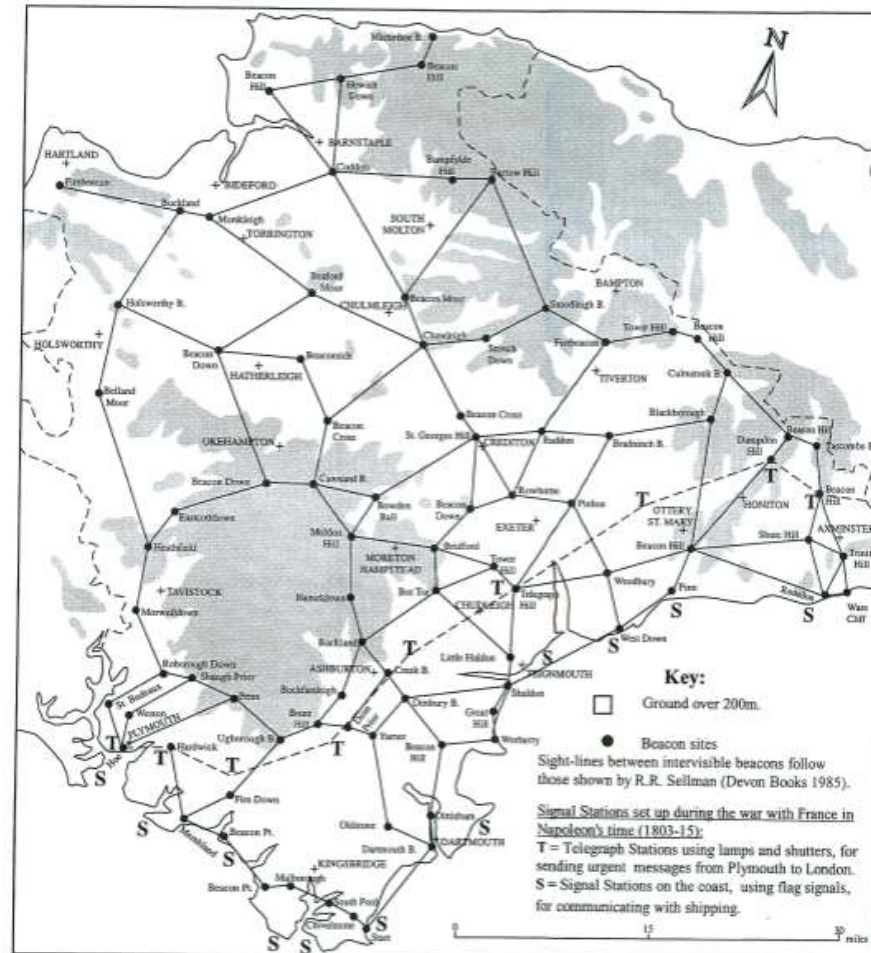


Reconstruction drawing showing Culmstock Beacon as it may have appeared in the 16th century. Reproduced from *Fire Beacons, warning signals across the countryside: a short history of beacons and other signals with special reference to Devon*. Devon County Council.

<https://www.devon.gov.uk/historicenvironment/schools-resources/fire-beacons/>

Fire Beacons in Devon

Devon's Beacons and Napoleonic Signal Stations



Fire that celebrates: Fire Beacons



The Queen's Platinum Jubilee 2022

Platinum Jubilee: Beacons being lit across South West

🕒 2 June 2022



Locations across the South West with beacons include the Isles of Scilly, Pendennis Castle in Falmouth, Start Point and Clovelly

More than 80 beacons are being lit across Cornwall and Devon as part of a tribute to the Queen.

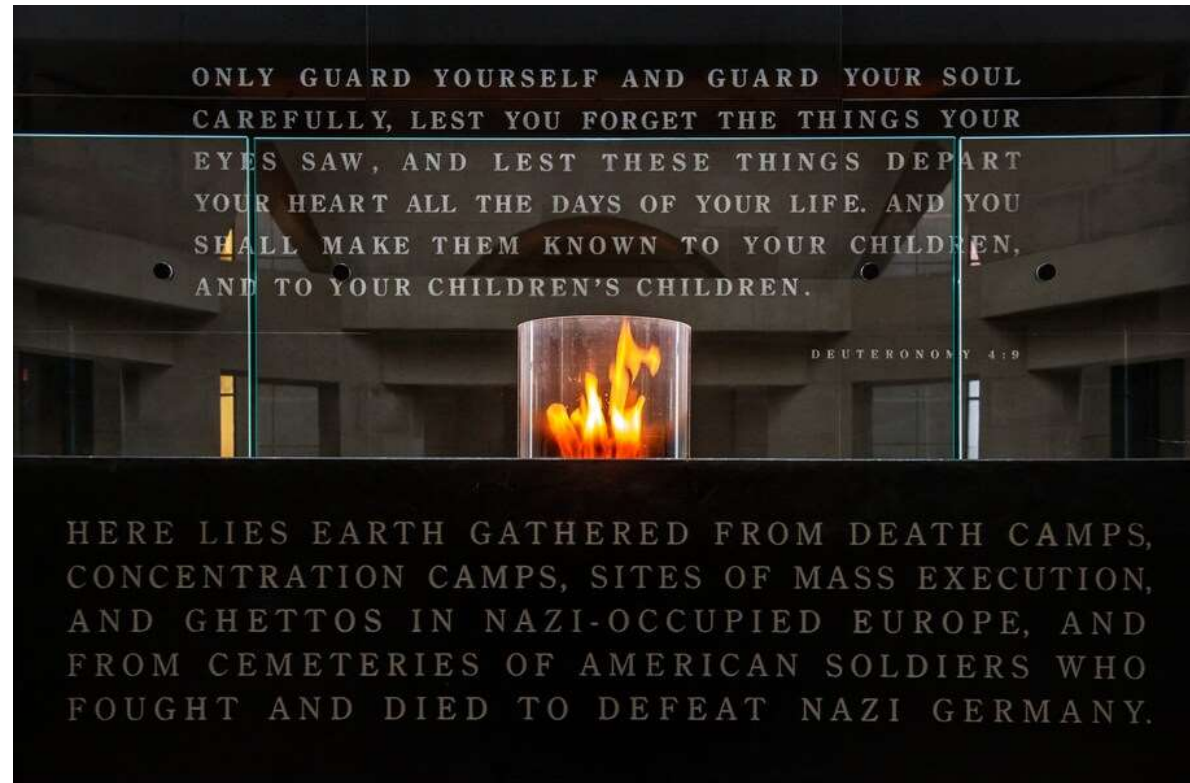
About 3,000 beacons will be set ablaze across the UK and the Commonwealth on Thursday to mark the Platinum Jubilee.



Fire Beacons



Fire that remembers: eternal flames - Shrines



A view of the eternal flame in the Hall of Remembrance at the U.S. Holocaust Museum. Photo: Bill O'Leary/The Washington Post.

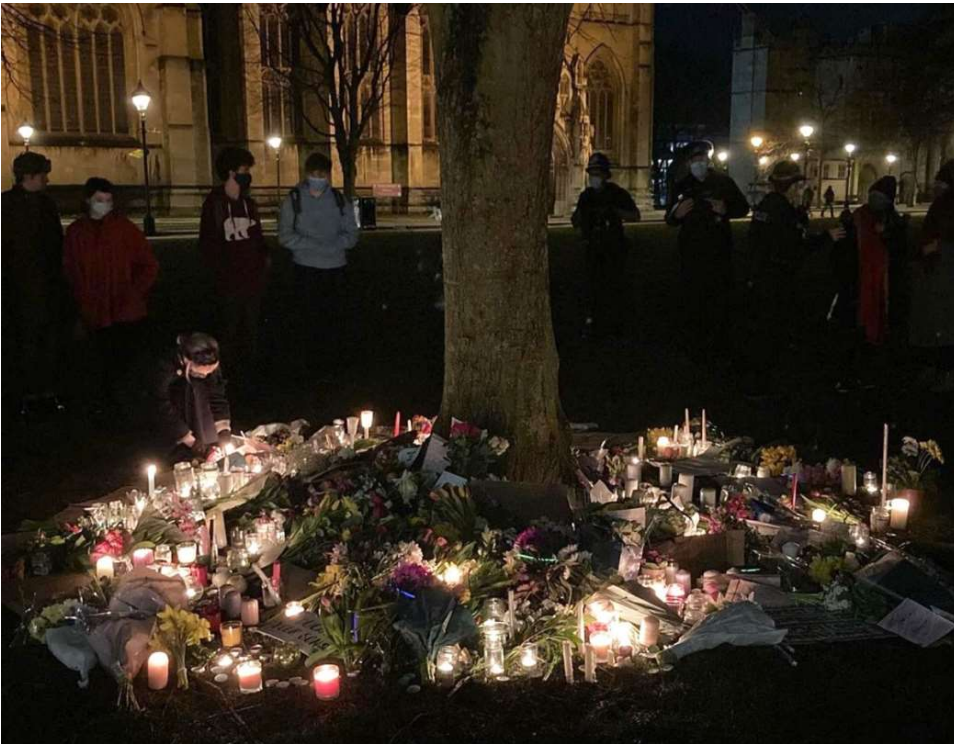


Fire that remembers: eternal flames - Shrines



The Shrine of Remembrance war memorial of Victoria and one of Melbourne's most iconic landmarks. It was opened in 1934 to commemorate First World War veterans, and now honours all Australians who have served their country.

Fire that remembers... vigils



Above: People gathered with candles and flowers on College Green, Bristol, a one of many candlelight vigils held across the country in memory of Sarah Everard who was found dead after she went missing in London, March 2021. Image: PA.



Members of the public hold candles at the vigil. Image: Hollie Adams/Getty Images)



Left: People in the crowd turn on their phone torches as they gather in Clapham Common, March 2021. Image: Victoria Jones/PA Wire.

Eternal flames – altar sanctuary lamp



Eternal flame on altar and reredos, Our Savior's Lutheran Church of Lansing, Iowa.



A Ner Tamid hanging over the ark in a synagogue at Keshet Israel, Washington D.C.



Mosque lamp, 1350–1400, glass, gilded and enamelled, collected and bequeathed to the British Museum by Ferdinand Anselm Rothschild.

Fire on the run

Olympic flame



Muhammad Ali, Atlanta at the Opening Ceremony at the city's Olympic Stadium on 19 July 1996, lighting the cauldron.

Natural eternal flames

Eternal Flame Falls, United States

This eternal flame flickers inside a grotto, just behind a waterfall in Chestnut Ridge County in the U.S. state of New York, south of the Canadian border.

This fire, visible throughout the year — even when the waterfall freezes over! — is **fuelled by a natural gas deposit** believed to be coming from a natural hydrocarbon seep.



Photo: www.flickr.com

Natural eternal flames

The Burning Water (水火同源), Taiwan

Similar to the eternal flame falls in New York, this eternal flame burns close to water. The Hot Spring Eternal Flame is located in Guanziling in Taiwan and is said to have been **started by an earthquake** that opened a fissure in the earth.

It has been burning for more than 300 years, fuelled by methane gas deposits beneath. The fire then escapes from a crack in the rocks near pools of hot springs.



Photo: Wikimedia commons

Natural eternal flames

Murchison, New Zealand

The tiny, isolated New Zealand village of Murchison is home to a perplexing cauldron of smokeless flames, which have been burning since the 1920s.

Legend has it that two hunters took a break and sat down in the bush to smoke. **One threw away his match**, suddenly igniting natural gas which was leaking from the ground right next to him. This bizarre bowl of flames has kept burning ever since.



Photo: Wikimedia commons

Human-made eternal flames

Gates of Hell, Turkmenistan

The Karakum Desert burning crater is considered mysterious, but most believe it is the result of a **Soviet drilling accident** that hit a gas cavern in 1971. The ground then collapsed, and the hole was reportedly lit on fire to prevent natural gas from spreading and has been burning since that day in the gigantic crater.

Turkmenistan has vowed to gather top scientists to figure out how to extinguish the Gates of Hell, although there are no current estimates on how much the operation might cost.



Photo: Wikimedia commons

Summary

Fire can **enable place** through prediction, such as the Delphic Oracle, or volcanoes considered to be sacred and embodied with myth.

Fire can **destroy place**, such as fire and brimstone of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Fire can **move through place**, of its own accord, such as the pillar of fire that led the Israelites through the desert (Exodus) or by human intervention, such as the Olympic flame.

Fire can **signal place** by beacon - in warning or in celebration.

Fire can **honour place** through eternal flames - in shrines or vigils.

Fire can **own place** through natural or human-made eternal flames in the earth's surface.

Reading and references

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