

Introduction

Exploring New Approaches to the Archaeology of Spiritualities

In September 2011, as we were editing this volume, our attention was caught by an online article in *Archaeology News Network* about a team of Oxford University scientists who were engaged in a project aiming “to produce a global map of the land owned or revered by the world’s religions”.¹ The researchers estimate that about 15% of the world’s surface is “sacred land”, much of it in groves and forests containing some of the richest biodiversity in the world, including numerous threatened species. While the researchers’ primary goal is the measurement, assessment, conservation, and official protection of the globe’s biodiversity using scientific methods and tools of quantitative assessment, they also want to understand the use of sacred places in cultural, recreational, and religious activities over time, and their value to local people in terms of, for example, harbouring medicinal plants. Thus they plan to also work with the community groups for whom these places are sacred, entailing encounters with a vast range of religious belief systems.

This article caught our interest for several reasons. First, the prestigious and ambitious nature of the project signals scientists’ growing acknowledgement of the acute and perpetual importance of understanding sacred places for human communities. The fact that such places constitute a large portion of the planet demonstrates that they warrant significant attention. Second, while prioritizing the methods and tools of quantitative assessment, the research team is interested in a rather more holistic understanding, which necessitates their working with other kinds of tools too. One tool requires engaging with the community stewards of sacred places whose expert knowledge, practices, and religious beliefs can assist the scientific enquiry. Hence, the often critical insights offered by ethnographic data, or living people—used appropriately—are recognized as having a potential role alongside

¹“Scientists map religious forests and sacred sites”, posted by TANN. The research team is based in the Biodiversity Institute in the Oxford Martin School. Retrieved September 7, 2011, from <http://archaeologynewsnetwork.blogspot.com/2011/08/scientists-map-religious-forests-and.html>.

other kinds of scientific data. Third, the article reminds us that sacred sites, forests for example, while crucially significant in the life-worlds of communities, are not necessarily associated with architectural structures or obviously “ritual objects”. Moreover they may not be set apart for exclusively religious purposes, but integrated with other aspects of people’s lives—the economy or health and healing, for example. Thus sacred places are not necessarily readily or solely identifiable as “religious” or “ritual” sites.

This growing scientific interest in sacred places speaks to the timeliness of this book, with its focus on understanding sacred places and what they may have meant to the communities who once lived in or near the places where archaeologists conduct their research. We are particularly interested here in the use of diverse and innovative research tools and perspectives to try to reach more comprehensive and nuanced understandings. Archaeologists’ efforts to understand past societies are inevitably informed by enculturation within our/their own societies, traditionally most often societies with Judaeo-Christian foundations, with their particular, commonplace perspectives of religion, ritual, and belief (even if individual archaeologists themselves may no longer personally subscribe to these beliefs and practices). Our goal is to promote a fresh exploration of the intersection of archaeology and religion or spirituality, one we hope will provoke interest and further research.

While archaeological approaches to the study of religion have typically, and to a degree inevitably, been influenced by Western religious paradigms, especially Judaeo-Christian monotheistic frameworks, archaeologists have rarely reflected on how these approaches have framed and constrained their research questions, hypotheses, definitions, methodologies, interpretations, and analyses. They have also tended to neglect an important dimension of religion: the human experience of the numinous, religion’s embodied dimension. While the embodied and experiential aspects of religion have been explored recently within some other disciplines—particularly social and cultural anthropology, sociology, and religious studies—the archaeological literature has yet to venture far in this direction. The limited exploration of this issue has been in the context of phenomenology, which has, however, tended to over-intellectualize experience rather than truly explore embodiment.

Within the religions of many of the world’s peoples, sacred experiences and embodiment—particularly in relation to sacred landscapes and beings connected with or constituting those landscapes—are often given greater emphasis, while doctrine and beliefs are relatively less important. Systems of belief may well not, or not only, entail *belief in* and *worship* (or *veneration*) of deities. Rather, ancestors, spirits, and other-than-human beings and features in the landscape, including the urban landscape, may have significant, active roles in an individual’s, family’s, or community’s life and relationships. The lines between the natural and supernatural, human and not-human, animate and inanimate may be less well drawn than many Western-raised archaeologists are familiar with. Vesa-Pekka Herva explains in her chapter, for example, that houses were thought to be animate, sentient, and conscious beings in seventeenth-century Tornio and elsewhere in the northern periphery of Sweden. Several authors (Wallis and Blain, Herva, VanPool and VanPool, Kelly and Brown, Goodison) engage with challenges to conventional understandings of

personhood which extend it to the non-human world and, indeed, to the archaeological material record. Such innovative attempts to locate an analytical consciousness and methodological approach outside of familiar Western epistemological frameworks—within a framework of animism, for example—open up thought-provoking and exciting avenues for interpretive possibility.

As the authors of many chapters emphasize, trying to distinguish between the religious and everyday aspects of life may constitute a meaningless pursuit in many cultural—and consequently archaeological—contexts. Every society's apprehension of the sacred is culturally situated and to a (frequently large) degree integrated with other aspects of its social and cultural life. Thus, the questions which initially engaged our interest as editors were: How do we recognize and investigate "other" forms of religious or spiritual experience in the remains of the past? How might we discern the nature of people's sacred ("spiritual" or "religious") experiences in the archaeological record? How might we recognize and attempt to understand the life-worlds and cosmologies which may have informed these experiences?

There is of course an inherent tension and challenge in archaeology's encounter with religion/spirituality, or with the evidence of past religions/spiritualities. Within a Western rationalist framework, science and religion are habitually seen as alternative epistemologies and competing authorities on "truth". Archaeologists are scientists for whom the material world in all its fragmentary minutiae constitutes "evidence": this evidence is and must be the discipline's starting and finishing point. Yet deciphering the relationship between the material and non-material worlds in the field of religion is arguably more challenging than in other aspects of archaeological analysis and interpretation. As a number of authors point out, the relationship between the material and non-material spheres for past societies may well have been mediated by elusive symbolism and systems of magical correspondences, altered states of consciousness, esoteric knowledge, ecstatic experience, particular emotional or psychological states, superstitions and magical beliefs—all of which are difficult for the archaeologist to "get at". Acknowledgement of this difficulty has prompted the contributors to this volume to variously co-opt, in addition to more traditional archaeological approaches, ethnographic, historical, archival and folkloric data, oral traditions, comparative and analogous data sets, and to explore experiential and experimental methodologies. In their chapter, Alan A.D. Peatfield and Christine Morris include a discussion of their use of shamanic techniques at a Minoan peak sanctuary—sites long accepted by archaeologists as associated with ecstatic rituals—in order to open another window of potential understanding of embodied spiritual or religious practices in the Cretan Bronze Age. This kind of experimental work contributes to a growing cross- and inter-disciplinary interest in issues concerned with embodiment and the human senses, and the positive re-valuing of subjective epistemologies and methodologies as legitimate, fruitful avenues of enquiry.

We have chosen to use "Spiritualities" rather than "Religion" in the book's title in order to de-emphasize the institutionalized, formal, doctrinal, faith-based aspects of religion and reflect a broader focus on the plurality of ways humans in diverse cultural contexts construct and relate to what they deem sacred. Our intention is to

destabilize the sacred/secular dichotomy, and pay attention to the ways in which “spiritual” ideas, emotions, and practices habitually enjoin the quotidian and everyday. We wish to shift emphasis away from the simple defining and identifying of “religion” and “ritual” in archaeological contexts, and to explore how different cosmologies in the past may have encouraged different forms of engagement with both the material and unseen worlds. Most importantly, “Spiritualities” signals our interest in the whole spectrum of religious and spiritual experience, including the religions of traditional, tribal, and indigenous peoples, contemporary religious or spiritual movements, and the acknowledged “world religions”. The chapters are broadly unified in their approach to the archaeology of spiritualities, sharing a common preoccupation with the relationship between materiality and spirituality, between spirituality and the quotidian, and between people and places, and in their desire to explore new perspectives and methodologies. At the same time they offer a diverse geographical spread in terms of the sites and contexts which have formed their research focus, and a range of scholarly preoccupations.

Part I, “Life, Death and Ancestors”, introduces themes which have significant resonances in subsequent parts. The manner in which a community deals with the bodies of its dead, the ways it mourns and continues to engage with the dead, especially dead kin (ancestors), helps us understand not only a society’s beliefs about death, but also its beliefs about life and how it is, or should be, lived in community. It is therefore fortunate—and probably unsurprising given their importance—that evidence of mortuary practices is often preserved in the archaeological record. Muiris O’Sullivan’s expansive opening chapter discusses a range of Irish megalithic tombs and mortuary practices—with an emphasis on the Hill of Tara—with respect to the insights they offer about Neolithic people’s spirituality and beliefs concerning humanity’s place in the cosmos. Comparisons are made between aspects of the Irish record and sites in Britain and continental Europe. O’Sullivan suggests that the location of at least some passage tombs “is the key to unlocking deeply meaningful places in the Irish Neolithic landscape, such as mountains and rivers that had been sacred since time immemorial”, on the evidence of their continued use by different communities over centuries and millennia, from the Neolithic to the Iron Age and into historical times. The repeated use of certain special places in the landscape by a series of cultures is also addressed in the chapters by Kelly and Brown, Paz, and Jonuks.

The enduring connection between living people and the ancestors, and between people and places, mediated through objects found at shrines and sacred sites, is also an important theme in Timothy Insoll, Benjamin Kankpeyeng, and Samuel Nkumbaan’s analysis of an assemblage of ceramic figurines and figurine fragments recovered recently from a mound at Yikpabongo, northern Ghana. The authors insist on the intimate, interdependent relationship between the material and spiritual given that the figurines may represent the material embodiment of ancestors. They suggest that the figurines’ deposition (as wholes or fragments) may provide clues about the social and individual construction of personhood, and the abiding nature of kin relationships and networks whose mutuality and reciprocity are uninterrupted by death.

The modern Pagans discussed by Robert Wallis and Jenny Blain also insist that “matter matters, and it matters much”: spirituality is rooted in materiality. Wallis and Blain focus on the contemporary importance of “ancestors” and their welfare for modern British Pagans, particularly Pagans’ concern about the reburial of ancient “pagan” human remains. People in this relatively new religious movement, with their polytheistic and/or animistic cosmologies and approach to sacred landscapes, construct identities partly by negotiating between past and present, interweaving evidence of the physical past with archaeologists’ interpretations and their own imaginings. Pagans contest what, or more importantly *who*, constitute “ancestors”; they also contest institutional authority as the singular authority to make such determinations from ontological and epistemological standpoints. Wallis and Blain conclude that in order to move beyond the impasse created at the interface of spirituality and science, stakeholders with an interest in sacred sites must engage in dialogue, and be prepared to renegotiate their discursive positions.

Modern Pagans are not alone in their interest in animism as a relational ontology—where human persons inhabit an interrelated world filled with persons, only some of whom are human. A number of archaeologists have been experimenting recently with using an animist epistemology for interpreting sites, and some of this work is included in Part II, “Relational Ontologies and Engagements with Landscape” (see also Chap. 10). Herva prefaces her discussion of spirituality and material practices in post-mediaeval Europe, particularly in the town of Tornio in early modern Finland, by explaining the divorce of the material and spiritual worlds as a result of the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment, which “evicted such spiritual properties from the material world and instead envisioned a clockwork universe composed of autonomous physical objects and governed by universal laws and mechanical cause-effect relationships”. She scopes the potential of a relational ontology and magical thinking as alternative epistemologies to science, whereby the boundaries between organism and environment, subject and object, are collapsed, and “things” can make and manipulate human people as readily as vice versa. Examples of this type of thinking are found, she says, in the architecture of Renaissance Europe, people’s relationships with sacred trees in Finnish folk culture, and people’s relationships with houses in seventeenth-century Tornio, where houses were perceived as person-like and spiritual beings with which people engaged.

Christine VanPool and Todd VanPool take the archaeological use of an animist perspective into the American context, demonstrating the mutual referencing and interdependence of ethnographic and archaeological data. They set out three general principles of animist cosmology and epistemology which they believe will assist archaeologists interested in the social role that spiritually potent (non-human) beings play in the social relations that structure any given culture, illustrating the principles with a variety of examples from American Southwestern groups. They discuss in particular the site of Paquimé in Mexico, one of the largest religious and economic centres in North America, where an animistic ontology is indicated by evidence from ethnographically studied communities reflecting historical continuity with Paquimé, as well as being ubiquitous throughout the general cultural area’s historic and prehistoric occupations.

John Kelly and James Brown similarly draw on continuities between past and present indigenous North American peoples, invoking the animist cosmologies, oral traditions, ritual and vision quest practices of contemporary people of the eastern Woodlands to help elucidate the meanings of basalt and red cedar recovered from Cahokia, an ancient city in the sacred landscape of the St. Francois Mountains along the central Mississippi river. Their engagement with living peoples' worldviews and spiritual traditions in order to help interpret the material evidence from Cahokia, alongside scientific analysis of the finds and their environmental context, again demonstrates the role ethnographic data may play.

The chapters in the third part, "Playing the Field: Archaeology, Ethnography and Oral Traditions", also draw experimentally on the tools and perspectives of multiple disciplines. Victor Paz explores continuities linking past and contemporary cultures in the context of Palawan Island in the Philippines, addressing explicitly the debate about whether ethnographic analogies can reasonably be used to propose cultural continuity over a time gap of millennia. He notes that amidst the flourishing of alternatives to exclusively positivist approaches and the vogue for multivocality, attempts to understand past spiritualities are now regarded more favourably and optimistically within archaeology, but the task is no less daunting or demanding of scholarly rigour and caution. Paz's novel approach is to track and decipher the "collective unconscious" in the material record as it is represented, for example, in specific cultural elements such as artefacts, landscape forms, motifs, and symbols. Following what he calls "a cautious trail", he lays out an approach he believes will link the ethnographic present to the deep past through a chain of reasoning demonstrated from an archaeological context in linear time. It is no accident, he concludes, that some sites remain ritually significant over long periods and through several changes of culture.

In Estonia, says Tõnno Jonuks, some holy sites have been used for almost two millennia, but their meanings, and the places themselves, have changed constantly. There are other holy places which have been abandoned or re-introduced with changes in religion or habitation patterns. Holy places or *hiis*—hillocks, flat areas, depressions, valleys, swamps, and wetlands—generally lack archaeological artefacts and other features, and thus since the end of the nineteenth-century oral traditions have been the main source used to identify and interpret them. In spite of the difficulties of dating folklore (meaning that *hiis* can seem to pertain to a timeless past), its unquestioned (and consequently problematic) aura of "authenticity" and tendency to represent an ideal world, and the use of stereotypical, romantic motifs influenced by literature, Jonuks believes nineteenth- and twentieth-century oral traditions can be useful in the study of *hiis*. More adventurously, he suggests that by analyzing archaeological material and using various holy sites known from folklore as analogues, it may be possible to find places once religiously important but which folklore has disappeared over time.

Emília Pásztor traces analogies between symbols found on Bronze Age jewellery from the Carpathian Basin and Near Eastern symbols of celestial divinities, particularly Ishtar/Astarte, who by that stage represented the planet Venus. Similarities in the symbols, along with evidence of an amber trade between the

Baltic and ancient Syria, Pásztor says, suggest an ancient connection between the two. Moreover, she argues, the Venus motif, apparently related to fertility and protection in the Near Eastern belief system, is still found in the Carpathian Basin (on Hungarian folk jewellery, shirt embroidery and carvings, for example), and in ethnographic contexts it continued to have broadly analogous meanings pertaining to magical protection against the evil eye, healing, and fertility well into the twentieth century. Again, however, the problems associated with positing continuity signal a need for caution. While recent or contemporary evidence of the use of such symbols may invite interesting propositions about continuity, local diversity in their forms and meanings is a reminder of the need to recognize symbols' transformation in different historical, cultural, and geographic contexts.

Finally, the fourth part, "Embodied Spiritualities: The Case of the Minoans", presents novel analytical and methodological approaches to the archaeology of Minoan Crete. Lucy Goodison argues that archaeologies of spirituality will remain marginalized unless archaeologists explicitly problematize the Judaeo-Christian religious legacy, especially its features of monotheism, anthropomorphism, and transcendence, in terms of how they influence the customary thinking of Western people in general, and archaeologists' interpretations of prehistoric religions—in this case, Early Minoan religion—in particular. She critiques interpretations positing goddesses or a single goddess in the Early Minoan period, claiming such misreadings reflect the Judaeo-Christian legacy in Western thinking rather than the material record, which depicts humans, trees, animals, mythological and hybrid beings in apparently ritual contexts in ways suggestive of entirely different relationships between humans and other-than-human beings. Goodison believes that for archaeological narratives about embodiment to gain traction, a new model for understanding the Early Minoans is needed—one grounded in a sacred, animate topography comprising diverse beings, engaged in dynamic "transactions" in conjunction with critical or special moments in time.

Peatfield and Morris' work is located firmly within current archaeological interest in the body and embodiment, and in experiential and experimental methodologies. While archaeologists working on the Cretan Bronze Age have long accepted the importance of ecstatic rituals in Minoan religion, Peatfield and Morris reflexively explore the usefulness of such ritual as a contemporary epistemology with explanatory power. They take the "vocabulary of ecstasy", traditionally accepted by researchers only as an intellectual idea, and translate it into an embodied research tool which can assist the investigation of Minoan religious practices. Their chapter explores issues raised by their experimentation with shamanic practices at peak sanctuary sites, the apparent tension between objective and subjective analysis, and the role of the performative and experience in archaeological enquiry.

Finally, Simandiraki-Grimshaw, a scholar of Greek origin, picks up issues discussed in the previous two chapters regarding goddesses and theism, the use of diverse epistemologies, and issues of embodiment. She critically and reflexively reviews a range of approaches to the Minoans, alongside those of archaeologists, and presents an insider's perspective on the role of Minoan Crete in the construction of Cretan identity. Simandiraki-Grimshaw concludes that it is "neither feasible nor

ethical to treat Minoan religion and ritual as artefactual domains devoid of embodied spiritual experiences”. However, she cautions, archaeologists should not imagine they can replicate the embodied spiritual experiences of Minoan people. Rather, archaeologists’ bodies can be employed as tools in a more holistic sense than traditionally accepted within the discipline, offering, in conjunction with other tools, expanded opportunities for robust interpretations of the material remains of the past. Here, she echoes Goodison’s conclusion, and Peatfield and Morris’s praxis, that “embodied spiritualities call for embodied archaeologists”.

The intention of this volume is to open a space to explore critically and reflexively archaeology’s encounter with diverse cultural and temporal expressions of religion and spirituality, and to offer a platform for innovative analytical approaches and experimental methodologies in this area of the discipline. While of primary interest to archaeologists, we anticipate that the book will also interest scholars in the anthropology and sociology of religion (especially given the incorporation of ethnographic material in the analyses of a number of authors), religious studies, theology, and consciousness studies. Most of the chapters began life as papers offered in the “Archaeology of Spiritualities” stream of WAC-06, held at University College Dublin in July 2008. Several additional authors were invited to contribute chapters because of their pertinent and very interesting research in this area. It has been our pleasure to work with all of them, and we thank them warmly for engaging with the spirit of the volume and their contributions to the archaeology of spiritualities.

Kathryn Rountree



<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4614-3353-8>

Archaeology of Spiritualities

Rountree, K.; Morris, C.; Peatfield, A.A.D. (Eds.)

2012, XVI, 277 p. 42 illus., 29 illus. in color., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4614-3353-8