

Session title: ARCHAEOLOGICAL IMAGINATIONS OF RELIGION

Organizers: Thomas Meier, University of Jena, Germany
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Time: Friday morning

Room:

Session abstract:

The religious beliefs of prehistoric societies are facing a growing archaeological interest during the last years. Cognitive approaches to the prehistoric mind play an important part within the set of post-processual archaeologies. Currently some cognitive archaeologists try a cross-over with actual studies of the neuro-sciences as well.

Underlying assumptions of archaeologists on the general nature and characteristics of religion, however, have less been an object of reflection. These assumptions strongly influence the results of any archaeology of religions. Therefore, this session sets out to reflect and explore how archaeologists think and argue about prehistoric religious beliefs. Likewise we ask, which scientific concepts might be viable to properly approach prehistoric religions.

The role of religion in prehistoric societies: In general we assume that religion played a strong role in pre-modern societies. This assumption is based on ethnographic parallels as well as on an evolutionary perception of European history starting from unity of religion and the social order and developing through separation of religion and society down to secularisation and ending up in a modern a-religious society.

But: Why do we assume that pre-modern European and ethnographic societies are representative of any prehistoric society? Why do we analytically separate the sacred and the profane, while we assume that both aspects were much more intertwined than today? What stops us from (re)constructing a prehistoric society to be secular and/or “a-religious”?

The kind of prehistoric religion: Religious systems as (re)constructed by archaeologists cover a broad spectrum of “types”. They range from hierarchically structured pantheons through monotheistic concepts like the Great Mother or the Lord of Animals to animism with spirits peopling this world – and also comprise any kind of blend from these “proto-types”. In some cases archaeologists believe in a complex religious topography (e.g. a tripartite system with a realm of deities, a realm of the living, a realm of the dead/ancestors), which quite often is structured vertically (sky/air, surface of the earth, interior of the earth); in other cases humans and religious beings live in the same and only world.

But: How far do Christian concepts (e.g. patriarchal monotheism, heaven and hell) influence our imagination of prehistoric religions? How far do modern pagan concepts (e.g. animism) influence our imagination of prehistoric religions? How far do pre-modern, but European ideas (e.g. correspondence of macro- and micro-cosmos, sympathetic concept) influence our imagination of prehistoric religions?

The definition of religious objects: It is one of the great methodological problems in archaeology to ascertain the religious meaning of an object. Generally an object is suspected of having a religious meaning, if we are not able to explain it along the rationalities of economy, ecology, sociology or aesthetics. Usual objects may be suspected of having a religious meaning or use in a religious ritual, if they were treated in a way, which excludes their further use in everyday life.

But: How do we justify these assumptions, which are responsible for defining an object to have a religious meaning? Why do intentional destruction and/or irreversible deposition hint to religious activities? Why do we regard irrational behaviour to be religious and what do we mean by “irrational”?

The definition of sacred sites: An exceptional monument (e.g megalith) or the deposition of objects puts the question for the special virtues of the site: Why in this place and not in another one? In the wake of landscape studies we prefer to refer to eye-catching topographical features (e.g. bogs and springs, rocks, caves), which could have attracted religious actions. In return, we attribute a concept of “natural sacredness” to such topographical features, arguing with such “sacredness” in favour of the religious meaning of archaeological features in this site. Thus archaeological material and topographical features are backing up each other to have religious meanings.

But: How could we argue for a topographical dimension of religion? Why should religious actions and topography be related to each other? How could we properly argue for a religious meaning of topographical features? What does “natural sacredness” mean, how do we define such sacredness and how could we scientifically argue for a place having been perceived as a sacred site? What, finally, is the difference between a scientific and an esoteric concept of “natural sacredness”?

Paper abstracts:

INTRODUCTION

Petra Tillessen, University of Munich, Germany, and Thomas Meier, University of Jena, Germany

SACRED SITES: A TYPOLOGY OF FACTIONS

Thomas Meier, University of Jena, Germany, and Petra Tillessen, University of Munich, Germany

The recognition of prehistoric sacred sites has been in the centre of archaeological interest since its very beginnings. Some apparent sacred sites like the megalithic monuments of Malta, Stonehenge and Carnac have not the least influenced the scientific development of our discipline. Sometimes scientific criteria for sacred sites have been discussed explicitly. In many cases, however, these criteria (partly) do not become apparent, but may be deduced from the vocabulary, metaphors etc used by an author. Regardless whether being made explicit or deduced, all of these criteria refer to patterns of religious plausibility at least of the writer and (hopefully) of his audience as well. Therefore time-related imaginations of prehistoric religiousness to a high degree dictate which places are regarded as prehistoric sacred sites. This

paper sets out to contextualize four types of such time-related imaginations that have deeply influenced our perception of prehistoric religiousness: irrationality, deduction, hierophany and goodness of fit. Each of them is clearly anchored in its specific modern sense of time and, therefore may be termed “fiction” in regard to an objectively existing prehistoric religion. Nevertheless, each of these types led to the recognition of “real” prehistoric sacred sites becoming scientific “facts”. Taking a constructivist point of view these types may therefore be termed “fictional facts” or “factions” (O. Stone) – being fictional, but having the power to create facts.

SACRED WORLDS OR SACRED COWS? CAN WE PARAMETERIZE PAST RITUALS?

John Bintliff, Leiden University, The Netherlands

Whilst it has been traditional to show scepticism about the tendency for archaeologists to label as 'ritual' anything unusual or hard to explain in everyday terms, the emphasis in recent years towards less clinical and more emotional engagement with the Past has led to almost everything becoming a form of conscious symbolic behaviour. Is it however possible to separate with any clarity what is merely 'the Other' in past material remains from what was genuinely religious or otherwise symbolic? This paper will introduce Wittgenstein's 'toolbox' as one way forward, and compare it with Renfrew's project to anchor ritual into measurable dimensions for the purposes of archaeological interpretation. Finally the confusion caused by the possibility that the practical and ritual usually interpenetrated each other in past daily life will be addressed.

HISTORY- AND PHENOMENOLOGY OF RELIGION

Ulla Odgaard, Sila – The Greenland Research Centre at the National Museum of Denmark, Denmark

When we want to discuss prehistoric religion, we must realise that the definition of 'religion' has been discussed for centuries, but until now no consensus has been reached, and there is a risk that we are not talking about the same thing. I will, however, argue that by comparing with known religious societies, we are in some cases able to recognize patterns in the archaeological material, which can give an idea of the type of religious ideology that structured prehistoric society.

There has been a tendency among archaeologists to interpret every prehistoric symbolic expression as 'shamanism', but this oversimplification is trivializing the discussion. Although most religions imply elements of shamanism, the interpretation of societal organizing principles as 'shamanistic' should only be ascribed to societies within specific frameworks, which are archaeologically detectable.

One tool that could enrich the study of prehistoric religious meaning, without attributing the archaeological material to any specific religion, is phenomenology of religion. Phenomenology of religion views religion as being made up of different components, and studies these components across religious traditions

so that an understanding of them can be gained. In this paper I will explore how the study of religious components can inspire archaeological interpretation.

TOPOGRAPHIC DIMENSIONS TO THE SÁMI NATURAL SACRED PLACES

Tiina Äikäs, University of Oulu, Finland

Sámi ritual sites represent the ancient world view and religion of the hunter gatherers and reindeer herders. Therefore they are in many ways important research branch in the Sámi archaeology, especially because of their symbolic value for the present day Sámi communities.

Types of the Sámi ritual sites are numerous. They can broadly be divided into three groups: terrain formations, natural objects and structures. From the written sources the most well known are perhaps the sieidi-stones, unshaped stones have been used for offering rituals. There are also many fell tops, islands, and lakes which have been regarded as sacred places. Most of the information about sieidis has been gathered by the priests in the 17th and 18th century but some of them have been used even couple of generations ago. Nevertheless they are part of a long tradition dating back to prehistory.

It has been indicated that sieidis are eye-catching landscape dominants. They have also been described as liminal places that are hard to be reached. The aim of my study is to use GIS-based topographic analyses to test these claims. Location in the landscape and the accessibility are taken into consideration.

RELIGION AND RITUAL PRACTICE IN NEOLITHIC EUROPE

Peter F. Biehl, University of Buffalo, USA

In this paper, I will re-evaluate theories and methodologies applied to the archaeology of religion stressing the symbolic meaningfulness of material culture, place and landscape. In a case study - the Neolithic enclosures of the first half of the 5th millennium BC in Europe - I will use a contextual approach to highlight that ritual practices function at both a community and at an individual level, and as social and communicative acts. I will also demonstrate that ritual practice ought to be contextualized with the material culture and the place associated with it in order to better understand and theorize its complex meaning in prehistoric religious life. Here, I will focus on the concept of 'cult places' and their complex role regarding religious beliefs – as prescribed ways of understanding – and ritual practices – as prescribed ways of behaving. But I will also discuss the agency of such places regarding identity, memory, and experience.

IMAGINING ANIMALS IN PREHISTORIC RELIGION AND THE MODERN WEST

Erica Hill, University of Alaska Southeast, USA

Twenty-first-century Western urban society categorizes animals in exclusive terms; that is, animals are either food (cattle, pigs, chickens) or pets (dogs, cats, parrots) or entertainment (elephants, tigers, pandas). For most modern Westerners, animals have no place in religious practice. (Zoo)archaeologists in North America tend to categorize animal remains from the past in similar ways, generally assuming a subsistence role unless the evidence is ambiguous in some way, therefore indicating ritual.

Ethnographic evidence indicates that animals played complex, overlapping roles of food, sacred objects, and mythic creatures. In this paper, I suggest that we misunderstand the roles animals played in religion because we have no modern Western analogs. Perhaps our neglect of animals as religious objects derives from the fact that there is no place for animals in modern Western religion; likewise, our search for 'prehistoric pets' reflects the importance we place upon canine companionship today. The recent interest in feasting may represent one of the acceptable ways to imagine animals—that is, as food items, despite the fact that the animals consumed often appear to have religious meanings as well. This paper will take a critical look at our neglect of animals in past religions and advocates greater attention to animals as ritual objects and mythic subjects.

“SENDING OFF THE ANIMALS”? ETHNOGRAPHY, ANIMISM AND THE RITUAL MANIPULATIONS OF ANIMAL BONES: ANY RELEVANCE FOR MESOLITHIC HUNTER-GATHERERS?

Anja Mansrud, University of Oslo, Norway

Ethnographic inquiries among hunter-gatherers demonstrate that economic, ideological, cosmological and religious aspects are intertwined to such an extent that they can hardly be separated: food procurement is not merely the mechanical exploitation of animals and the environment to obtain food, it is a religious activity. Rather than exploiting the environment, “animistic” hunter-gatherers are said engage in a dialogue with it, stressing a relational continuity between humans and animals where animals are considered as fellow-subjects rather than objects. Animal body parts are often perceived as animated, or believed to have intrinsic powers that constitute an activating agency. Ritual manipulations of animal bones are a common feature in circumpolar hunting rituals, integral to the reproductive cycles of both animals and humans. Archaeologically, the link between the ideological/religious superstructures and the meaning of such material expressions are more problematic to handle. The aim of this contribution is to explore whether this holistic understanding of “religion”, the use of ethnographic parallels, and analytical concepts such as animism, is beneficial to the study of prehistoric hunter-gatherers. Rituals involving animal body parts and bone objects also seem to be a significant feature in the archaeological record of the Scandinavian Mesolithic (10 000-5000 BP), indicating a close connection between daily subsistence practice and cosmology.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL ‘EVIDENCE’ FOR CHRISTIANITY IN ROMAN BRITAIN

Mike McCarthy, University of Bradford, UK

After a long period of relative neglect, the publication of Charles Thomas's *Christianity in Late Roman Britain* (1981) heralded a new phase in the study of the early Christian church in Britain. Whilst Thomas was well aware of the limits of inference, this cannot always be claimed for successor scholars, some of whom have gone to considerable lengths to identify objects and buildings as 'evidence' of Christian worship. What is this 'evidence'?

The formalisation of building layouts and the embedding of significance in specific images or objects to the point where they have a recognizable identity takes time. This was certainly the case with Christian worship in which ritual evolved slowly over many generations, even with the increased momentum in the Constantinian and later periods. Given this, it is worth asking whether or not inferences drawn from archaeological observations, the 'evidence', is sufficiently robust to allow us to postulate the presence of active Christians in the Roman period. Are we not simply chasing shadows in hoping to find them? Is our ability to see Christians any more or less difficult than it is with other cults in the Roman world, or that of late prehistory? We do not seek to identify adherents of Jupiter or Belatucadros. Do our expectations differ when we consider, say, beliefs in the pre-Roman Iron Age or the Roman Empire as opposed to the Christian church?