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Session ID

33

Session Title

Reassessing the Archaeology of Religion

Start Time

Tue Dec 17 14:00:00

Room

Clarke Hall (Level 3)

Archaeologists generally discuss religion via two paths: the tangible material manifestations of religious practice and intangible theory based upon modern reconstructions. This session aims to unite material and theory to present a holistic view of religion. The focus will be on the theoretical and methodological problems at the foundation of archaeologies of religion, including definitions of religion in archaeology, the application of concepts and methods from the study of religion to archaeology, and the archaeological contribution to knowledge about religion(s). Historically, religious practices were integrated into all other practices within almost all culture groups, and our theoretical discussions need to begin to address the entanglements within the material culture we uncover and the cultures we reconstruct. Furthermore, the session will ask how archaeological knowledge of religion(s) is produced and involved in broader discourses in academia and beyond. This session aims to bring together a wide range of research, both geographically and temporally, to provide a rounded conversation that ultimately addresses how archaeologists can reconstruct religion.

14:00 Session organisers

Introduction

14:10 Sophia Marques, University College London

When is it useful to do an archaeology of religion?

It has long been argued that “religion” is not a useful descriptor except when consciously imposed as an academic construct. Going farther, this paper questions the utility of even this imposition. The goals of archaeologies of religion can be broadly divided between a desire to learn more about “religion” as a concept through cross-cultural comparisons, or about a particular culture by understanding its “religion”. I argue that with rare exceptions, the category of “religion” is unlikely to benefit either goal. In the first section I assess various limitations that have left definitions of “religion” largely ineffective. Many of these limitations are common to all imposed categories, but others are unique to “religion” because of the important role it plays in modern identity politics. Without a definition of “religion”, academic imposition and comparative studies are not viable and “religion” can only be studied in cultures that have a distinct emic conception of the category. However, if the material evidence studied in archaeologies of religion were reconceptualised along different boundaries, it could be incorporated into more theoretically sound methodologies and do more for our understanding than it currently does under “religion”. While this requires the complete deconstruction of the category, it would not constitute a discipline-ending conceptual shift. In the second section, through a review of current interpretive approaches to the material evidence, I conclude that many remain suitable. Thus, little in the way we study the topic would need to change if “religion” were in this way reconceptualised.

14:25 Ross McIntire, University of York

In the Footsteps of the Saints: Buildings, Sacred Landscapes, and the Pilgrims’ Experience beyond the Shrine

A key facet of the development of sacred sites in the medieval period, particularly in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, was the imposition of stone-built buildings into the landscape. While the vast majority of study of the materiality of saints’ cults and pilgrimage has focused on either the shrine settings or the souvenirs pilgrims took along with them, there is significant evidence that some of these buildings and sites they marked might have also been used to shape the pilgrims’ experience and achieve greater access to saints in both their life and afterlife. Some of these buildings and their immediate surroundings still exist, while other can be cautiously recovered through archaeological investigation. In addition, a number of the sites can be corroborated or identified through specific place-name references in contemporary hagiography and historical writing.

I will examine this phenomenon as it can be detected the landscapes surrounding St Davids Cathedral in Wales and the monastery of St Kevin at Glendalough in Co. Wicklow, Ireland. Both sites feature a network of chapels and other ecclesiastical monuments at a distance from their cathedrals, which can be identified as marking places of significance to their patron saints and their familia in both life and death. It is a distinct possibility that these sites were promoted through both hagiographical material and word of mouth to provide a richer pilgrimage experience, particularly on a saint’s feast day.

14:40	Simon Kaner, Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures; Andrew Hutcheson, Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures	Nara to Norvic: the Arrival of Belief, religion and archaeology at the extremities of the Silk Roads AD 500-1000	<p>This paper will discuss a wide-ranging comparative study of the material cultures and landscapes associated with the adoption of Buddhism in Japan and Korea and the conversion to Christianity around the North Sea. We are embarked on a comprehensive reassessment of the historical and archaeological evidence for the spread of these two religions into regions at either end of the Eurasian landmass. In both places there were existing beliefs with time-depth that can only be explored archaeologically. Shinto in Japan flourished alongside Buddhism throughout the long history of the Japanese state and was closely connected with the deification of the Imperial Family. We will examine the evidence from the sacred Island of Okinoshima, off the coast of Kyushu, and compare it with archaeological sites around the North Sea where pre-Christian religious activity is inferred to have taken place. Clearly religion around the North Sea and understanding the associated beliefs is elusive. Votive offerings and structured deposits in both situations offer insights into the materiality of belief. A comparative approach, used reflexively, we argue, has the potential to offer insights into belief and intention.</p> <p>How the two religions affected state formation and gave rise to new forms of monumentality is also being explored in this work, with the abandonment of mounded tombs in favour of other types of burial practices and the development of temples, churches and urban forms. The role and impact of monasticism and the clergy will be examined through the nature and materiality of early monastic life, including the gendering of religious experience.</p>
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14:55	Peter Kahlke Olesen, University of Copenhagen	Rock Art and Ritual Drama in Bronze Age Scandinavia: Image, Myth, and Ritual in Comparative Religion	<p>There is a long tradition of interpreting the Bronze Age rock carvings of Scandinavia in terms of religion. In a broad sense, a discourse has persisted that groups the images into one of two categories, “mythological” and “ritual”. One ascribes the carvings to transempirical agents and narratives; another relates them to actions performed by human agents. Although it is widely acknowledged that both “mythological” and “ritual” elements are present in the images, the classification itself is rarely challenged.</p> <p>I will argue that the dichotomy between “transempirical” and “real” elements in the rock carvings fundamentally misses the nature of ritual images, in particular images connected with ritual drama. By drawing on examples from comparative religion, I will show how images mediate between the different levels of ritual drama. In this mode of action, the distinction between the mythical and the real is collapsed, and the image is uniquely suited for materializing this ontological fusion.</p> <p>I will examine a number of rock carvings from southern Sweden in order to show that there is meaningful continuity between transempirical and empirical elements in the images. By analyzing them in the framework of visual ritual drama, I will argue that the rock carvings offer a prime insight into the semantic heart of Bronze Age ritual.</p>
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15:40	Tõnno Jonuks, Estonian Literary Museum	The problem of analogies – East-European perspective to the archaeology of religion	<p>When building up interpretations about religions in archaeology we often use analogies from other contexts – be these from contemporary culture, anthropological examples or other archaeological contexts. Depending on their historical and cultural background archaeologists tend to draw analogies from different sources. Differently from the Western European archaeology tradition and due to multiple historical reasons the folk tradition and oral histories are the preferred sources for interpreting past religions across the entire East Europe. In addition, the Estonian (and Finnish) archaeologies have traditionally favoured analogies from the (eastern) Finno-Ugric peoples. As a result, interpretations of past religions in Europe have often developed into so different directions and are thus difficult to combine.</p> <p>On the basis of East-European archaeologies of religion in general and Estonian archaeology in particular, this paper seeks to summarize the usage of analogies in the archaeology of religion. The emphasis is set on how the choice of analogy shapes our understandings of past religions and how interpretations of similar archaeological contexts depend on analogies that may influence our understanding also unintentionally.</p>
15:55	Zenta Broka-Lāce, Institute of Latvian History, University of Latvia	Ancient Latvian Religion: Attempts to Reconstruct "Pagan" Religious Praxes in 20s and 30s of the 20th Century	<p>As far as science can tell, we do not know what exactly the religion of ancient inhabitants of Latvia was like. There is no continuity of those traditions and there are no written religious texts. Few written sources that were made by Christians who tried to convert Latvian tribes to their beliefs lack trustworthy explanations, all we know – from the western Christian view Latvian tribes were pagans with barbaric rituals when they met them around 12th to 13th century.</p> <p>When Latvia gained its independence (18th of November, 1918) there appeared to be many people who wanted independence also from Christian Church (mainly Lutheran), which at some point was seen as a symbol of oppression, something foreign and incompatible with Latvianness. The ruling nationalist agenda was a fertile soil for new religious movement – Dievturība – to grow. In 1925 a Latvian intellectual who was also one of the most notable hillfort researchers in Latvia Ernests Brastiņš (1892-1942) with his followers created a religion that claimed to be the pre-Christian historical Latvian religion.</p> <p>Despite historical collisions, Dievturi are still thriving and evolving their ritual praxis. It is noteworthy to investigate what role archaeology has played in this particular reconstructionist religion and how far it is possible to adjust archaeological facts to fit the narrative, furthermore, what influence it has left on modern Latvian state and the views/ beliefs people hold about their past. Even the Preamble of the Constitution of Latvia since 2014 emphasizes the special role of Latvian-like life-wisdom (Latviskā dzīvesziņa – a term widely used by Dievturi) that has been influential in shaping Latvian identity.</p>
16:10	John Soderberg, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, Denison University	Why does the archaeology of religion need a biology of religion?	<p>The study of religion is bifurcated between humanistic and biological perspectives. Within archaeology, the recent surge of interest in religion has run primarily along humanistic channels, with attention focused on practice-based approaches to embodied experience, non-human agency, and entanglement with landscapes. But, for the most part, archaeologists have either explicitly rejected biological insights or simply found them of little relevance. While dismissals may be based on valid concerns with biological theories, the lack of engagement creates the curious circumstance that theories about religion as bodily doings ignore what bodies physically do.</p> <p>Disengagement is due in part to the inability of biological perspectives to take on-board insights about the contingent nature of the self that are the centerpiece of contemporary humanistic approaches to religion. In the last few years, biological researchers have taken up that task. This paper explores the implications of that research for strengthening archaeologies of religion.</p>
16:25	Brooke Creager, University of Minnesota	Identifying Religious Meaning	<p>Religious materials are identified based upon context, but what do we do when a material is associated with multiple religious practices during the same time period? This challenge is explored through a case study of crystals in the fifth and sixth centuries across Europe. Crystal balls are at different times in history associated with Christianity and pagan practices in Europe. During the fifth and sixth centuries, there are a series of burials with crystal balls that suggest they had an inter-religious appeal, or were valued for perceived ritualistic use and not associated with any one belief system. In Early Anglo-Saxon England, crystals are found in select female burials in Kent and East Anglia associated with other materials identified as amulets suggesting they were an important ritual item. At the same time they appear in Anglo-Saxon burials, they are used in the Christian contexts on the Continent. This paper explores the difficulty in identifying religious intent in grave goods when they are used in multiple burial types.</p>
16:40	Peter Kahlke Olesen, University of Copenhagen; Brooke Creager, University of Minnesota	Discussion	

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