

The archaeology of holiness

Holiness and religion have always played an important role in human culture and these topics have also been widely studied in archaeology. In most of the cases these studies tend to relate to separate religious practices – rituals and cults being the most common ones – because these acts leave direct material traces that can be studied archaeologically. Another commonly used branch of the archaeology of religion is landscape studies and mostly cognitive approaches to the past landscapes. However, religion should be considered much more broadly than just a collection of rituals and cults and without doubt there is much more to it than just the traces of material culture. When studying religion one should not dismiss its other essential component – idea of holiness as a mental part of religion. That kind of problem setting is necessary in order to think further from the research tradition that has been practiced for decades and that considers religion as a collection of separate rituals that are not incorporated or combined into broader belief system. On the other hand, the idea of the broader concepts of holiness and religion make the researchers ask about those aspects of religion that are not directly covered with archaeological data.

The session invites papers to discuss the theory and methods for studying religion and holiness in the past. What kind of religious activities and artefacts are visible in the archaeological record, how do we decode and find them in the archaeological record and how do we or should we label them? Should we study single practices or can we decode broader religious concepts and phenomena of holiness in archaeology? What is the materiality of religion and holiness? What are the limits of the nature of an archaeological record when studying past religion and holiness? Can or should we use the same concepts as anthropology and comparative religion studies and to what extent can we draw parallels and take over approaches to religion from these sciences in order to get closer to the holiness and religion in the past? Or what might be the input or a contribution to the study of religion and holiness from the archaeological perspective? What are the shared parts of materialised religion and holiness in case of archaeological and anthropological record?

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From ritual to religion – how to make the connection

During the last twenty years, a combination of new excavation techniques and an intensified research interest in religion and ritual among archaeologists, have resulted in new interesting insights. In the province of Östergötland, cult-sites from late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age have been excavated. The finds at these places are mundane and stem from the everyday sphere and the places themselves are viewed to have been of local importance, fertility and death could be underlying themes.

At these places we see a pattern of fixed components. The ritual landscape often focuses around a stream or river, a rock with cup-marks is another component. Whole sections of landscape seem to have been imbued with special meaning. The lay-out of the cult sites shows similarities; areas for cooking-pits (where the ritual meals were prepared) are essential. Some categories of objects reoccur as offerings; glass-beads or -sherds, pottery, small knives.

The written sources describe primarily religious ideas and cult connected to the élite. Did the same underlying ideas exist in all strata of Iron Age society? How can we as archaeologists use these sources when studying other strata than the élite? What is their relevance? How can we deal with the fact that most of the written sources are 1000 years younger than the time-period in question? Can we give plausible interpretations of religious ideas by combining archaeology, written sources and folkloristic research? Or should we solely focus on reconstructing the rituals?

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Magic as revealed by archaeological material

It seems that differently from ritual or cult, magic has not been used in archaeological interpretations as often and perhaps this is why the picture formed shows magic as comparatively uniform, expressed in strange and outside norms activities. However, the actual situation is more close to the contrary – magic includes ordinary, daily practices that cannot be classified as exceptional. Nevertheless, magic is not routinely repeated, but rather practiced when and where needed. Therefore, representations of magic can be found from the archaeology of „daily life“ more than can be expected in the first glance, however, they are more explicitly expressed by specific finds (e.g. fossils or Stone Age artefacts from clearly medieval contexts), but expressions of magic can be found in „ordinary“ objects (e.g. glass sherds, natural pebbles etc.) as well.

In my presentation I will explore the perception of magic in Estonia according to historical sources as well as seek for the implications of magical behavior in archaeological material.

Can we trace magical behavior back into prehistoric times? And what it is that must be looked for in this case? What has magic been and how has it been understood?

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Finding folk religion – An archaeology of strange behaviour

Archaeology is not only about describing things, we seek to understand what we find. So when we find for example an animal skull which is apparently deliberately concealed in the constructs of a building, among the first questions we ask is why this has been done. When we are dealing with historical finds, some help can be found from folklore records or other sources of our neighbouring disciplines. Still archaeology can offer something not accessible to these other disciplines.

This paper will discuss the ways we can take to finding the meanings behind the material remains of practices that may perhaps seem odd to us. This will be done from the perspective of concealments in buildings during historical times, but with a wider connection to matters of folk religion. Another question addressed is why we might be surprised to find evidence of “strange” practices in historical contexts.

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Holiness entwined: sacrifice or offer?

The terms and concepts used in archaeology of religion often tend to contain some fluidity and vagueness. One of such pair of concepts is the notion of sacrifice and offer. In the paper I will introduce how these two terms have been used in archaeology. I also analyse what is their background and definition in other social sciences and humanities. Through latter I am hoping to point out what might be the differences between these two concepts on definitional, including mental and material level. Thereafter I would like to discuss how can these differences be traced in material culture alone i.e. if and on what basis can we separate those two concepts in archaeological research and interpretation at all. The wider aim is to open a discussion whether and how holiness as a concept is reflected in the material culture.

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What is hidden in the ritual?

The study of religion and holiness in past societies has a long tradition within the field of archaeology. In previous research, scholars often focused on source-critical aspects, like how to identify offerings in the archaeological record. However, in the last two decades – due to new theoretical approaches – there has been a change of attitude towards the archaeological study of pre-Christian religious practices. Here, the identification and interpretation of ritual actions has been much debated.

According to Catherine Bell, rituals did not serve only as religious practices, but were also used by different agents as strategies to create and reproduce social or power relations. Thus, if we want to better understand sites of holiness and cult activities in past societies we need to look at ritual actions not only as an expression of religious beliefs, but as social strategies.

What rituals were performed on the site? What purposes did they serve and for whom? Who were the agents and what interests did they want to maintain? I will try to address these questions in my paper, through the recent excavations of a settlement- and sacrificial site complex, dating from the Early Iron Age and Viking Age at Lindängelund Malmö, in southern Sweden.

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Ritual function of fine grained lithic raw materials around Lake Tana of Northwest Ethiopia: Some insight on prehistoric exchange

When the word exchange is raised in the academic discourse, the idea that we immediately recognize is most often the economic significance of the items exchanged or utilized in the transaction. This seems straight forward particularly with regard to prehistoric lithic raw material circulation and exchange. Yet, such close association may not always signal direct material functions of items and activities exercised. Beyond direct functional necessity, its role could be associated with deep seated cultural and social values and belief systems which did indeed shape and guide society's survival and activity since prehistory. Tracing and reconstructing these from archaeological data is however very challenging and often leads scholars to focus primarily on utilitarian functions. The ethnographic study I conducted among dwellers of Lake Tana region demonstrates that fine grained lithic raw materials are being utilized for different ritual purposes. And this may have archaeological implications such that the

circulation of fine grained lithics in prehistory could also have been influenced by socio-cultural and symbolic motives.

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To be or not to be... a Christian. Once again about the Christianisation of Estonia

Christianisation has been one of the major research issue not only in Estonia but more widely in North-Europe. There are several reasons for this – many more and direct sources are known about the Christianisation, which introduces a new era and simultaneously represents a new type of religion compared to the earlier ones. Pending on this Christianisation has been studied from different perspectives and various results are presented on the basis of different sources.

For Estonian archaeologists Christianity before the 13th century crusade has been the major topic. According to the dominant opinion throughout the 20th century the inhabitants of Estonia were familiar with Christianity and Christian influences existed in Estonian Late Iron Age religion. However, the scope and the meaning of these influences has not been discussed. Methodology so far has focused on „christian burials“ and the presence of cross-pendant, lack of proper grave-goods and western orientation of the grave have all been stressed as characteristic to Christian burial.

Few years ago a 13th century cemetery was excavated at Kukruse, North-East Estonia. Here, it can be speculated, that despite of a rich selection of grave goods some of the people buried there probably considered themselves as Christians. Having this in mind I would like to raise a question in my presentation, which aspect should be regarded more important when studying past religions: our seemingly objective criteria or our speculative interpretations about those people.

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Cairns and Rites of Corporeal Passage

The study addresses questions regarding materiality of religion and holiness. Taking an anthropological approach, it focuses on cairns which have been the result of religious reverence paid on particular holy points along routes. Comparative review shows that the materiality of religion has in this case condensed in mere ordinary stones added on significant thresholds in the landscape, and that this practice, or rite of corporeal passage, eventually produced cairns all around the world. Global occurrence and regional parallels indicate that the practice may have relevance to archaeology, whose

key interests include cairns made both during the historical time and before it. It may be assumed that some of the archaeologically investigated ambiguous stone heaps have accumulated on places of perceived significance and are thus one of the shared things of materialized religion and holiness between archaeological and anthropological record. However, while archaeology might perceive such cairns as important in their monumentality, anthropological record suggests that from the perspective of the individual, the greatest meaning was incorporated in the location and a single stone added on them. The religious element of these cairns is invisible in the archaeological record, but with the essence and the key variables suggested by anthropology, they can be jointly interpreted as a phenomenon whose existence in time and space requires first of all archaeological input.

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