

One World Archaeology

Kathryn Rountree  
Christine Morris  
Alan A. D. Peatfield *Editors*

# Archaeology of Spiritualities



Springer

# One World Archaeology

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# Archaeology of Spiritualities

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# 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”.<sup>1</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> “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 jewelry 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

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**Part I**  
**Life, Death and Ancestors**

# Chapter 1

## The Spirituality of Prehistoric Societies: A View from the Irish Megaliths

Muiris O'Sullivan

**Abstract** Spirituality is the inner human quality that gives meaning to life and provides motivation to keep going even in darkest times. Being at the core of personal and group identity, it is closely intertwined with the fundamental beliefs and values that find expression in ceremonies associated with mythology and religion. It is also an essential characteristic of self-image and the relationships through which the individual or group negotiates the world. Although complementary to materiality in one's experience of life, spirituality has a material dimension in that profound spiritual experiences occasionally find expression in material symbols. Many symbols acquire the status of icons that not only represent but are believed to participate in what they portray. This underlies the offence caused by disrespect to a national flag or religious image, while also explaining how ancient religious texts are deemed "sacred scripture" and presented in specially bound and illuminated volumes. Beyond the reach of history the mythological narratives of deeper prehistoric times have "grown silent and unstated through the natural process of time" (Ó hÓgáin 1999: vii) and the original vibrancy of any extant symbols associated with them is irretrievable. That said, the stage on which these myths were set is the same landscape we inhabit today (O'Sullivan 2010). Aspects of the scenery may have changed but the underlying structure endures, as do props in the form of surviving monuments and other archaeological features. New props have continually been added over time but earlier ones survive in various phases of decay, collapse and ruin. While intrinsically valuable as gateways to the past, these ancient monuments by their location provide information on the landscape as perceived and experienced in ancient times. But a landscape feature does not have to be designed and built by humans to be incorporated into mythological narratives. Anything distinctive in the

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environment may be appropriated, especially if deemed to be mysterious, liminal or otherwise remote from the everyday. Thus, caves, mountains, distinctive rock formations or rivers might be as culturally charged as an ancient mound or a stone circle. A modern perception of the landscape, no matter how well informed, could never approach serious empathy with a Neolithic experience. Yet by examining patterns of behaviour in the context of megalithic tombs it is possible to identify issues that were taken seriously in Neolithic Ireland and thus focus dimly on the heart of fourth millennium BC spirituality.

## **From Animism to Monumentality around 4000 BC**

The human story in Ireland is normally traced to the arrival of pioneering hunter-gatherers around 7500 BC, presumably from Britain, who established a Mesolithic way of life that persisted for more than three millennia. The archaeological footprint of these societies is ephemeral but they account for more than a third of the time over which people have occupied the Irish post-glacial landscape. Before assuming that hunter-gatherer lifeways remained broadly homogeneous through that long span of time, we might consider how much our life experience corresponds with that of someone living around 1000 BC. We are conditioned to accept that social change moved more slowly in the Stone Age, but this may be a product of perspective, just as the variegated colours and forms of an island recede into a uniform tone from a long distance. There is a deficit of relevant archaeological information apart from a dramatic change in lithic technology around 5500 BC, the social implications of which are not clear. Mesolithic societies in Ireland were consistent on at least one issue: they do not appear to have made a significant monumental impact on the landscape. In the absence of built monuments, traces of ritual practices are archaeologically faint, their identification fortuitous, a case in point being the discovery of the Early Mesolithic cremations at Hermitage, county Limerick, which emerged only because of development-led excavations (Collins and Coyne 2003, 2006).

Intermittent episodes of forest clearance in Ireland during the fifth millennium BC were as nothing compared with the large-scale clearance after 4000 BC that transformed the countryside within a century or two (see Cooney 2000:37, fig. 2.4, for example). In many areas, the wooded terrain had been replaced by open grassland and a period of intensive farming was emerging, represented most dramatically by the extensive complex of co-axial fields discovered beneath blanket peat in county Mayo (e.g. Caulfield et al. 1998). The Neolithic had arrived—and the environmental transformation was matched by an equally pronounced change in material culture. A new range of lithics appeared, as did pottery, and the polished stone axe came into its own. Sturdy rectangular timber houses were constructed in a short-lived but island-wide housing boom during the thirty-seventh century BC. An increased variety of settlement types is reflected in the small number of known Early Neolithic hilltop enclosures, notably the early phases underneath the

megalithic complex at Knowth in the Boyne Valley (Eogan 1984:211–244, 1991), another at Donegore Hill, county Antrim (Mallory 1993) and a third at Magheraboy near Sligo town (see <http://www.excavations.ie/Pages/HomePage.php>). After 3500 years of relatively stable development, at least as represented in the sparse archaeological record, the centuries after 4000 BC were indeed radical, in keeping with the experience of virtually all parts of Western Europe at the transition to agriculture. And, in line with other parts of Atlantic Europe, the emergence of farming sparked a tradition of megalith building.

By the time the first megaliths appeared in Ireland, the megalithic tradition had already been established along the Atlantic seaboard of mainland Europe for approximately a thousand years. The earliest clearly attested insular versions of the tradition are known as Portal Tombs and Court Tombs, respectively. Portal Tombs are picturesque and often spectacular monuments with enormous capstones and a pronounced entrance framed by two tall portal stones over which the largest part of the capstone tends to occur (Fig. 1.1). The monument tapers towards the rear where the third of the supporting stones occurs, a comparatively lower and less imposing orthostat (Fig. 1.2). The sides and front of the structure are generally closed off by means of further large stones to form a chamber within which human remains tend to be found. In many cases, there is a residual cairn but it is the megalithic structure that catches the eye and inspires the imagination. In footprint and spaciousness, Court Tombs are generally larger than Portal Tombs, but they tend to be lower and more modest in profile. Contained within a trapezoidal cairn, their defining characteristic is a pronounced open court, ranging from full to residual, leading to a covered megalithic gallery divided into a succession of chambers. These chambers are the normal repositories of the human remains found in the Court Tombs. The significance and original role of these megaliths is normally understood in terms of their situation in the landscape, their structural qualities, the nature of the human bone and associated material deposited within them, and the manner in which Neolithic societies interacted with the monuments and the human remains.

Even allowing for the passing of generations during the course of even one or two centuries, the transformation in the environment and material culture described earlier must surely have been accompanied by profound social changes. There was undoubtedly an increase in population, probably driven in part by migrants from Britain and mainland Europe, and inherited values and beliefs were in all probability challenged by the variety of new circumstances. Fresh models of identity were almost certainly generated and a new sense of the environment and its many layers of meaning were inevitable. The effects of such tensions on core mythological beliefs and spiritual experiences are a matter of speculation, but it is interesting that the outcome in terms of ceremonial monuments blends inherited traditions with introduced ideas. Both the Court Tomb and Portal Tomb have contemporaneous parallels in Britain (see Lynch 1997, for example), and communal burial was the Early Neolithic norm in Ireland as well as Britain, but it has often been noted that the common occurrence of cremation in Irish contexts is a distinguishing feature. It is not that cremation is unknown elsewhere or that unburned human remains are



**Fig. 1.1** Portal tomb, popularly known as *Leac an Scáil*, Kilmogue, County Kilkenny. Was this envisaged as a doorway to the underworld?

absent from the Irish sites. On the contrary, inhumed bones accounted for all the Neolithic burials at the Portal Tomb at Poul nabrone in county Clare (Lynch 1988), for example, but cremation occurs with unusual frequency in the earlier prehistoric monument types in Ireland (Cooney and Grogan 1994:69, fig. 4:14) and may be a reflection of indigenous mortuary practices mirroring lingering traditional beliefs. In the same vein, it is tempting to regard these early megalithic tombs as marking locations that might, in earlier times, have been represented by clearances in the woodland, special trees or other such natural phenomena that might have lost their currency in the new environment. The Portal Tomb might be envisaged as an elaborate entrance to an imagined underworld/otherworld, bearing in mind the focus on the front “doorway” (Fig. 1.1) and the existence in many cases of a residual cairn (Lacy 1983:29–36). If so, the audience and especially the mediating ceremonial enactors were directed towards the entrance, and part of the mystique of the monument may have involved symbolic journeys into the interior, notably involving the



**Fig. 1.2** Side view of *Leac an Scáil* showing the height tapering towards the rear

deposition of human remains. The Court Tomb, although quite different in appearance, encapsulates a similar dynamic. Here the audience, or perhaps a select element of the audience, was marshalled within the court and the focus was on the entrance to the gallery where the burials occurred (Fig. 1.3). Whatever their differences in design, both of these classes of megalithic tomb would have facilitated continuing dialogue with the ancestors, standing as constant reminders of the dead. There is nothing to suggest any major differences in worldview between the builders of the two types of monuments, although their distribution while overlapping is not identical (see Waddell 1998:figs. 31 and 41) and the siting of Portal Tombs speaks of a specific interest in coasts, rivers and even streams that is not found in the case of Court Tombs (Ó Nualláin 1983). Notwithstanding these differences, the generally dispersed pattern of their combined distribution around the countryside suggests that each megalithic monument may have functioned locally in the context of a specific group defined by kinship, place or some other common trait.





**Fig. 1.3** Rathlackan Court Tomb, County Mayo, Ireland. Providing scale at the entrance to the court is Professor Seamus Caulfield, pioneering director of the Céide Fields research project. The access to the burial gallery is visible at the inner end of the court

## **Emergence of Middle Neolithic Burial Practices (c. 3500 to 3300 BC)**

A more subtle array of new ideas can be seen from the mid-fourth millennium BC onward. The common feature is an increased focus on individuals in death, which contrasts with the communal burial traditions of earlier Neolithic communities, and an apparent convergence in a specific region of the island, the heartland of which appears to have been in south Leinster and parts of Munster. Such burials are known from the Lough Gur settlement site, a cave at Annagh, and a natural rock shelter at Caherguillamore, all in county Limerick, but the normal context is a central cist covered by a carefully constructed circular cairn and/or mound (comprehensively discussed in Raftery 1974). The principal or only burial is normally unburned, sometimes disarticulated and usually an adult male. Invariably, the individual is accompanied by a decorated round-bottomed pottery vessel. Associated subsidiary burials occurred at some of these sites, and the enduring topographical and presumably cultural significance of the mounds afterwards can be gauged from the incorporation of secondary burials in some of them during the Early Bronze Age more than 1500 years later. A feature of the Middle Neolithic burial mounds is the emphasis on enclosure reflected in their design. The walls and roof of the central cist are often doubled or even trebled with additional slabs of stone; enclosing arcs of



boulders occur beneath or through the cairn and mound and the tumulus itself appears to have been ritually constructed in a succession of acts involving burning and other ceremonies. It reflects incredible attention to detail in closing off the final resting place of a single individual. One of these sites requires specific attention in the context of ideas developed below. At Ashleypark near Nenagh in county Tipperary, a pre-existing natural limestone block was modified to form part of the burial cist and this was covered by a cairn and overlying mound 26 m in diameter, surrounded by a series of ditches and banks to comprise an elaborate monument some 90 m across (Manning 1985). Within the burial cist, itself an unusually large structure measuring nearly 5 m in length, there were the bones of an elderly man and a 4–5-year-old child. The remains of an infant were also located in the cist but in a separate area approximately 3 m from the other two individuals. We can only speculate on the roles of the child and infant in the rituals around the burial of this clearly special adult, but it might help if the genetic relationship between the three individuals, if any, could be clarified. We will see below, however, that the incorporation of infant bones as an accompanying feature, grave goods perhaps, became a theme at the height of the Passage Tomb tradition a century or two later.

## Passage Tombs

Passage Tombs are the best known of all Irish Neolithic monuments and those at Newgrange, Knowth and Dowth form the core of the Boyne Valley World Heritage Site (Fig. 1.4). Archaeological excavations at both Newgrange and Knowth revealed evidence of prior Neolithic activity, including a succession of phases in the case of Knowth, but the floruit occurred in the centuries between 3300 and 3000 bc. Other sites like the Mound of the Hostages on the Hill of Tara, county Meath, Fourknocks in the same county, and Knockroe in county Kilkenny are likely to be broadly contemporaneous with this, as are British sites like Barclodiad y Gawres in Anglesey and Maes Howe in the Orkneys. That said, the origins of the Passage Tomb tradition lie shrouded in mystery. Controversial radiocarbon dates from Carrowmore in county Sligo were interpreted as proof that these Passage Tombs were some of the earliest megalithic in Europe (Burenhult 1980:111), but this claim was forensically disputed by Caulfield (1983) and is not generally accepted. Recent radiocarbon dating of bone from Carrowmore suggests that some of the Carrowmore sites may pre-date those in the Boyne Valley by a few centuries. This is not surprising as there are strong similarities between Passage Tombs and the mid-fourth millennium bc monuments discussed in the previous section (Raftery 1974; O’Sullivan 2009).

The classic Irish Passage Tomb is contained within a round mound or cairn, usually defined at the edge by a kerb of megalithic boulders (Fig. 1.5) and forming part of a cluster in which the focal cairn is larger than its satellites. The clustering varies from the tight-knit group of 18 sites at Knowth to the loosely distributed Suir Valley group in which a handful of sites extends from south Kilkenny to east Limerick with the focal cairn on the summit of Slievenamon in south Tipperary (Fig. 1.6).



**Fig. 1.4** Passage Tombs in County Meath, Ireland, showing the relationship with the Boyne River and its main tributary, the Blackwater

A Passage Tomb is usually reached along a passage from an entrance that is often highlighted architecturally. Both the chamber and passage are lined with orthostats and the passage is usually roofed with lintels (Fig. 1.7). In plan the chamber is sometimes cruciform (a specifically Irish form), occasionally stalled, or sporadically a simple quadrilateral variant. The roof components of the chamber vary from

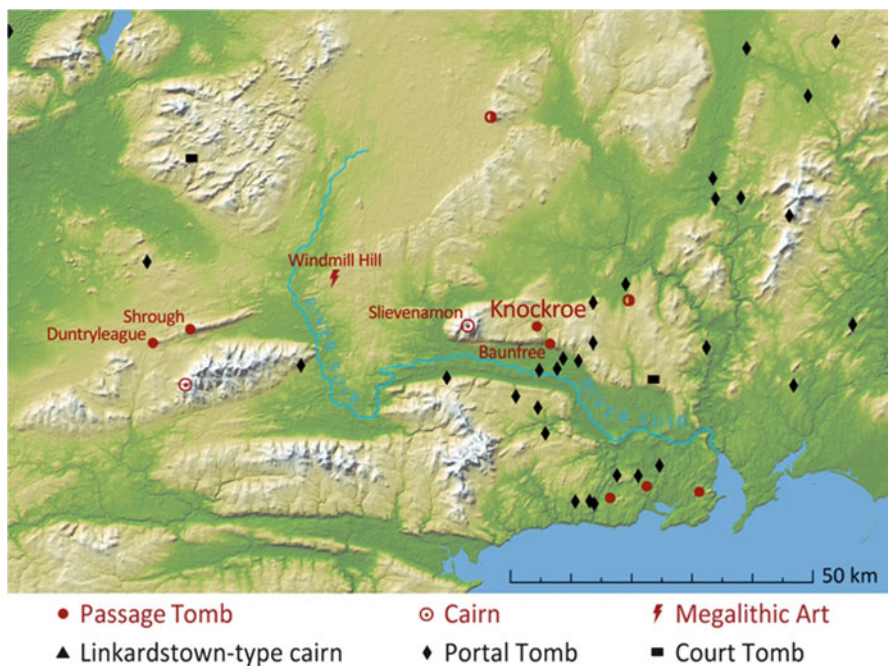


**Fig. 1.5** Aerial photograph of Knockroe passage tomb structure from the south-west prior to conservation in 2010–2011. Note the megalithic kerb, with two tombs south of the laneway

enormous lintels, as in the West Tomb at Knowth, to elaborately corbelled capping, as in the East Tomb or at Newgrange. As in the earlier megaliths, but in contrast to the closed central cist of the mid-Neolithic burial mounds, there is access from the exterior to the interior.

In spite of echoes of earlier insular traditions, the Passage Tomb of all Irish megaliths belongs to a mainstream European strand known from the south of Spain and Portugal to southern Scandinavia, including Brittany, Ireland and parts of Britain. The Irish version shares many of the general characteristics but it is also distinctly insular in several respects, most notably the emphasis on the cremation rite in human bone deposits and the development of a megalithic kerb around the perimeter of the round cairn or tumulus. Passage Tomb cairns were located in Ireland on the pinnacles of some prominent mountains as if to suggest that their builders were in a position of unique influence and privilege. The cairn on the summit of Slievenamon is a case in point (Fig. 1.8). This is constructed over a natural rock formation that is peculiarly evocative even today, raising the possibility that the





**Fig. 1.6** Passage tombs and other Neolithic sites in the Suir Valley region of south-east Ireland



**Fig. 1.7** Entrance to the Mound of the Hostages, a passage tomb on the Hill of Tara, county Meath, Ireland. Note the decorated orthostat in the interior



**Fig. 1.8** High above the Golden Vale, one of Ireland's most fertile agricultural regions, the summit of Slievenamon Mountain is capped by a cairn enveloping a natural rock formation that has fired the imagination since time immemorial

rock formation may have been regarded as significant in its own right even before the cairn was added. Its capacity to stimulate the imagination can be gauged from its incorporation into an early medieval tale about Fionn Mac Cumhaill, an iconic mythological hero (Ó hÓgáin 1990:214), and its incorporation under a presumed Neolithic cairn is a strong echo of the manner in which natural limestone blocks were incorporated into the Ashleypark monument as noted earlier. Emphasizing the unique status of Passage Tomb locations, a few evolved into some of the most prestigious and iconic ceremonial landscapes of prehistoric Ireland. In this context it is not surprising that Passage Tombs are the most vivid expressions of Neolithic spiritual and intellectual values.

## Architectural Symbolism

Even today, after 5000 years of environmental and human interventions, clued-up visitors to a Passage Tomb can appreciate the architectural prompts they encounter on their way from the exterior to the chamber. While the richness of the symbolism conveyed by these signs is beyond modern retrieval, they nevertheless indicate Neolithic attitudes and values as expressed in a communal ritual environment.

Approaching a Passage Tomb, the visitor is sometimes confronted by a cairn or grass-covered mound of the type we know in the Boyne Valley. Neolithic visitors presumably knew where the front of the monument was to be found, but even when approaching these sites today one's natural tendency is to follow the perimeter until the entrance is encountered. It seems to have been important to mark the area around the entrance with quartz and other special stones. In the case of the eastern and western tombs at Knowth, a pillar stands in front of the entrance and a number of carefully constructed saucer-shaped hollows lined with stones are also to be seen, some abutting the kerbstones. In the case of Knowth, the kerbstones increase generally in length approaching the entrances, with the entrance stone being the longest kerbstone in each case. At Newgrange and Knowth the entrance is further marked on the entrance stone by a distinctive vertical line carved on the front face. As if contradicting the attraction to the entrance area, it is normal to encounter an obstacle at the entrance itself, in the form of a kerbstone running across it (Knowth and Newgrange), a tall sillstone (east tomb at Knockroe) or a blocking of boulders (west tomb at Knockroe), the latter possibly added in the Early Bronze Age. The journey along the passage is often further interrupted by additional sillstones, notably at the entrance to the chamber, but the most interesting obstacle is a carefully designed architectural feature noted in certain cruciform structures such as Newgrange, the east tomb at Knowth and Cairn T at Loughcrew. In these cases, the succession of longitudinally aligned orthostats forming the side walls of the passage is interrupted by a double pair of transverse orthostats on which rests a dropped lintel, i.e. a comparatively narrow roofstone that rests at a lower level than those on either side of it, forcing the entrant to bow as the chamber is approached. There is no obvious structural logic for this feature and yet its consistency of design from one site to another, including the narrowing of the passage, suggests it was considered an important component, presumably as a means of enforcing an act of homage.

Immediately beyond the point at which access along the passage is obstructed by the constriction described earlier, the visitor sometimes encounters an enigmatic piece of megalithic art, a design that might be construed as a ghostly image or might equally be dismissed as a figment of the imagination. At Newgrange it occurs on Orthostat L19 and is composed of spirals, zigzags and a lozenge arranged ambiguously so that the anthropomorphic interpretation today seems like a matter of personal taste. On the other hand, as argued elsewhere (O'Sullivan 1997), there are reasons to think that this design is one of a handful in Irish megalithic art that may be highly abstracted images of a human face, possibly intended to be a mirage-like representation of a deity, tomb guardian or even the spirit of the dead located within. Equivalent icons occur at Knowth and Knockroe and at a number of Breton and Iberian sites, normally located at a threshold (e.g. beside a sillstone) as one approaches or enters the chamber. Cautious readers may be tempted to dismiss this as nostalgia for the heyday of the Eye Goddess (Crawford 1957; Gimbutas 1989) but leaving aside the identity of the being(s) represented so vaguely, it is interesting that Neolithic ritual should find expression in a ghostly representation of an otherworldly being. This is hardly surprising: belief in otherworldly powers is a deeply rooted human condition, inspiring fear and security according to circumstances but also influencing behaviour.

Within the chamber of those Passage Tombs that are cruciform in plan, another symbolic feature often occurs. This is the privileging of the right-hand side over the left by means of size, elaboration and other means. In the case of Newgrange, for instance, the right-hand recess is larger than that on the left, has two basin stones as distinct from one and is capped with a highly decorated roofstone. In the east tomb at Knowth, the right-hand recess is larger than that on the left, is entered between flanking jambstones, contains a highly decorated basin and is further enhanced by an attractive artwork pattern on the backstone. It was also at the entrance to the right-hand recess that an intricately decorated flint macehead was found. In the east tomb at Knockroe, the backstone of the right-hand recess is distinguished by large natural hollows and the lower part of a Carrowkeel bowl was discovered in this compartment. At Dowth the chamber of both the south and north tomb is more elaborate on the right-hand side than the left. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, as in other faiths, right and left are used as a symbolic code for good and evil and other such opposites. Again the symbolism of their usage in Passage Tombs is lost but the appropriation of traits normally associated with the human person for re-working in ceremonial structures betrays the importance of this right-left dichotomy in Neolithic society. It is sometimes seen as a by-product of dividing the world (*axis mundi*) by means of the axis through the length of the tomb. The interplay between opposites might also be seen in the different human experiences associated with the inside of the chamber by comparison with the outside world: an ominous mix of silence, darkness and claustrophobia removed from everyday sensory dynamics. This is the world of the abstract dead, once vibrant human beings with individual personalities now reduced to collections of fragmented cremated bone from an unknown host of ancestors. Questions abound. What scraps of mythologized memories survived the passing of even a few generations? Were the spirits still alive in the chamber as far as the Neolithic visitor was concerned? And who was the visitor? It is possible that entry to the tombs was on the agenda in everyone's life but, since the ease of access that makes Newgrange such a popular visitor attraction is exceptional, it is likely that direct access to the interior of a Passage Tomb was restricted to a select few.

## Ceremonial Practices

As with earlier megalithic tombs in Ireland, human bone was deposited in considerable quantities at Passage Tombs, sometimes representing very large numbers of people (O'Sullivan 2005:122–123). Deposition generally occurred within the chamber area but sometimes in the passage, in ancillary pre-cairn cists or even outside the cairn. Normally the bones were cremated and sometimes further reduced by pulverization, but unburned bones were also included. In the case of the Mound of the Hostages at Tara, some unburned limb bones were placed as a foundation deposit under the cairn and small samples of milled cremated bone were placed within small stone settings (mini chambers) in the ground around the perimeter of the cairn.



Through the masses of cremated bone within various compartments in the tomb area, individual unburned bones occur intermittently, of which the most poignant and common are lone limb bones from infants described anatomically as “about term”. At the Mound of the Hostages, Tara, there were many significant collections of teeth including deciduous specimens indicating children aged no more than about 7 years. A few hundred years after the primary burials but still well within the Neolithic, a cluster of unburned human skulls were placed within the passage. These findings suggest that the so-called tombs were not standard burial places but ossuaries or shrines, because they reflect what appear to be practices involving the separation of skeletons into individual bones followed by the selection of specific bones for ritual purposes (O’Sullivan 2007). This selection process undoubtedly betrays attitudes around age, gender and even humanity itself, especially in death. Death is a major transition point beyond which the personhood of an individual is replaced by an increasingly generalized memory or a legend. Perhaps the transformation and massing of the human bone in Passage Tombs is a reflection of this generalization process. Here we come close to the intangible communal spirituality of Passage Tomb society. If only we knew what it all means!

In Passage Tombs the human remains were consistently accompanied by a distinctive array of artefacts. The most obvious were pottery vessels, round-bottomed bowls known as Carrowkeel Ware, a coarsely gritted fabric decorated all over with arcs of stab-and-drag ornament. These are so distinctive to the Passage Tombs that their rare discovery in other contexts links those contexts very strongly with the Passage Tomb tradition. Understandably, the vessels normally survive as fragments but they also survived intact in two protected pre-cairn cists at the Mound of the Hostages, Tara. The contrast in their sizes is remarkable (O’Sullivan 2005:plate 1, lower), the larger having a diameter of c. 25 cm at the rim, which is four times the diameter of the smaller bowl. We might ask whether this reflects age, status, devotional intent or some more practical differential such as the amount of bone to be transported in the respective bowls. Other accompanying artefacts include beads and pendants, perforated objects presumed to have been more or less interchangeable items of decoration until it was realized that pendants, by contrast with beads, are often made from exotic material (O’Sullivan 2007:171, table 22.1), a trend not confined to Ireland (e.g. Barrowclough 2007:49–52). This is in keeping with the sourcing of exotic or at least distinctive stones for specific purposes in the Boyne Valley tombs and elsewhere (e.g. Mitchell 1992; O’Sullivan 2009). Fragments of bone and antler pins are also a common occurrence amongst the cremated bones in Passage Tombs. The favoured raw material was a tine from the antler of a red deer or a metapodial bone from a sheep. Large numbers of both pin types were found at the Mound of the Hostages, which draws attention to the absence of bones from the two relevant animal species amongst the many skeletal fragments discovered in and under the cairn at the site. Deer bone is a rarity at Passage Tomb sites in general and it may be that shed antler was a treasured material while the deer itself remained elusive and mysterious. There are even doubts as to whether red deer existed in Ireland at this time, suggesting that the antler may even have been imported. The stag, especially adorned with its mature antler spread, is a frequent representation in



European rock art, and the annual growth and shedding of the antler with its allusions to the rutting season is taken as a symbol of fertility and time. Landscape rock art in Ireland is closely comparable with its counterpart in Galicia, north-western Spain, but the deer is not represented in Ireland whereas it occurs prominently and frequently in Galicia. Perhaps the manufacture of mushroom-headed antler pins for use in Irish Passage Tombs may have been the insular representation of the deer in the Galician artwork. The form of the antler pins has sometimes been interpreted as phallic, which if sustainable may be another allusion to the yearly cycle with its fertility undertones, like the solstices.

## Spiritual Landscapes

It can plausibly be argued 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 (O'Sullivan 2010). The enduring significance of these landscape features can be appreciated from their repeated appropriation by various groups from Neolithic to Iron Age and historical times. For example, the course of the River Boyne and its tributaries is the most all-embracing explanation for the network of Passage Tombs in county Meath (Fig. 1.4), and this river emerges from prehistory in the mid-fifth century AD as a place of enormous mythological significance, its source revered as a holy well in the Christian tradition and its waters associated with a variety of Celtic gods and heroes.

Similarly Knocknarea Mountain in county Sligo, site of an enormous cairn surrounded by Passage Tombs, is traditionally believed to be the burial place of Meadhbh, the powerful proto-historic queen of Connaught, made famous in the mythological epic *The Táin*. The most compelling example of all, however, is the Hill of Tara in county Meath, where a Passage Tomb was constructed over pre-existing traces of human activity in the late fourth millennium BC, its foundation marked by a votive deposit of human bone (O'Sullivan 2005, 2007:167). The Neolithic phases in this monument reflect a conspicuously detailed treatment of human bone, occasionally shocking to a modern mind but no doubt considered appropriate in the Neolithic. It involved practices such as the systematic crushing of cremated bone, the apparently random incorporation of unburned infant long bones through masses of cremation and the insertion of selected skeletal parts such as disarticulated adult skulls and limbs. Such practices, doubtless a reflection of attitudes towards the dead and their relationship with the living, suggest that skeletons may even have been broken up and distributed to various locations. While such rituals may seem strange from a modern perspective, they are objectively no less mystifying than the Native American tradition of removing scalps, the Jewish tradition of circumcision or the Christian tradition of keeping body parts in shrines, all of which are inexplicable without an appreciation of the spiritual values and beliefs that transform them into sacred actions.

Once constructed a century or two before 3000 BC the Mound of the Hostages continued in use intermittently as a place of burial until approximately the seventeenth century BC, a period spanning about 1500 years. During this time there were at least three major phases of intervention. The vast bulk of the human remains, accounting for 200 or more individuals, were introduced during the primary usage of the structure around 3100 BC; unburned human skulls were inserted several generations later, a few centuries after 3000 BC and a series of specific burials occurred both in the tomb and in the overlying mound during the Early Bronze Age, beginning before 2000 BC. This final period of use involved a large number of burials and it encapsulated successive burial rites from inhumation to cremation and eventually an isolated inhumation at the end of the sequence. The Early Bronze Age re-use of the tomb is interesting because it would appear that, while the site itself was a magnet for high-status burials, the pre-existing Neolithic deposits were not accorded any obvious respect. In the inner compartment of the tomb, for instance, preparations for the very first Early Bronze Age burial involved digging a large pit into the pre-existing mass of cremated bone which was simply scooped aside to make way for the new burial. Indeed some of the Neolithic material was scattered carelessly outside the entrance. That the Early Bronze Age burials represent people of standing is evident from their entitlement to be buried as such an iconic site and underlined by the quality of the associated artefacts. Magnificently crafted pottery, especially bowls and vases known as Food Vessels, bronze daggers and razors and a spectacular ceremonial axe-head or mace-head are some of the more special items. The final burial is intriguing. It involved an adolescent boy wearing a necklace of beads from a variety of raw materials: artificial faience echoing the shores of the Mediterranean, amber from the Baltic, jet and a set of tubular metal spacers or beads. A small number of such composite necklaces are known from burials in north-west Europe and composite necklaces featuring faience are also known from Mycenae, suggesting that the Tara burial represents someone with an interesting background. Further mystery is added with the likelihood that some of the beads may have been manufactured in Britain. The circumstances in which this individual was laid to rest in the Mound of the Hostages are lost to us but this was clearly a one-off burial, isolated spatially from the pre-existing Early Bronze Age burials and having no successors in the mound which was now left to merge naturally back into the landscape.

But this was not the end. On the contrary, it was a transformative moment in the emergence of Tara. During the course of the ensuing 2000 years up to the middle of the first millennium AD, the hill was festooned with barrows and other later prehistoric features confirming its status as a location of unique importance in which the Mound of the Hostages continued to be the focal monument (Fig. 1.9). One Late Bronze Age ring-ditch was dug immediately adjacent to the mound but in general the array of earthworks extended a considerable distance north and south along the spine and flanks of the ridge. If anything, the variety of ritual activity associated with the Hill of Tara and its neighbourhood may have been intensifying in the later centuries of the Iron Age, during the third and fourth centuries AD. Glass and pottery dating to this period indicate that exotic drinking vessels from the Roman province



**Fig. 1.9** The Hill of Tara, county Meath, Ireland. The Mound of the Hostages, reconstructed after the archaeological excavations of the 1950s, is isolated and clearly visible above the pair of conjoined earthworks near the centre

of Britain were in use at the Rath of the Synods, mirroring contemporaneous votive deposits from Roman Britain at Newgrange.

It was also around this time that the great enclosure known as *Ráith na Ríg* was constructed. Only a few kilometres east of the hill, a circular wooden henge was constructed near the Gabhra River at Lismullin. It is not surprising then that early traditions about the life of St. Patrick, credited with evangelizing Ireland in the space of a few decades in the mid-fifth century AD, have him brought to Tara to account for lighting a Paschal fire in naive contravention of a royal prerogative. Even more noteworthy is the schizophrenic attitude to Tara conveyed by archaeological and documentary evidence from the early medieval period. The importance of the hill at this time is undeniable, especially as represented by its titular kingship, but it may also have been shunned by monks and other Christians. Yet a Christian church was built on the hill in medieval times, its surrounding churchyard extending over the outer earthworks of the Rath of the Synods and medieval burials were inserted into the prehistoric earthwork outside the churchyard. Over the past 500 years, the hill has been the scene of various symbolic visits associated with key events in Irish history, from an encampment by the army of Hugh O'Neill on its way south to the fateful Battle of Kinsale in late 1600 and a doomed last stand by a remnant of a failed uprising in 1798 to a monster political meeting organized by Daniel O'Connell in the

1840s and a major controversy sparked by clumsy excavations at the Rath of the Synods at the turn of the twentieth century by a group convinced that the biblical Ark of the Covenant was buried there. Reflecting the continuing status of Tara in more recent times, the first sod of the archaeological excavations on the hill in the 1950s was turned by the then Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Eamon de Valera. Finally, in recent years, it was the iconic status of Tara that enabled the campaign against the construction of the M3 motorway to gather momentum.

Bearing in mind the evolving role of Tara from Middle Neolithic to modern times, the question of its significance during the Early Neolithic and preceding Mesolithic era needs to be considered. As noted earlier, Mesolithic societies did not build monuments, so that their spirituality is reflected very dimly in the archaeological record as we know it. But what of the initial Neolithic era as represented by the first half of the fourth millennium BC? Slight traces of pre-cairn activity occurred under the Mound of the Hostages, as happened at many other sites, such as Knowth, Newgrange, Baltinglass Hill, etc. The interaction of Neolithic societies with the Hill of Tara during this time may be appreciated by analogy with Slievenamon in county Tipperary (Figs. 1.6 and 1.8). Slievenamon appears to have been so sacred during the earlier centuries of the Neolithic that no monuments occurred on its slopes or within a radius of 10–15 km from the mountain, although such monuments massed beyond the rivers defining the zone of avoidance (Fig. 1.6; O'Sullivan 2012). All the evidence to date points to a general Neolithic settlement void in this reserved landscape. Approaching 3000 BC, as at Tara, a cairn was constructed on the summit of Slievenamon and some associated Passage Tombs were located along the edge of the zone of previous avoidance (O'Sullivan 2010, 2012), as if Passage Tombs were permitted or imposed where previously there had been a prohibition. It seems from this pattern of activity that Slievenamon was a mountain of singular importance and inviolability during the fourth millennium BC and for an unknown period previously. Equally it might be inferred that the prestige of Passage Tombs and their fundamental centrality to Neolithic spirituality exceeded that of any previous monument type in Ireland. The only other inference—a radical cultural change in which previously fundamental values became irrelevant—is disproved by the evidence of continuity represented at Knowth (Eogan 1991). Applying this to the Hill of Tara, where pre-tomb activity is also known, we might envisage the Passage Tomb not as initiating a sacred place but as confirmation of its well-established significance. Similar cases can be made to highlight the significance of other eminences in Ireland that dominate their local landscapes, such as Knocknarea in county Sligo, Slieve Gullion in county Armagh, the Loughcrew Hills in county Meath and Baltinglass Hill in county Wicklow, all of which have cairns on the summit.

## Conclusion

Pulling together the strands of evidence explored earlier, we might envisage the fourth millennium BC as a melting pot in which a variety of traditions fused to create the distinctive spirituality of Middle Neolithic Ireland: (1) sacred places, (2) the

cremation rite in funerary contexts, (3) monumental architecture and (4) the Passage Tomb tradition. As material expressions of spiritual values and beliefs, these strands are probably as close as we can venture to the Neolithic soul. The first two strands seem to have been endemic to Neolithic Ireland, with a very ancient pedigree reaching back to hunter-gatherer societies. Cremation, for example, occurred from Early Mesolithic times in Ireland as noted earlier and persisted through the Neolithic, often predominating in individual megalithic tombs. This contrasts with the Neolithic of continental Europe where inhumation is the predominant rite, notably in areas such as Brittany that are closest to Ireland. Inhumation is also the more common rite in Britain, apart from the west and north (Lynch 1997), these being the regions where other parallels with Ireland are best known, as one might expect. Straining against the predominance of cremation, the restricted occurrence of individual inhumation burial in a cist under a round mound points to a parallel strand associated with specially chosen individuals. As reviewed briefly earlier, some Middle Neolithic cairns were constructed at sites that were probably regarded as sacred long before they were distinguished visually by cairns. In these cases, the construction of the monument may be envisaged as a transformative event in the social life of a holy place (see Cooney 2007), rather than its moment of establishment. Other focal locations in the Neolithic landscape may even have escaped the intrusion of artificial cairns and may instead have been highlighted by other means, such as the carving of petroglyphs on naturally occurring outcrops or boulders (Bradley 1997; O'Connor 2007).

Megaliths have long been a source of information about the Neolithic, facilitating studies on monument architecture, funerary practices and associated artefacts, megalithic art and even domestic settlement evidence when this is associated incidentally with the megalith. Modern analysts tend to focus more sharply on their ritual dimension, their significance in the landscape and the manner in which the builders interacted with the environment. Passage Tombs are the megaliths that allow these issues to be explored in the greatest variety and detail. They reflect an obvious interest in the shifting location of the rising and setting sun on the horizon, providing insights into latent Neolithic beliefs around time and the place of humanity in the cosmos. Spatial hierarchy, expressed in the alignment of several passages towards focal cairns located on prominences at a higher altitude, may express beliefs about the iconic status of certain places in the environment. The incorporation of material gathered from a variety of sources provides references to other locations so that the monument is a physical and metaphorical microcosm of the surrounding landscape (Cooney 2000:136). The establishment of a central axis, as manifested at sites like Newgrange, Knowth and Knockroe, coupled with the even more common privileging of the right-hand side in cruciform tombs, reflects considerable subtlety of belief and symbolism. Complex and varied deposition rituals convey a sense of transcendent beliefs, and the megalithic is at once mysterious, stylized, varied and charged with long-lost meaning.

The surviving traces explored earlier are a pale reflection of once-rich panoplies of Stone Age interaction by means of myth, sound, music, visual aesthetics and ceremony. We have lost the narratives and beliefs that bestowed these places with

a distinctive colour and life. The vibrant pantheon that added mystery with explanation, conferring security with uncertainty, has become as silent as the chamber of a megalithic tomb. We can only imagine the ceremonies that might have occurred around the construction of megalithic tombs and the deposition of human bone within them. And while our studies of these sites evoke a spirituality that might best be described as earth-centred, the deeper existential thoughts of Neolithic societies, never mind individuals, remain suitably obscure.

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## Chapter 2

# Fragmentary Ancestors? Medicine, Bodies, and Personhood in a Koma Mound, Northern Ghana

Timothy Insoll, Benjamin W. Kankpeyeng, and Samuel N. Nkumbaan

**Abstract** Excavation of a single mound at Yikpabongo, Koma Land, northern Ghana, recovered a significant assemblage of ceramic figurines and figurine parts radiocarbon dated to the early second millennium AD. Rather than haphazard deposition of waste materials, the contextual arrangements suggest meaningful intention, and that the mound might have been a shrine, possibly linked in part to a medicinal or healing function. Potentially, significant statements were also being made about bodies and persons via the figurines, their fragmentation and selection, and their association with selected human remains—skulls, teeth, long bones—and other materials—pottery, lithics, iron, and glass beads. Complex beliefs seemingly underpinned these actions and this is explored in relation to the concept of the ancestors and how this might have helped structure past personhood and ontology.

## Introduction

The recurrence of “ancestors” as an interpretation in European prehistory with particular reference to the European Neolithic has been critiqued (Whitley 2002). This might be a fair criticism in the European context where there is a lack of ethnography attesting to ancestor veneration (Insoll 2004), but is less suitable in West African archaeology where ancestral veneration, based on ethnographic analogy from the region (e.g. Fortes 1983), might be a more apt hermeneutic in exploring past ritual practices, religious beliefs, and “spiritualities”. Yet even in West Africa thinking of

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ancestors as discrete religious phenomena is perhaps incorrect. Ethnography again suggests (Fortes 1945/1969, 1949/1967) that ancestral veneration was probably “bundled” with other concepts, linked to metaphorical relations with animals and plants, sometimes simplistically referred to as “totemism” (Levi-Strauss 1962/1991; Fortes 1987), the ascription of animate properties to materials and locations, belief in a high God, and earth and medicine cults related to fertility and healing.

Structuring much of this religious complexity might have been existential concerns about what it meant to be human, of how personhood was individually and socially constructed, but also with recourse to memory and the ancestors, and invoked mnemonically with substances, materials, and through ideas about the body. The clay figurines from Koma Land in northern Ghana that are the focus here would seem to provide an insight into past ontology in all these various dimensions. This is certainly an ontology that cannot be separated from spirituality, when it is defined, as in *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, as “a spiritual thing or quality as distinct from a material or worldly one” (Onions 1973:2079), but equally cannot be wholly encapsulated within such a definition for it suppresses materiality. The Koma figurines might have been literally ancestors—spiritual constructs—but they were also embodied materially through clay and “medicine” and empowered through context and association.

The Koma figurines indicate, and potentially also suggest for prehistoric archaeological contexts elsewhere, that seeking to interpret past spiritualities in a mono-explanatory way is probably flawed. Instead, complex systems of beliefs involving multiple components, beyond ancestors alone, or not involving them at all, were perhaps the norm. Reconstructing these systems of beliefs in their entirety is unlikely, and they need not have been configured in “modern” forms. However, recognizing complexity is vital for this perhaps forces more nuanced, and ultimately thoughtful, interpretation.

## The Archaeology of Koma Land

The archaeological region known as Koma Land covers an area of approximately 100×100 km within the basins of the Sisili and Kulpawn Rivers in the northern region of Ghana (Fig. 2.1). James Anquandah first recovered the anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines for which Koma Land is renowned through excavations in the mid-1980s (Anquandah 1987, 1998). In addition to figurines, copious quantities of locally manufactured ceramics, grinding stones, iron bracelets and utilitarian artefacts, some human and animal remains, and small numbers of glass and stone beads and cowry shells have also been found (Anquandah 1998; Kankpeyeng and Nkumbaan 2008, 2009). Anquandah (1998) dated the Koma Land occupation to between c. 1200 and 1800. This has subsequently been revised, with the overall highpoint of Koma Land occupation placed between the sixth and twelfth centuries AD (Kankpeyeng and Nkumbaan 2009:195, 200).

The makers of the Koma figurines were seemingly settled agriculturalists; this is suggested by the large numbers of grinding stones found, some of which must have

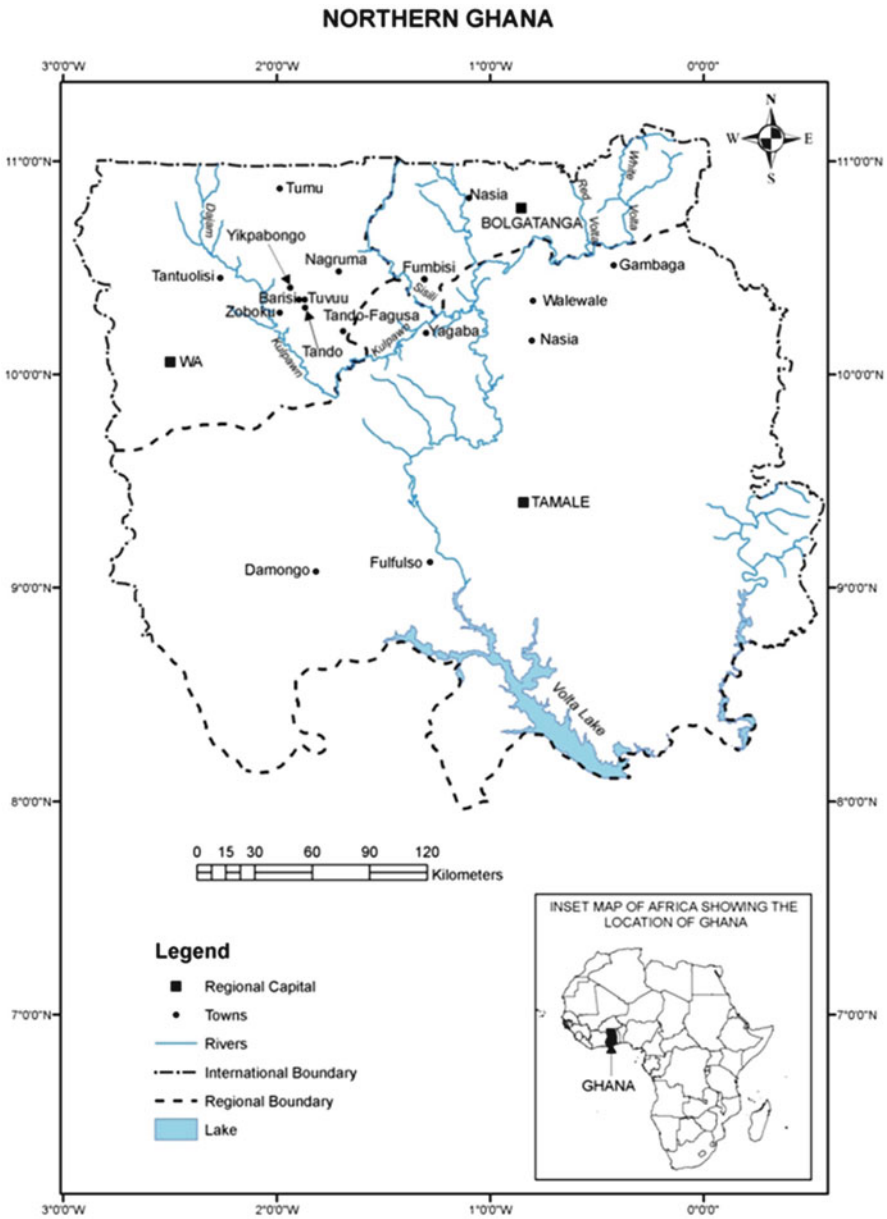


Fig. 2.1 The location of Yikpabongo in northern Ghana

been used for processing cereals such as millet (Anquandah 1998:91, 93–94). Remains of cattle, sheep, and fowl suggest these domestic animals were also kept. Besides figurines, the people of Koma Land produced pottery and iron, as the finds of slag indicate, and this was worked into tools such as knives and hoes, as well as jewellery

such as bracelets, rings, and anklets (Anquandah 1998:95–101; Kankpeyeng and Nkumbaan 2009). Participation in trade is suggested by the glass beads and cowry shells found, as well as a small number of figurines depicting people riding horses and camels (Anquandah 1998:78–82).

It would seem that Koma Land was abandoned and that the makers of the figurines have no link with the current population who have only been settled in the region for about 120–130 years (Kröger 2010:1). Depopulation may have been due to changing climatic factors (Brooks 1993:7–25) or diseases like river blindness (Patterson 1978:101, 116). Alternatively, it might be due to migration as a result of insecurity caused by slave raiding. This could have been from any or multiple directions, though perhaps a northern focus of slave raiding, if valid, is the most probable, to connect with the trans-Saharan slave markets in cities such as Timbuktu and Gao in Mali (see Insoll 2003). Certainly later in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Koma Land formed part of the middle belt in northern Ghana that suffered extensively from slave raids (Kankpeyeng 2009:213). Anquandah (1998:34) has suggested that the area might have been previously occupied by an “ancestral ‘Bulsa-type’” population and argues that the figurines depict various features he identifies as proto-Bulsa, for example, cowry decorated calabash helmets, amulets, and pendants, and he argues there are resemblances between ancient Koma pot forms and decoration, and recent Bulsa material culture (ibid:34, 49, 163–164). Ethnographic analogy is useful in broadening interpretive horizons rather than seeking direct resemblances (Insoll 2004:113–116), but whether such precise ethnographic parallels as those suggested by Anquandah (ibid) can be projected over this period of time is uncertain. The construction of ethnicity in northern Ghana and throughout West Africa has been shown to be historically situated, variable, and far from immutable (e.g. Lentz and Nugent 2000).

Since 2006 renewed research has been undertaken in Koma Land under the direction of B.W. Kankpeyeng. T. Insoll has participated in the project since 2010, and S. Nkumbaan since 2006. A key cluster of predominantly mound sites is located in and around the village of Yikpabongo. These were initially interpreted as burial mounds (Anquandah 1987), but are possibly the remains of shrines (Kankpeyeng and Nkumbaan 2009:201), perhaps functioning in the context of healing (Kankpeyeng et al. 2011). One of these mounds (YK10-3, subsequently coded YK11) was made the focus of excavation in January 2010 and January 2011 as part of a training excavation for students from the Universities of Ghana and latterly also from Manchester.

Mound YK10-3/YK11 (N10°14'48.0"W001°34'05.2") is approximately 18 m east–west and 15 m north–south. It has been excavated using arbitrary levels of 10–20 cm depth where natural levels are not readily recognisable and a 1-m grid reference recording system. The mound stratigraphy is simple with an inconsistent depth of archaeological material of between 20 and 30 cm depth overlaid by a thin layer of modern dust and rubbish (c. 1–3 cm), and below by sterile or nearly sterile soil (c. 10 cm) before the natural red gravel filled deposits are reached at a depth of 40–50 cm from the surface. The mound was radiocarbon dated to Cal AD 1010–1170 (970±40 BP) (YK10-3-N-10-L2, Beta-274104). This concurs with the four thermoluminescence and one other C14 dates obtained from elsewhere in Yikpabongo that range between the sixth and early fourteenth centuries AD (Kankpeyeng et al. 2011).

## The Figurines

### *Frequency and Types*

A total of 251 figurine and figurine fragments were recovered from mound YK10-3/YK11. These comprised 238 figurine fragments, 7 complete figurines and 6 largely complete figurines. Fragments thus dominate the assemblage. Of these, 240 had old breaks and 6 new breaks caused during excavation. Refitting has not been a focus of the research to date, so it is possible that a greater number of the fragments conjoin, but based on field observations only two instances of refitting were noted, a leg joining a torso (YK11-L12) and a finger possibly joining the rest of a hand (YK11-M11). The majority of the figurines would seem to have been modelled in one piece, but in one instance a larger seated figure was made with separate legs that were attached to the torso using a ball and socket joint (YK10-3-N11 [2]), visible as the figurine had fractured along the joint (Fig. 2.2).



**Fig. 2.2** YK10-3-N11.  
Figurine with ball and socket  
joint (overall height of figurine  
18 cm, width at shoulders  
7.5 cm)

**Fig. 2.3** YK11-H14/I14.  
Human and fish figurine  
(overall length 13 cm,  
maximum width 7 cm,  
maximum height 8 cm)



It is not possible, based on the frequently small fragments present, to provide a figurine typology, but the broadly salient groupings represented are human, animal, part human and part animal, and anthropomorphic cone figurines. Much more detailed attempts at classifying Koma Land figurines are provided by Anquandah (1998:129). What can be interpreted of the human figurines regarding parts represented, gender, age, and lateral understandings is considered below. The complete examples of these figurines are represented standing (e.g. YK10-3-N11 [1]), seated (YK10-3-N11 [2]), and possibly kneeling (YK11-H14/I14 Feature [Figurine 9]). The figurines are all of a small size, not exceeding 200 mm in height. The anthropomorphic cone figurines are a numerically much larger group. Forty-four fragments from shafts or bases of the cone figurines were found and it is likely that a significant percentage of the 43 heads recovered also come from these figurines. The facial features on the complete cone figurines found are either stylized but reasonably realistic (YK10-3-O11 [Figurine 4]), or very stylized (YK10-3-I15 [A]). They lack limbs and end in a cone or point at their base, the possible purpose of which is discussed below.

Part human and part animal figurines were rare. These included a figurine that possibly combines elements of humans and fish, represented by a human face with a Mohican crest or fin along the top of the head and a truncated limbless body (YK11-H14/I14 Feature [Figurine 1]; 130 mm × 80 mm × 70 mm) (Fig. 2.3). The single wing fragment found (YK11-O9) is almost certainly representative of a part human part bird figurine of a type recorded in previous excavations in Yikpabongo. This is a type of figurine that has been interpreted by Kankpeyeng and Nkumbaan (2009:201) as “probably reflective of people that practice witchcraft or are objects used in a ritual activity to cleanse people of their witchcraft”.

**Table 2.1** Incised cavities recorded on the figurines and figurine fragments

Top of head	Ear	Mouth	Nostril	Internal (visible through breakage)
32	26	5	23	4

The only figurine without any human characteristics was a complete chameleon (YK10-3-4-I15-B; 140 mm×45 mm×25 mm). The chameleon is still represented in craft production in northern Ghana; in contemporary Bulsa metalworking, for example, a brass figurine surmounted by a chameleon is illustrated by Kröger (2001:491).

In general, the depiction of human features could be described as solemn. The majority are stylized and lack expression or emotion and are framed in static standing or seated postures. The exception is provided by a few examples of figurines with open mouths (e.g. YK10-3-P13). Anquandah (1998:164) has drawn specific parallels between the open mouths and Bulsa dirges, eulogies, and war cries. As already mentioned, these precise ethnic analogies are unlikely, and the open mouths could equally express pain or terror, or the admission of libations, or for inserting substances.

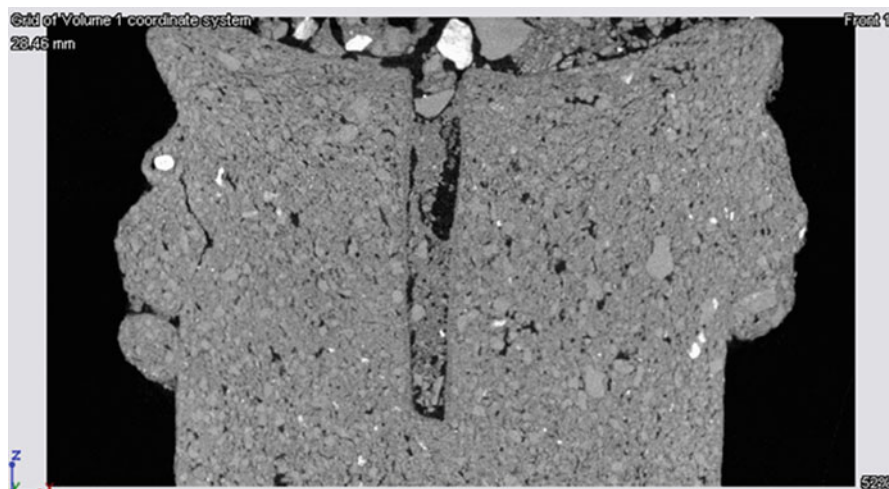
*Incisions, Cavities, and Healing*

The possible use of the figurines for libations or the insertion of substances is suggested by the cavities sometimes pierced into the figurine singularly or in combination, from the mouth, ears, nostrils, or top of the head (Table 2.1).

Computed Tomography scanning of five figurines indicated that these cavities could be incised deep into the figurine (Insoll et al. in preparation). For example, a cone figurine (YK10-3-4-I15A) has an incised cavity running c. 20 mm deep into the body of the figurine from the top of the “head” (Fig. 2.4), whilst in an adult female figurine (YK10-3-O11-2) cavities in the ears, nostrils, and top of the head were visible in the CT image. Another cone figurine (YK10-3-O11) has an interesting irregular cavity running up the centre of the figurine, but this might be a correlate of manufacturing rather than an intentionally formed cavity. The single animal figurine found, the chameleon, had no cavities. Based on a single example it is not possible to state that all animal figurines were excluded from having cavities incised.

Parallels from elsewhere in Africa exist for the cavities evident on the Koma figurines. Radiographs of a wooden Songye figurine from eastern Kasai in the Democratic Republic of the Congo indicated the presence of “magical substances” located in the head, anus, and abdomen. These were interconnected with channels running to the mouth (Hersak 2010:43). The head and stomach were thought by a Songye subgroup, the Bala, to house the *kikudi*, the “essential spirit”, which after death left the body through the mouth (ibid:44). A similar interpretation invoking





**Fig. 2.4** CT scan of a figurine head (YK10-3-4-I15A)

“spiritism” (Apho and Gavua 2010:211) might be attractive to apply to the Koma Land figurines and their cavities, but is weak without any form of supporting ethnographic analogy.

A significant number of archaeological terracotta figurines from Mali have also been CT scanned (Van Dyke 2009:76). Unfortunately, most are seemingly without provenance, which limits their usefulness. However, they do clearly indicate various types of cavities, including one figurine that had a round clay patch filling a hole leading to a stomach cavity below the figurine’s breasts. This cavity was “filled with substances of various, yet discernible densities” (Van Dyke 2009:83).

Besides being used potentially for offering libations, piercing cavities into the Yikpabongo figurines could have served other purposes as yet unknown. For example, the focus upon sensory organs—ears, nostrils, mouth—would appear significant beyond technical or aesthetic choice. Ancestors, if this is what the figurines were, could have been perceived as seeing, hearing, and speaking. The action of piercing, of breaking or travelling through surfaces might have been significant, as amongst the Yaka of south-western Congo where smelling was “the olfactory mediation between inner and outer” (Devisch 1991:297) and listening perceived as “a horizontal movement from outer to inner” (Devisch 1991:295).

Jacobsen-Widding (1991:36) notes that in many African cultures “the prime mediating metaphor is constituted by *fluid elements*” such as wetness in the body or blood. Equally, penetrating might function as mediating between inner and outer surfaces via the agency of fluids in relation to healing. This is especially so in the African context where the frequently found idea exists, according to Willis (1991:278), “that the invisible or ‘subtle’ counterpart-body has a causal relationship with the outer, visible body, such that changes in the first lead to corresponding changes in the second”.



## *Medicine and Power*

It is not known what substance or substances, if any, might have been used for libations or contained in the cavities of the figurines, but it is possible that both served a medicinal function. The term “power object” (Hersak 2010:38) would seem as apt to apply to the Koma figurines as “medicinal”, for the latter can be a problematic term to apply to African materials as “medicine” can have much wider meanings than in the West (Kankpeyeng et al. 2011) where it is often “narrowly defined as a specific physical remedy to a physically manifested complaint” (Page 2009a:438). It can, as with the Hausa concept of *magani*, include much more in that it may “refer to anything which corrects or prevents an undesirable condition” (Lewis Wall 1988:211), and emphasis is often placed on associated psychological, social, and supernatural factors (Twumasi 2005). Medicines could be packed into sculpture and figurines, poured over them, or tied onto them in packets (Ghent 1994; Biebuyck and Herreman 1995; Page 2009a, b). Libations are, as Page (2009a:438) notes, “sometimes also called medicine”, and “to medicate a sculpture was to call its powers into an active state from a somnolent one”.

The *minkisi* of the former kingdom of Kongo in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola provide the best-known category of objects in sub-Saharan Africa that combine container and a “medicinal” substance that empowers them. The *minkisi* can be a wooden figure, or a clay pot, raffia bag, or even a snail shell (MacGaffey 1993:43), but their activating medicine was the important component. These were various and included minerals such as quartz, white clay, and red ochre; and seeds, leaves, fungi; and other materials, hair, horns, charcoal, often collected for their metaphorical qualities (MacGaffey 1993:62; Page 2009b:92). The ingredients were then reduced to scrapings, ashes, and other small fragments, the power of which was constrained within their container (MacGaffey 1993:63).

The addition of materials might also have served to activate the figurines’ powerful essence (Insoll and Kankpeyeng in press). For example, Kankpeyeng and Nkumbaan (2009:196) recorded the use of iron ore for the eyeballs on several figurines they previously excavated at Yikpabongo. This is potentially, as they suggest (ibid), a representation of an association between the pre-eminence of iron ore as a material linked to iron smelting which was of particular ritual and symbolic importance in sub-Saharan Africa (cf. Herbert 1993; Schmidt 1997) with the pre-eminence of eyes as part of the human body.

Various forms of adornment are shown on some of the figurines and figurine parts, such as bracelets, necklaces, belts or waistbands, and straps criss-crossing over the torso. The majority of these could have served aesthetic or utilitarian purposes. For example, an almost complete standing figure (YK10-3-N11 [1]) has a necklace, waistband or belt, two anklets, four large bracelets on the lower right arm, four large bracelets on the upper left arm, and one bracelet on the lower left arm. Between the first and second bracelets on the upper left arm, there is a bulge or packet depicted fixed in place by and between these bracelets and extending above the first bracelet and the shoulder. Anquandah (1998:173) describes similar features

**Table 2.2** Figurine parts represented

Part	Total
Torso (can include arm)	13
Janus head	4
Head	39
Eye(s)	4
Eye(s) (+one facial feature)	9
Eye(s) (+two facial features)	2
Hand	5
Arm (can include hand)	29
Tongue	1
Chin and lips/mouth	15
Foot	8
Wing	1
Top of figurine (not cone)	5
Flat base of figurine	3
Part of cone figurine (no facial features)	44
Unidentified	51

to these, albeit modelled in greater detail, as *Nifelin*, or sheathed daggers, based on Bulsa parallels. The absence of detail on YK10-3/YK11 examples does not allow such an interpretation, and alternatively, they might represent a protective amulet filled with medicinal/powerful substances. A similar feature is represented on the upper left arm of another seated figure (YK10-3-N11 [2]).

### ***Bodies, Gender, and Age***

The figurines and figurine fragments provide some potential information on gender, age, and understandings of the body (Table 2.2). First, it has to be asked whether the fragments were used as part of healing rituals focused on the body parts deposited—arms, heads, hands, feet, and torsos? This seems unlikely as such an interpretation could not account for the Janus heads, wing, pieces of bases, and unidentifiable fragments as anatomical elements.

Of the single body parts with a laterality that can be identified, right arms predominate at 16, with 7 left arms found. One right hand is also present and no left. Left and right eyes are equal at four each, and one right leg, three left legs, and one left foot are identifiable. Overall, right elements total 22 and left 15. These patterns, particularly in relation to the right arm, are of interest considering the near universal importance ascribed to the right hand (e.g. Hertz 1960). Hertz (1973:120, 121, 123) eloquently indicates how the right hand is linked with “communication with sacred powers” and the left hand “is directly concerned with all that is demoniacal” and “the needs of profane life”. We do not know if such thinking also related to the makers of the Koma figurines, but it is not an unfair supposition to suggest it might have.

The presence of 43 heads would appear significant especially as a single skull was also found (see below). The importance of the head in African concepts of the body has been remarked upon. Drewal and Drewal (1983:166), for example, refer to the head in Yoruba (Nigeria) belief as “the site of one’s personal essence, potential and destiny”. Hairstyles accentuated the head (Sieber and Herreman 2000), scarification and painted patterns emphasised the head (Bohannon 1988), medicines incised under the skin empowered the head (Drewal and Mason 1997), and head-rests supported the head (Nettleton 2007). The majority of the heads are single, but four Janus heads were also found. Jacobsen-Widding (1991:37) argues that Janus figurines represent “the power of fertility in Central and West African cultures”.

The corpus of figurines and fragments provides some insight into thinking about gender. The majority of figurines and fragments, 221, have to be classed as gender unknown or not applicable based on the elements present. Seven males (including two possible males potentially represented by stylized beards), 3 females, and 20 androgynous/genderless identifications were made. Females were identified through the presence of breasts (e.g. YK10-3-N11), and males through the presence of features such as beards (e.g. YK10-3-N11). On one male, the penis bulge is seemingly modelled (YK10-3-N11 [1]), but none display genitals, unlike previous figurines recorded (Anquandah 1998:164–165). A possible exception to the absence of genital representation is provided by examples of modelling around the libation hole on the top of some figurines (e.g. head, YK10-3-N10). This can be interpreted as representing the female sexual organ with the labia clearly depicted and the libation hole the vagina. Alternatively, on certain examples it might represent a cowry shell (e.g. head, YK10-3-N10).

What is significant is that the vulva/cowry motif is found on figurines that are otherwise best defined as androgynous/anthropomorphic/“genderless”. Chapman and Gaydarska (2007:57) define androgyny as the “importance of a union celebrating the complementarity of the two genders”. In the absence of the depiction of genitals and other anatomical features, a precise “androgynous” interpretation cannot be made, but is suggested by the faces and bodies represented that are not easily attributable to either male or female. If this is what was sought, it might perhaps engage with the recurrent theme in African religious beliefs remarked on by Zahan (1979:11), that “the idea of androgyny, the ideal form of the human being, reflects the concern for perfect equilibrium between male and female and for their total reciprocity in equality”. Fertility might also be relevant in thinking about the androgynous figurines as the complementary fusion of both the sexes and genders. Identifying age patterns represented by the figurines is somewhat subjective. It would seem that no children are depicted, with 53 adults represented, 2 possible adults, and 196 classified as not known or not applicable.

Ancillary elements that are represented such as hairstyles, putative scarification and keloids, and items of decoration and dress, such as the bracelets and waistband/belts previously referred to, are not particularly informative. Excluding the latter, these include part of a hat (YK10-3-I13), possible keloids on an upper right arm (YK10-3-N10), an arm perhaps indicating the individual was wearing a skin (YK11-H14/I14), the depiction of a skirt (YK10-3-O11, Figurine 2), a crest of

Mohican style hair (YK10-3-P11), and putative scarification on a foot (YK11-L12), and an arm and shoulder (YK11-O9). However, it is important to note that the majority of the figurines are not seemingly meant to be realistic; they perhaps serve “as compressions and distinctions” (Bailey 2005:201). They depict elements of quotidian reality, but are not fully representative of the real world and everyday practices and life for they transcend this.

## Figurine Contexts and Associations

The dispersal patterns of the figurines and figurine fragments varied across mound YK10-3/YK11 with the highest concentration in square N10 at 41. Other significant concentrations included 34 recorded in squares H14/I14, which was also in part associated with a feature discussed below, and 16 in square O11. In two contexts, figurines were found associated with the remains of possible libation structures. In square YK10-3-I15, a layer (3) composed of arrangements of potsherds was recorded at a depth of *c.* 15–20 cm. The potsherds were in at least two instances from the same vessel as represented, for example, by a large pot pierced at its base. These were associated with a clay structure, perhaps a libation hole, and a stone quern. This was over a layer containing two recumbent figurines: a stylized anthropomorphic cone and the chameleon described previously, as well as a figurine fragment, a head. The putative clay libation structure was directly above the pointed figurine. An iron razor, ring, point, and part of an iron bracelet were also found in this layer.

In contrast, in square YK11-012 three figurine fragments and a pointed anthropomorphic figurine, again associated with a spherical stone quern, were recovered from above a possible libation structure. This was found at a depth of *c.* 15–18 cm from the surface and was made of low-fired clay (daub) and arranged in a circular pattern interwoven with potsherds. The inference that can be made from these features is that presumably liquid offerings were being made to the earth through the agency of the holes in the clay structures. This would appear to be ancillary to the figurine usage for libations, as also suggested by the variable patterning of figurines found both above and below the libation structures.

A different feature was recorded in squares YK11-I13/I14/H13/H14 at a depth of between 30 and 45 cm from the surface. A dense concentration of material of *c.* 120 cm×80 cm and composed of two complete figurines, an androgynous adult with a flat base (YK11-H14/I14 Feature [Figurine 9]; 160 mm×67 mm×50 mm) and the human/fish figurine described previously, as well as 15 identifiable figurine fragments, 12 unidentifiable figurine fragments, spherical stone querns, fragments of quartz, numerous potsherds, and 5 pottery discs was noted (Fig. 2.5). The pottery discs were formed from potsherds and seem, based on ethnographic parallels, to have been stoppers for horn containers, usually horns filled with medicine (Akamasi Williams, January 17, 2011, personal communication). Twenty-eight were recorded in the 2011 excavations. This interpretation might be further supported by the recovery of eight small (*c.* 60–65 mm length) clay conical shaped objects, sometimes



**Fig. 2.5** YK11-I13/I14/H13/H14 feature

paired (e.g. YK11-H13B) from the 2011 excavations. These, it has been suggested based on previous finds (Kankpeyeng et al. 2011), were perhaps referencing horns that provided healing and transformative powers to shrines through the addition of powerful substances in the cavities found on the top of these objects.

The material in the YK11-I13/I14/H13/H14 cluster had been deliberately arranged and deposited, literally “structured deposition” (Richards and Thomas 1984). To the north of this cluster, fragments of clay, the residue of a semicircular structure, were evident, possibly again associated with some sort of libations activity. This was the largest intact feature recorded in the two seasons and is significant in again indicating that the mound essentially represents ritual actions bringing together important or powerful materials over short time periods—single events even, multiply represented—but cumulatively over longer time periods as represented by the complete mound.

Beneath the main cluster, a second defined smaller, c. 60×40 cm, cluster containing two further figurine fragments was recorded. This also produced a small iron razor or knife. Considering the probable overall shrine context and possible medicine and healing related nature of much of the material found (Kankpeyeng et al. 2011), it is conceivable that this knife/razor and the other example from YK10-3-J16 might have been used for scarification, circumcision/excision, and surgical procedures. A similar “knife” recorded amongst the Nankanse as used for “tattoo(ing)” (scarification), is illustrated by Rattray (1932/1969:330).

Human and animal remains were rare and the bone recorded was friable and degraded. However, taphonomy cannot solely account for its rarity as Anquandah (1998:87–91) recorded fragmentary human remains, and bones from cattle, sheep, fowl, and monkey in his excavations in Yikpabongo. Rather, selectivity in what was interred in mound YK10-3/YK11 is apparent. This was evident in a feature (see Beta-274104 above for radiocarbon date) recorded at a depth of 30–40 cm below the surface in square YK10-3-N10 where a fragmentary human skull had been buried beneath deposits containing a largely complete cone figurine, 22 identifiable and 18 unidentifiable figurine fragments. The skull had been placed upside down with the front facing into the earth. Fragments of human long bones were placed to the south-west and southeast of the skull, the latter in association with a human jawbone.

A pile of human teeth had also been placed directly east of the skull. Identification of the teeth recovered from the vicinity of the jawbone and in the separate pile by Mr. Peter Burrows (March 14, 2010, personal communication) indicated that they were mixed and from two individuals, a younger adult of about 20 years old (19 teeth) and an older adult (8 teeth). It is not possible to state with whom the jawbone was associated, whether the younger or older adult. Two of the teeth (upper right and upper left lateral incisors) of the younger adult showed evidence for tooth filing. This is a practice that persisted. Rattray (1932/1969:331) refers to the then widespread distribution of tooth filing in the first quarter of the twentieth century amongst many ethnolinguistic groups of northern Ghana, but provides no detail on the teeth that were filed.

The features described are seemingly representative of the *in situ* residue of ritual action and support the argument that the majority of artefacts, including the figurines, are in their original positions as deposited. This is supported by the repeat deposition evident with layers of similar material culture in comparable patterns “superimposed on each other” (Kankpeyeng and Nkumbaan 2009:196). As, for example, in the recurrent patterning of the spherical stone (quartz and granite) querns and the discs formed from potsherds overlying the layers containing figurines that were noted as a repeated contextual feature (Insoll and Kankpeyeng *in press*).

## Insights into Ritual Posture and Practices?

Of the 46 figurines and figurine fragments for which positional data were available, 6 were upright and 40 were recumbent. Cardinal orientation also varied with this data available for 35 examples. This indicated that 11 were oriented northwest–southeast, 8 east–west, 7 north–south, and 9 northeast–southwest. As argued elsewhere (Insoll and Kankpeyeng *in press*), this would seem to be indicative of how they were originally placed rather than post-depositional disturbance. Equally, the low height of the figurines and their associated arrangements would appear significant. The figurines rarely exceed 15 cm in height and are laid out in horizontal spreads and not vertical clusters. It is possible that crouching, kneeling, squatting, or sitting rather than standing were the postures adopted in depositing and arranging



the figurines and their associated material culture. These are ritual postures that have been recorded ethnographically in northern Ghana (Kröger 1982:Plates 1, 2, 3a, 3b; Mendonsa 1982:120; Fortes 1987:59) and elsewhere in West Africa (Badel-Mathon 1971:229–233).

The ritual actions possibly associated with these postures could have varied. Offering libation is suggested by the structures recorded, and squatting might have been the posture adopted to offer libations to some of the figurines as well, especially the pointed cone figurines. It is possible that they were produced with a point or cone at their base for placing or inserting in the ground, rather than for hafting as Anquandah (1998:129) has suggested. The recurrence of pierced holes in their tops might also correlate with their being offered libations after insertion in the earth, presumably via a low posture such as squatting or sitting as only c. 8–10 cm of the figurine would have been exposed (Insoll and Kankpeyeng in press). However, the recumbent position of the majority of figurines and figurine fragments for which positional data is available suggests this was not necessarily the ritual action completed at the mounds themselves.

Offering libations could have been directed to the figurines themselves within a framework of ancestral veneration, but potentially also as a reflection of chthonic beliefs directed to the earth through the agency of the figurine. Small clay cups and small clay vessels modelled on gourds or seeds that have been found (Kankpeyeng and Nkumbaan 2009:196) might represent the types of receptacle used for offering libations. These and the small size of the cavities in the figurines suggest libations were poured into, rather than from, the figurines. From context YK10-3-L13 the rim of a small clay pouring vessel with a pronounced lip was recovered, and in YK10-3-N11 half a ceramic gourd or seed was found. The latter was drawn from a single lump of clay, a technical choice that could likewise be linked into frameworks of chthonic beliefs related to the power of clay as a product of the earth. This interpretation is perhaps strengthened by the presence of six lumps of clay in mound YK10-3/YK11 that were unmodified except for being fired. Their occurrence would seem to reinforce the idea that clay, as a substance, was important.

## Discussion: Fragmentary Ancestors?

It is apparent from the evidence that the figurines and figurine fragments seemingly served multiple purposes relating to medicine and healing (Kankpeyeng and Nkumbaan 2009:201), ritual practices, power, protection, memory, personhood, identity construction and maintenance, and indirectly, memory. Yet these could all be subsumed within an interpretive framework centred on ancestors. Anquandah (1998:159) has argued that the figurines of Koma Land functioned within an “ancestral cult”, which seems a reasonable interpretation, but he also suggests they are “the materialisation of belief patterns which have survived in modern Bulsa *Wen-bogluta Jadoksa* and animal totemic practices”. It is likely that this level of analogical precision drawn from specific recent practices in relation to ancestral *Wen-bogluk*



(see Kröger 1982:6) and totemic beliefs associated with a contemporary ethnolinguistic group is insupportable for reasons described earlier.

Chapman and Gaydarska (2007:4) suggest that “bonds predicated on material culture” can be used to create and maintain “lasting bonds between persons or groups” via deliberate fragmentation “and the use of fragments in enchainment processes”. In thinking about the Koma Land figurines perhaps wholes have been privileged when fragments may be equally meaningful, but following Brittain and Harris’s (2010) recent critique, it is suggested that both wholes and fragments are significant, not one or the other, and enchainment could be via both. Rather than the sole detritus of accidental breakage of ritual objects brought together, perhaps the fragments represent, in part at least, deliberate processes of fragmentation and breakage linking individuals and kin groups through ancestors represented by the figurines, or were fragmented after an individual’s death, enchainning the living and deceased to ancestors/figurines. The ubiquity of fragments compared to whole figurines suggests some meaningful intention might underpin their fragmentation and deposition, processes that were perhaps as meaningful and important as the creation and curation of the much rarer complete figurines themselves.

Personhood may also have been constructed through relationships with the fragments, within the concept of “dividuality” where “people are composed of social relations with others to the degree that they owe parts of themselves to others” (Fowler 2004:8). More specifically, “partible” personhood, a form of dividual personhood derived from Melanesian ethnography (Brittain and Harris 2010), may be of broad interpretative relevance. Fowler (2004:25) describes how this can be related to substances and the essences they form, and that these “can be continually circulated, monitored, transformed”, and is again linked with enchainment and fragmentation. Thinking in this way suggests the importance of relationships with shrines, ancestors, and kin groups, and potentially allows for the incorporation, recycling, and movement of objects and substances perhaps represented by the figurines, their contents, and their fragments.

Equally, it would be unwise to subjugate the individual in thinking about personhood in relation to the Koma material. It is an error, as Morris (1994:146) notes, to think of African concepts of the person as a “cipher of the social collectivity”. Individuality is potentially represented in YK10-3/YK11 by archaeological objects such as a stone lip or earplug, the occasional cowry shell, teeth, iron bracelets and rings. This too could be in relation to ancestors, individuals, perhaps loosely analogous to those that are involved in the Talensi concept of *Yin* or destiny where unique configurations of ancestors are served via unique ritual relationships by the individual whose destiny these exemplary ancestors control (Fortes 1983; Insoll 2008:383); ancestors who are materialized in the *Yin* shrine via objects linked with the ancestor such as a man’s tools or weapons or a woman’s brass bracelets or beads (Fortes 1987; Insoll 2008:392).

It is possible that the YK10-3/YK11 figurine fragments were used for enchainment perhaps also linked to the possession of body parts, as represented by the skull, jawbone, teeth, and long bones recorded, in so doing joining together—enchainning—the living, the dead, and the figurines. Perhaps this was part of a cycle

constructing full personhood analogous to the Talensi processes. Morris (1994:128) summarises as “attained by degrees over the whole course of life, and is focused on the male elders who are transposed after death into an ancestor”. The human remains could come from the newly deceased that were contemporary with the figurines or represent earlier corporeal relics. Previously, a skull was also recovered from another mound in Yikpabongo (YK07/D3/D4/C3/C4) indicating this was not a singular instance. This skull had been placed face downwards with 27 ceramic discs surrounding it, but associated with no other human remains (Kankpeyeng and Nkumbaan 2008:100). Again, within exploring the concept of partible personhood, Fowler (2004) describes how social circulation of physical parts of the deceased could be significant along with relations of “accumulation” (Chapman 2000:47 cited in Fowler 2004:66).

The removal of the skull as part of secondary burial rites linked with ancestors has been recorded ethnographically in West Africa, but not in northern Ghana. Meek (1925/1971:18) refers to skull removal and reverencing among the Mama, Vere, and Mumuye of northern Nigeria, where if a village relocated, the “ancestral skulls” were also “moved to a shrine near the new village” (1925/1971:18). Similar practices, where the skull was kept in a pot with holes perforated at the bottom to allow the passage of rain and libations of beer are also described for the Ganawuri, Berom, Jarawa, Chamba, and Anaguta of the same region (Meek 1925/1971:129). The coincidence with the YK10-3/YK11 deposits and their perforated vessel sherds and putative libations evidence is noteworthy even if analogically meaningless. More pertinent is the existence of the secondary burial practices themselves, which suggest at a general level according to Kujit and Chesson (2005:175), “the idealization of links between the living, the deceased, and collective ancestors”.

Boddy (1998:271) has made the point that it is not uncommon in Africa for a person to be viewed as “composite, multiply sourced, and constituted through reciprocal engagement in a recursively meaningful world”. Together the human remains and the figurines and figurine fragments could tie into such frameworks and seem to make powerful statements about ancestry but also linkages to place. Place, claims to autochthony, and ancestry are often coterminous in northern Ghana. Possession of the land is made through first-settler status claims (e.g. Lentz 2006). The density and number of mounds in Yikpabongo would suggest that it was linked with what Chapman and Gaydarska (2007:12) describe in the context of Balkan prehistory as “place-value”, i.e. “the self-perpetuating place-value, nourished and maintained by increasing ancestral power”. Approximately 85 house and stone circle mounds have been identified in Yikpabongo and the number is certainly higher but the current settlers have disturbed or built on the mounds.

Finally, other ancestral “clues” are potentially represented. First, the possible emphasis on androgyny, and second, absence of depictions of children might be significant. Children are unlikely to have been accorded ancestral status, and the androgynous ancestor recurs in African mythology as amongst the Bambara and Dogon of Mali (Zahan 1979:11, 135). Third, prominent external navels are also modelled on nine figurines and figurine fragments (e.g. standing largely complete figurine YK10-3-N11-1). Nakamura and Meskell (2009:217) make the interesting

point in relation to navel modelling on figurines from Neolithic Çatalhöyük in Anatolia that besides providing a visual marker of the link between the unborn and the living, it may “extend beyond offspring to producing ancestors, both in a literal and symbolic sense”. Fourth, the Janus heads and the model of the chameleon might represent time, the ability to look into the past and the future, manifest via two heads on one individual, and the independently swivelling eyes of the chameleon, ethno-graphically understood as “beings created in primordial times” (Roberts 1995:51).

## Conclusions

The ideas explored in this chapter are preliminary and provisional. A larger corpus of figurines will help in testing them further. Equally, extrapolation beyond mound YK10-3/YK11 is unwise, as this interpretation is contextually specific rather than generically applicable to all Koma Land figurines across time and space. Figurines have been given prominence here but these would not be understood without examining their context and association from an inter-disciplinary perspective, otherwise the trap of what Bailey (2005:13) refers to as “figurine essentialism” where “figurines just *are* important” could be fallen into. The Yikpabongo figurines are spectacular objects, evocative and powerful aesthetically, but it is their context that unlocks their meaning.

Context suggests that within assessing their place in the “archaeology of spiritualities”, their role was vital, multi-functional, and pre-eminent in explaining, configuring, and sustaining life and personhood via their substance, form, and biography. Ultimately, although it is unlikely that the concept of “art” applies to the Yikpabongo figurines (Kankpeyeng et al. 2011), Willis’s (1991:278) point has to be agreed with that mobiliary “art” in Africa does not represent ancestral spirits: “they also *are* such spirits”. It is suggested that similar beliefs were in existence over a thousand years ago and that the YK10-3/YK11 figurines, both fragmentary and whole, are their representation; they too are material ancestors.

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## Chapter 3

# Negotiating Archaeology/Spirituality: Pagan Engagements with the Prehistoric Past in Britain

Jenny Blain and Robert J. Wallis

**Abstract** Our *Sacred Sites, Contested Rites/Rights* project examines contemporary Pagan engagements with pasts in Britain, focusing on archaeological monuments and associated material culture held in museum collections. These engagements take diverse forms, from protesting against road-building and quarrying affecting monuments, and performing public and private rituals at “sacred” locations including sites and museums, to leaving votive offerings or clearing the ritual litter of previous celebrants and taking an interest in the curation of ancient human remains. Discourse between Pagans, archaeologists, museum curators and heritage managers results, involving tension, negotiation and attempts at understanding. In this chapter, we situate ourselves reflexively as scholar-practitioners, summarise our findings pointing to issues of difference and convergence between the interest groups, and focus on Pagan interest in human remains, from “respect” to reburial. Issues emerge of competing claims on “heritage”, how “ancestors” are constituted, contest regarding institutional authority and the diversity of Pagan voices, from those committed to the “return to the earth” of all excavated pagan remains to those adhering to the “preservation ethos” of scientific archaeology and heritage management. We conclude that in order to move on from entrenched stereotypical attitudes, all interest groups need to engage in dialogue and be prepared to re-negotiate their positions.

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## Introduction

Contemporary Paganisms are arguably no longer “new nature religions” but are growing, developing and maturing in today’s Britain and elsewhere across continents. Pagans term themselves in diverse ways (for instance, Wiccan, Druid, Heathen or less strictly “pagan” with a small “p”),<sup>1</sup> often drawing on ancient paganisms (such as Greek, Celtic, Egyptian, Norse), though indirectly and usually without claiming unbroken connections with the historic or prehistoric past. Scholarship on Paganisms is offering increasingly theorised and sustained analysis (e.g., Blain et al. 2004a). Where once a “Paganism” singular was assumed by some scholars (and practitioners), Paganisms are now more often approached as distinct groupings of people and practices, though with fuzzy boundaries, which enable constructions of identity and meanings within today’s society. The study of Paganisms, by both “outsiders” and more often “insider” Pagans themselves, has reached the status of a rigorous sub-discipline, cross-cutting the boundaries of such fields as religious studies, anthropology, archaeology and social policy, offering reflexive theoretical, epistemological and methodological contributions in addition to ethnographic data (e.g., Pearson et al. 1998; Greenwood 2000, 2005; Blain 2002; Wallis 2003; Blain et al. 2004a).

Our work on Paganisms (see, e.g., the project website: <http://www.sacredsites.org.uk/>; Blain and Wallis 2007; Wallis and Blain 2011), both individually and in collaboration, has been reflexive: we upfront ourselves as both scholars and Pagans, not to take up positions of exclusivity (although inevitably some scholars and practitioners will assume this) or to speak as “Pagan apologists” (as we were once called, in an attempt to close dialogue) but to acknowledge that all research is partial and that a location traversing insider/outsider, among others, offers a particular yet nuanced and useful contribution to the field. Our research has focused on Pagan representations of the past, exploring variously gender and sexuality, shamanisms/neo-shamanisms, reconstructionist polytheisms including Heathenry, engagements with prehistoric monuments as “sacred” sites and “spiritual” encounters with objects in museum collection displays. We are interested in how Pagans construct their identities and negotiate past and present in order to do so, interweaving the physical past (archaeological monuments, artefacts and reconstructions of these, human remains on display and in storage) with representations of these (the interpretations of archaeologists as well as Pagans’ own imaginings), in a slippery, largely secular and materialist “liquid modernity” (Bauman 2000) of the present.

In this chapter, we first summarise our findings from the *Sacred Sites* project, by dealing in turn with Pagan engagements with sites and artefacts, and the shifting beliefs and practices evidenced by these, then move on to focus on Pagan interest in

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<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, contemporary Pagans and Paganisms are given an upper case “P” for consistency. A small “p” is used for ancient paganisms.

“ancestor welfare”, particularly “respect” for and the reburial of ancient pagan human remains. Issues here emerge of competing interest in “heritage”, particularly how “ancestors” are constituted, as well as contest to institutional authority from ontological and epistemological standpoints which diverge from orthodox beliefs, with yet a diversity of Pagan voices. We treat as axiomatic the tension between Pagans’ emotional engagements and the assumption of scientific enquiry. We conclude by arguing that in order to move on from entrenched stereotypical attitudes and the impasse created where spirituality and science meet, it is crucial for the stakeholders to engage in dialogue, prepared to renegotiate the positions from which they speak.

## Paganisms in Britain Today

Paganisms are of many kinds. Typically, they are characterised as spiritual paths which involve approaching nature as sacred, with attempts to re-enchant practitioners’ daily lives in an increasingly secular and materialist world. But just as anthropologists and scholars of religion have problematised the sacred/profane divide, and Pagans are often voracious readers of such literature, so Pagan engagements with their world(s) are complex, resisting simple classification. For some, human cultures have become increasingly distant from nature and Pagan practices enable reconnection and empowerment. For others, negotiating animic understandings, humans are part of an interconnected world in which rigid dualisms do not hold. Some Pagans are, yet, dualist, “worshipping” a God and Goddess who, while not transcendent in the sense of the Abrahamic religions, are honoured with practices which seek to balance centuries of gender discrimination. Other Pagans are polytheist, their gods (small “g”) evident all around them in nature and with distinct personalities. Others do without gods and the trappings of “religion” but perform their lives in ways which are distinctly Pagan, playfully interweaving elements of folklore (pixies, fairies, and so on) into road protest cultures, for instance (Letcher 2001).

Seeking connection or even “oneness” with elements of the natural world, and thereby a sense of understanding of one’s place in the world, might be said to be a common interest for Pagans. Equally, Pagans tend to look to ancient paganisms, especially to various constructed, imagined or evidenced “pasts” for sources of inspiration, interpretations (artistic, academic, romantic) which are themselves rooted in time and place. Whether it be the early twentieth-century analyses of “witch hunts” or later and recent scholarship from archaeology, classics or studies of mediaeval literature, Pagans have investigated interpretations of worldviews and practices of various periods of history and prehistory. As such, they may be drawn to careers in disciplines dealing with “the past” (see also Sayer 2009). Indeed, the development of Druidry (with both a Christian and Pagan focus) is associated with the early development of archaeology in Britain, notably so through the figure of the antiquary William Stukeley (whose Druidry, though essentially Abrahamic in construction, has been

influential on Pagan Druids today) (see Hutton 2009; Wallis 2009). Some practices and Paganisms therefore have roots in early to mid-twentieth-century interpretations and understandings (with various developments since, of course), others in later or current interpretations. The emergence of “reconstructionist” Paganisms has been a particular feature of the last 2–3 decades. Reconstructionists—tending towards polytheist understandings of a sacred landscape peopled with many deities and other beings (ancestors, landwights, spirits of place, elves or others)—have tended in particular to follow developments in archaeology, anthropology and folkloristics (Wallis and Blain 2003).

Another strand in the construction of Pagan worldviews and practices for today must be the importation of understandings of “indigeneity” elsewhere. While this may result in appropriations (see, e.g., Rose 1984; Wallis 2003) which are highly problematic for the people whose practices are appropriated, it is also associated with attempts to “reclaim” worldviews which inspire interactions with ancestors and landscape. Just as some archaeologists turn to anthropology for ethnographic analogies for context and interpretation, many Pagans draw on perceived parallels for nuances of spiritual practice. Our research indicates that most recently Pagans have picked up on the rethinking of animism in academia, notably Amazonian anthropology, filtered particularly through Graham Harvey’s volume *Animism* (Harvey 2005). These animic Pagans often combine Tylor’s sense of animism—the belief that “animals”, “objects” and other “things” have “souls”, hence the conception of “living landscapes”—with the more recent recasting of animism as a relational ontology (see, e.g., Herva and VanPool and VanPool this volume), situating human persons in an interrelated world which is filled with persons, only some of whom are human. We have used the term “new-indigenous” to refer to attempts to embed not only formalised ritual but daily life in worldviews of a living landscape, peopled by ancestors, landwights and other non-human persons. Discourses of indigeneity surface among Pagan groups referring to themselves as “New Tribes”, and in the relationships developing between some Pagans and the physical remains of ancestors excavated by archaeologists and stored and displayed in museums—to which we will return.

## Paganisms and Archaeology in Britain

The emotional attachment to place, or topophilia, is well known as a constituent of national or ethnic identity, but also local “belonging” (Tuan 1974). The place is claimed by the participant as one where they are at home or one where they seek to be, one which holds intense meaning for them. Topophilia associated with historic or prehistoric sites is described for Pagan practitioners by Bowman and others, and this research alongside our own evidences how ancient sites are not for them places merely of archaeological interest (e.g., Bowman 2000). They are spoken of as sacred places, living landscapes, temples, which appear to hold answers to important questions of meaning and ontology, and hence they become spaces for transformation,

enabling re-enchantment that extends to other dimensions of the Pagan world. Pagans may view themselves as the inheritors of the “wisdom” of ancient cultures, particularly those of the British and wider European Neolithic, Bronze and Iron Ages which provide sources for this inspiration and re-enchantment, while also drawing on images of “indigeneity” elsewhere and seeing themselves as echoing indigenous voices, taking up campaigns relating to land use, sacredness of place and preservation of heritage. As such, it is likely that the term “sacred site” entered Pagan discourse via comments on and publications by indigenous spokespersons—many Pagans are familiar with presentations of indigenous groups’ perspectives on issues such as the repatriation of artefacts and reburial of human remains kept in non-indigenous museums and collections (e.g., Layton 1989a, b; Messenger 1989; Carmichael et al. 1994; Murray 1996; Mihesuah 2000). Their intimate engagements with sacred sites result, for many Pagans, in representations of place adorning shrine spaces and house walls, and the geometry and symbolism of past and present Paganisms from art and archaeology finds its way into domestic and garden design, tourist mementoes and personal decoration (for further discussion, see North-Bates 2006).

Re-enchantment practices relating to place take a variety of forms and may be articulated very differently within practitioner understandings of place, materiality and sacredness. With practices and beliefs very much rooted in the land, materiality is central to what many Pagans do. For Pagans, “matter matters, and it matters much” (York 2010:76). But this matter is not “material” as contrasted with “spiritual” in Western discourse, but a state of paradox outside of this dichotomy. As such, Whitehead suggests “[t]he Pagan merely laughs out of her acceptance of the freedom that is born of paradox” (Whitehead 2010:99). Since for many Pagans “divinity” is in all things, so it is typical for Pagans to build relationships with things, resonating with Pels’ (2008:266) assertion that “materiality is a quality of relationship rather than a thing in itself”. Building relationship with sacred sites itself raises the issue of where sacredness is located. Is a sacred site more sacred than the landscape around it? Practitioners may engage with “nature” (and/or supernatural or otherworlds, depending on personal ways of knowing) in the form of spirits, landwights, ancestors, gods and goddesses at such “power places” where the presence of these beings is felt most strongly, considering this manifestation to be marked by the monuments erected by ancient peoples. Alternatively, a sacred site may be seen as similar to a modern church, a place deliberately consecrated to deities or a generalised “divine” presence. Or, a location such as a hill, a copse or a river may be a particularly beautiful “natural” site to which both deities and people are drawn, or indeed a living entity in itself.<sup>2</sup> At sacred sites Pagans perform seasonal rituals and rites of passage such as hand-fasting (marriage), child blessing and the honouring of the recently deceased. They may conduct calendrical and astronomical celebrations or festivals which are public, also (re)forming temporary communities

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<sup>2</sup>On comparable indigenous and prehistoric conceptions of place, see Bradley 2000.

to celebrate Pagan identity and values. Yet often Pagan rites are private, even secret, and they may involve perceived direct communication with spirits of the land via altered consciousness. Increasingly, these places are forming an essential part of Pagans' lives and communities.

The most visibly evident Pagan activities at sites regarded "sacred" are the making of ritual and leaving of offerings. This evidence only touches the surface, however. What the outsider sees are accumulations of incense sticks, coins, flowers, pieces of paper with vows or poems written on them, chalk marks on stones and other forms of offering or decoration, sometimes scorch marks on grass and smoke deposits on stones, and in particular numerous empty tea light holders used to light dark places but also forming a part of ritual experience in itself (candles might be used to represent the element of fire, the sun, the return of light in the dark time of winter, and so on). What the outsider hears includes voiced invocations, singing, repetitive drumming and chanting. Some of the activities or offerings can be destructive (heat damaged sarsen stones will fracture, for instance), others less so. In our experience and our discussions with various Pagans, many, even most, Pagan rituals or other "visits" do not leave these traces, as the ethos "leave only footprints" is acted out. Large-scale calendrical Druid rituals at Avebury which involve bringing offerings of fruits and flowers also involve the removal of these. The most frequent offerings are small pourings of beer, cider, mead or another drink, soon evaporated, and the intangible performances of poetry, song or story. Within the overlapping networks and communities of British Paganisms, there have been sustained attempts to educate "new" celebrants on the need to be respectful both of the place and of the impact on other site users. While rituals may involve formality and special items of dress, they may also be meditative or may look like any other form of visit. The family picnicking at a stone circle may well be Pagans celebrating a special day. Some "visits" are pilgrimages, with adherents coming long distances to the better known sites; many are of local people who attend regularly for ritual and non-ritual purposes, taking time to learn the place in its many moods, as for instance at the small circles of the Peak District. They may bring rubbish bags to clear up anything left behind by other (Pagan or non-Pagan) visitors. Many of our informants stress that particular sites are important to them because of the feelings that they arouse and the experiences met with there: that is, that the place communicates with them, that ancestors or the site's builders can be met with, or connections with deities more strongly experienced there. Often they seek more knowledge, both experiential and scientific, about place and time, and their place in these.

In learning more about places and pasts, Pagans form an important audience for presentations of archaeology and history. In past work we have argued that they may be better seen more often as allies of conservationists than as opponents, and this relationship is increasingly evidenced. Indeed, some Pagans have come to their spirituality through other forms of direct engagements with "the past", whether these are history rambles or participation in archaeological digs. Conversely, it is not unknown for Pagans to find themselves increasingly interested in prehistory and indeed to become archaeologists. For many Pagans, various periods or histories become sources of inspiration or knowledge, culture and artistic expressions to

which they may feel drawn, whether with a specific focus (e.g., on early Iron Age archaeology and on later mediaeval literature for some Celtic reconstructionists), even to the extent of involvement with living history events and reconstructions of clothing and artefacts. This attraction of the past ranges from an interest, a feeling of connection, or a hobby, to a deep longing to be part of a perceived “golden age” of stability and morality. Some explicitly describe themselves as “pre-modern” in their seeking identity in such pasts. One practitioner journal focuses on pre-modern “radical traditionalism” (Blain and Wallis 2007:23):

reject(ing) the modern, materialist reign of quantity over quality, the absence of any meaningful spiritual values, environmental devastation, the mechanization and over-specialization of urban life, and the imperialism of corporate mono-culture, with its vulgar values of progress and efficiency ... yearn(ing) for the small, homogeneous tribal societies that flourished before Christianity.<sup>3</sup>

This preface seems to project a highly romanticised, homogenous, “past” in which “small...tribal societies” have “a harmonious relationship between men and women vs. the war between the sexes”. We suspect that not only historians and archaeologists, but also some of the journal’s readers and indeed contributors, would find reasons to reject the imagining of apparently all pre-Christian societies as small, tribal and existing in a gender-balanced harmony with nature. Yet the concepts expressed here may be seen as constituting a discourse or set of background assumptions about “the past” and “tribes” found in varying degrees in many of today’s works by Pagan authors, and in many of the comments that our informants—whether they adhere to generic Pagan, Druid, Wiccan, neo-Shaman, Heathen or other “reconstructionist” philosophies or spiritualities—make to us directly or via Pagan internet sites and forums. Particularly, these do include ideas about harmony with nature, gender equality and a feeling of belonging with other identifiable people who share in these concepts and who observe similar ritual practices, so that anthropological examples which seem to counteract the underlying assumptions (for instance about unequal manipulation of power, differential valuing of contributions of women and men, or indeed state formation) are denied as aberrations.

Yet these concepts and denials are also critiqued strongly through the same Pagan forums and internet sites, and even the comments which seem to indicate a harking back to a “simpler” past rarely suggest that the authors would actually like to live in that time. Few Pagans express a desire to actually be “pre-moderns” (though we have met a few who do). The focus on “tradition” is not necessarily equated with a rejection of current ideologies: Pagans, including those using the term “reconstructionists”, tell us their aim is to take from the past what helps them make sense of the present and the future. Strands of remembering or creation, invention (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) and appropriation emerge, and reflexive practitioners making (often deliberate) use of these position themselves as spiritual people and construct

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<sup>3</sup>The preface to this journal, *Tyr*, is available online at [http://tyrjournal.tripod.com/about\\_the\\_journal.htm](http://tyrjournal.tripod.com/about_the_journal.htm).

complex cultural identities. There are those whose re-enchantment practices are avowedly romantic, but equally re-enchantment practices may be more reflexive and creatively irreverent (e.g., the Secular Order of Druids or SOD, in the UK, with their Tasmanian branch, the Secular Order of Druids in Tasmania, or SOD-IT).<sup>4</sup> As such, new Pagan traditions are creatively constructed, embedded in place and time, and, quite simply, enjoyed. Pagan approaches to “pasts” have therefore some similarity with approaches or assumptions of the much larger and growing number of those seeking ancestral connections in other ways, perhaps through family history records and grave inscriptions, and so creating knowledge of “self” through present-day practices and narratives.

## The “Sacred” in the Sites

Part of our project has been to examine how and when concepts of “sacredness” enter Pagan and heritage discourses, and how they are used. In some areas of the world, notably North America and Australia, discourses of indigeneity, ancestors and sacredness of landscape have been articulated to contest government or official understandings, including those of National Parks Services and some archaeologists and anthropologists, in relation to issues of access, ownership and management (e.g., Biolsi and Zimmerman 1997; Swidler et al. 1997; Wallis 1999, 2003). In Britain, Pagans have adopted “sacred site” and “ancestors” rather than “archaeological site” or “monument” or “remains”, suggesting both a spiritual element to “visiting” and (particularly through “ancestors”) an implication of direct engagement with landscape rather than a more voyeuristic relationship with a “closed” past. In particular, as earlier indicated, these terms indicate a deliberate alignment with indigenous usages (for related discussion, see Ivakhiv 2001).

At the opposite end of a continuum, for animist Pagans “sites” or landscapes are living places where a human practitioner meets other-than-human people (spirits of place, landwights, ancestors, birds and animals, and so on) for whom this is home. These “alive” sacred sites—whether marked or not by ancient monuments—are seen as embedded within *living landscapes*, so that it is as much the wider context as the specific location at which connections are made, which is significant. In these cases, the “sacredness” of landscape is not of human determination or inscription. The human marking by a monument, or the interment of human remains, does not confer sacredness; rather, sacredness is a property of the place, something which the place “tells” humans and it is those who recognise this who may then mark it out with such features (visible or otherwise) as monuments and the interment of human remains, thereby enhancing the dialogue between people and place. Much of this

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<sup>4</sup>Tim Sebastian (aka Sebastian and Woodman), Chosen Chief of the SODs, died in 2007. See pages in his memory at [www.grahamharvey.org/Tim.htm](http://www.grahamharvey.org/Tim.htm).



sort of animic thinking among these Pagans resonates with that of indigenous animists precisely because many Pagans are voracious readers of the anthropology and archaeology books that inform their thinking.

While many Pagans self-ascribe as indigenous to Britain, this land is more widely perceived as having no indigenous peoples as a result of thousands of years of immigration, or it is assumed that people born in Britain are not “indigenous”. Pagans seeing themselves as indigenous range in political leaning from the Nationalist right, assuming a genetic link to ancient, particularly Anglo-Saxon or Celtic ancestors, and therefore “more indigenous” than later immigrants, to the left, claiming no privileged relationship with prehistoric ancestors but feeling an emotional or spiritual link nonetheless. For these Pagans, “the ancestors”, particularly ancient pagans, are of great interest. Depending on one’s “tradition” or “path”—Heathens may focus on Anglo-Saxon and Viking remains, Druids on the “Celts”, and so on—the approach may be period or culture-specific but not necessarily, and Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic, Bronze Age, Iron Age and Roman remains in Britain are all of relevance to varying degrees. Indeed the “respect” offered to ancient pagans may similarly be extended to more recent Christian sites and remains. This highlights the sort of connection that many Pagans have with the past—a spiritual or emotional one which connects them with the living, sacred landscape of the present, their recently deceased relatives and all those people (human and other-than-human) of Britain who have lived and died here. The view is far-reaching and holistic: “everything is connected”. For non-Pagans, these sorts of links to the past and ancestors are often viewed as fringe, eccentric and inauthentic, and such portrayals are also reproduced and reified in popular media presentations. While decolonising methodologies may be in the process of adoption elsewhere (Smith 1999; Watkins 2000), facilitating participatory decision-making among communities local to archaeological monuments, in Britain people who live close to a “site” are by contrast not deemed to be able to interpret it authentically or even to have a valid special interest.

Despite this, we have seen a gradual insertion of the term “sacred” into heritage discourse and publications over the last two decades. The English Heritage World Heritage Site Management Plan for Avebury argued that: “Paganism may well be the fastest growing religion in Britain and this is linked with the increasing interest in the mystical significance of Avebury as a ‘sacred’ place” (Pomeroy 1998:27). Commenting on his negotiations with Pagans, David Miles (Chief Archaeologist, English Heritage) used the term “sacred site” when referring to “Seahenge”, stating: “the experience of working and discussing with [Pagans] was extremely fruitful” (Wallis and Lymer 2001:107). Archaeologist Francis Prior, in the *Time Team* special on “Seahenge”, stated that: “I think that what I’ve learnt, largely due to our pagan friends, is that as an archaeologist I’m too analytical and I’m too removed from [Seahenge]...I’ve learnt to get back to treating it as a religious site, as a religious thing”. And, Clews Everard, former site manager of Stonehenge, agreed that the term “sacred site” enabled round table dialogue over open access negotiations (Wallis 2003:165). Signage at Avebury in Wiltshire and Stanton Moor in the Derbyshire Peak District adopts terminology of “special” and “spiritual”, stating for

example that “Stanton Moor is a Scheduled Monument because of its national importance” and asking visitors to “help us look after it by: respecting these ancient sites and the beliefs of the people who built them”. This signage refers to local legends and possible prehistoric ceremonies “concerned with living and working, life and death”, some “everyday”, others “more special”, seasonal, and possibly involving dance. Other signs refer to the complex of Bronze Age monuments on the Moor as indicating it was a “spiritual place” and a “special place as a site for funerals and ceremonies”.<sup>5</sup> The meanings of sacredness and spirituality, though, are very wide ranging.

Our work for the *Sacred Sites* project has looked not only at when “sacredness” is used but the tensions between usages and user groups. It is not hard to find examples of how Pagans, Goddess worshippers, Christians and heritage managers will inscribe a “sacred” site in very different ways (Wallis 2003; Blain and Wallis 2007). Druids or Heathens may promote direct (and tactile) engagement with sites, and with the beings—landwights, spirits of place, ancestors—felt to be still inherent in the landscape. For Wiccans such places may be temples in which to approach their “Goddess(es)”. In turn, Goddess worshippers may contest the disregard for sacredness which they find inherent in some masculinist archaeologies.<sup>6</sup> For some heritage managers, “sacred” indicates the importance of “conservation” or “preservation”, and preservation-ethos oriented Pagans would agree. For other Pagans, and some archaeologists we have spoken to, there is the idea that spirituality of place may continue through past to present. Increasingly, there is communication between Pagan understandings of place, movement and inherent sacredness, and theory-based and museum-linked archaeological and anthropological interpretation.

Discussion and negotiation, then, is happening: some reconciliations are already underway. The Stonehenge “peace process” and round table meetings have facilitated Summer Solstice “managed open access”, for instance; yet these are not equal partnerships. Power is inherent in the establishment and no comparable power is vested in the mixed Pagan/Druid/alternative representation on the negotiations.<sup>7</sup> For several years, though, the Stonehenge summer solstice event has proceeded without

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<sup>5</sup> The situation at Stanton Moor involving a protest camp “protecting” the moorland from quarrying, and largely focusing around sacredness of landscape, has been extensively discussed by doctoral researcher Aimee Blease-Bourne (2011).

<sup>6</sup> A famous example is the ‘dialogue’ instituted between archaeologist Ian Hodder and Anita Louise, a leading member of the Goddess movement: see the Catalhöyük excavation webpages at <http://www.catalhoyuk.com/>, and a view from the Goddess community at [http://www.awakened-woman.com/goddess\\_in\\_Anatolia.htm](http://www.awakened-woman.com/goddess_in_Anatolia.htm). For discussion of these issues, see Rountree 2003.

<sup>7</sup> This is demonstrated in a BBC documentary, *National Trust: The Stones*. In this, Brian Viziondanz, campaigner and round-table member, commented that the “table” was “pear-shaped” rather than round. Brian, who died in 2011, is one of the people referred to in the Director’s Diary (accessible from the programme website at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour/documentaries/features/national-trust5.shtml>) as “outside society’s boundaries” and it is implied there that he is “a druid”. He was a leading campaigner for the Stonehenge event, but Druidry was not his spirituality. Likewise, his day job located him within “society’s boundaries”—he was a roofer, indicated in the documentary, in addition to being a highly articulate social critic.

many problems, facilitated by the table discussions. And at winter solstice in 2010, when fewer people brave the cold than at the more widely publicised summer solstice, those who did brave the weather were met with beautiful, deep snow. Elsewhere, alliances of Pagans, archaeologist and heritage groups at Stanton Moor or Thornborough Henges point to other ways for developments of practice and interpretation on all sides. Such transparency, communication and participatory dialogue must be welcomed by all concerned.

For transparent negotiation and dialogue to remain successful, it is important that all parties using the terms “sacred site”, “spiritual site” and “ancestors” are explicit about what they mean. Our documentary analysis shows some archaeologists and heritage managers apparently coming to both theorise the term in their discourse and recognise diversities of “Pagan” use of both term and site (Blain et al. 2004b). Similarly, while Pagans tend to have a vague or perhaps fluid understanding of sacredness, some others are debating and problematising the term. Hubert has drawn attention to discrepancies between Christian and indigenous concepts of “sacredness” as applied to place: peculiarly, a church can be “deconsecrated”, whereas in many indigenous understandings “sacredness” is inherent in place or in non-human manifestations there (Hubert 1994; Cruikshank 2005). Much heritage discourse in Britain seems to us consonant with the former view, derived from a constructed dichotomy between what is “sacred” and what is “profane”, in line with other dualisms emerging from Cartesian philosophy, and migrating from religion to sociology through Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Durkheim 1912/1964). Many theorists have critiqued dualism, Bakhtin and Tambiah particularly addressing the sacred/profane opposition, but in heritage documents and management discourse it still appears, with sacredness associated with stillness, silence and awed reverence, and hence a “sacred site” being in need of careful preservation (Bakhtin 1968; Tambiah 1990). Within this dualism, prehistoric sacred sites become analogous to Christian cathedrals where peaceful reverence, quietness and hushed tones are now seen as the only correct ways to show respect. We have met Pagans who are uncomfortable with “partying” at Stonehenge managed open access events, and we have met Pagans who express a view that if a site is not in recipient of celebration (as either party-site or temple or quietude) it is no longer “sacred”. The spectrum of understandings of landscape, place, monument and “sacred” site, then, is diverse, contested, and in a process of ongoing negotiation. As a targeted example, the remainder of our paper considers a particular set of issues relating to Pagan engagements with “sacred” sites and “ancestors”, those of Pagan calls for respect and potential reburial, focusing on the consultation opened by English Heritage and the National Trust regarding possible reburial of an “ancestor” whose bones are in Avebury’s Alexander Keiller Museum.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The initial Avebury consultation documents are online at <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/server/show/nav.19822>. The contribution from our Sacred Sites, Contested Rites/Rights project is at [http://www.sacredsites.org.uk/news/Avebury\\_response.html](http://www.sacredsites.org.uk/news/Avebury_response.html). The website of Honouring the Ancient Dead (HAD) is accessible at <http://www.honour.org.uk/>.

## Respect and Reburial

Site welfare, for some Pagans, extends to “ancestor welfare”. In 2004, the *Western Daily Press* (Bristol) reported that “Druid leaders” had “called for the creation of a sacred site at Stonehenge for the re-burial of human remains” (unearthed during the implementation of the now postponed Stonehenge Management Plan): “They want a parcel of land near the site to be set aside as a ceremonial shrine for the Pagan and Druid communities” (*Western Daily Press*, 2 March 2004). It is important to reiterate that such Pagans are not seeking privileged status in relation to the human remains, site or landscape, in this instance, Stonehenge. Rather, given the spiritual, emotional connection these Pagans feel to ancestors and place, they feel it is their duty to honour and respect these things and encourage other people to do the same. The Druid leader known as King Arthur Pendragon has suggested (personal communication) that while pagan remains are regarded as scientific specimens, Christian ancestors are by contrast afforded due respect (by the national Church organisations, and in England there is *Guidance for Best Practice for the Treatment of Human Remains Excavated from Christian Burial Grounds in England* [Mays 2005]), which is why he is campaigning for the pagan ancestors at Stonehenge.

This sort of interest in archaeological sites (see also the work of the Druid Paul Davies, e.g., 1997, whose publications kick-started the reburial issue for Pagans in Britain), challenges the very nature of archaeological practice. Excavating human remains and associated material informs the ongoing process of interpreting the past, but reburial is for these Pagans one part of a much bigger picture concerning “respect” for prehistoric human remains (and wider archaeology). In 2004, the group Honouring the Ancient Dead was established by the Druid priestess Emma Restall Orr, with the aim to “ensure respect for ancient pagan remains” through “clear interactions between archaeologists, historians, landowners, site caretakers, museums and collectors...and the pagan community”.<sup>9</sup> For Restall Orr, the scientific analysis and storage of human remains is problematic (see also Davies 1997, 1998/9): excavation severs the original connection that burial made with the landscape.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast, other Pagans see no problem with the excavation, analysis and storage of human remains in museum collections; it is through such practice that the past comes to be understood, particularly the past paganisms which inform today’s practices. In response to the interest in ancestor welfare announced by various Pagans and the organisation HAD, Yvonne Aburrow (2004) formed the group “Pagans for Archaeology” which argues against reburial, “so that the memory of the ancestors can be perpetuated and rescued from oblivion, and the remains can be studied scientifically for the benefit of everyone”, pointing to how respect can be offered in other ways<sup>11</sup>: specifically, respect should mean memory, which involves

<sup>9</sup> See the HAD website at [www.honour.org.uk](http://www.honour.org.uk).

<sup>10</sup> See also <http://www.warband.org.uk/page5.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> See Aburrow’s Wiki: <http://pagantheologies.pbwiki.com/Finding+a+compromise>.

recovering the stories of past people.<sup>12</sup> As a compromise to reburial, Aburrow (2006) suggests the use of “keeping places” where remains can be kept respectfully, without reburial, but with access provided for both Pagan ritual and archaeological analysis. This idea may not be financially viable in practice, as Aburrow herself acknowledges, but in any case this group appears to suggest that reburial should never be an option, positioning itself diametrically to the call for automatic reburial, and also distancing itself from the “case-by-case” suggestions of HAD.

For many archaeologists, too, of course, the notion of reburial signals the potential loss and destruction of heritage (e.g., Payne 2007), while the excavation of human remains is in itself a respectful process. One only has to be on site when human remains are discovered to get a sense of the emotions raised by the find, to see the careful attention given to the remains. As Sayer points out, “[t]he need for respect has been enshrined in the law since 1857 and reinforced with the publication of the Guidance for Best Practice. Theoretically, excavation is a ‘meticulous’ process, and could be seen as intrinsically respectful” (Sayer 2009; also Williams and Williams 2007; Leahy 2009). Issues of authority, legitimacy and ownership are raised by these varied discourses on respect and reburial, as evidenced by opinion expressed during the Avebury Consultation.

## The Avebury Consultation

The period of public consultation on reburial at Avebury (2008–9) was initiated by English Heritage and the National Trust in response to an official request for the reburial of certain high-profile human remains held at the Alexander Keiller Museum. As “Reburial Officer” of the Council of British Druid Orders (CoBDO),<sup>13</sup> Paul Davies submitted a letter to the National Trust and English Heritage (received 24 June 2006), calling for the reburial of, in particular, the child known as “Charlie” (excavated by Harold Grey in the early twentieth century from the southern ditch of Avebury henge), which has been on and off displayed in the museum for some years. Davies collected signatures from visitors at Avebury for a petition calling for reburial and organised a small protest at the Alexander Keiller museum in January 2007,<sup>14</sup> which caught the attention of the local press (Kerton 2007).

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<sup>12</sup>See *Pagans for Archaeology* on Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=16336348284>; also the Pagans for Archaeology Blog at: <http://archaeopagans.blogspot.com/> and Pagans for Archaeology Yahoo group discussion list at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/archaeopagans/>.

<sup>13</sup>Druid politics are complex. Here, in an example of this, Davies’ actions were deemed inappropriate by other members of CoBDO, leading to the splitting of interested parties into the (“official”) CoBDO and CoBDO West (of which Davies was a member, though no longer). In a further layer of complexity, CoBDO’s standpoint on reburial is almost identical to that of Davies/CoBDO West. Tensions between personalities often drive such Druid politics.

<sup>14</sup>See: [http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/upload/pdf/Appendix\\_3\\_CoBDO\\_Petition.pdf?1270285434](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/upload/pdf/Appendix_3_CoBDO_Petition.pdf?1270285434).

On receipt of this letter, Dr David Thackray, Head of Archaeology for the National Trust and Dr Sebastian Payne, Chief Scientist of English Heritage, were charged to respond and they held seven meetings with CoBDO in 2007 and 2008. Thackray and Payne published a draft report outlining the consultation process, stating their response to the claims and asking for public comment before any decision was made. The final report, a year later than anticipated, was released in April 2010 and recommended keeping the remains in the museum: an outcome which (to us) was the best outcome at the time but, problematically, was pre-framed in the procedure of the consultation, as we discussed in detail in our own submission (Blain 2009) and in a recent article for *Public Archaeology* (Wallis and Blain 2011). In order to position their claim, CoBDO drew on DCMS (Department of Culture, Media and Sport) guidelines—the *Report of the Working Group on Human Remains* (2003) and *Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums* (2005)<sup>15</sup>—focusing their attention on genealogy and claiming a genetic link between modern people and prehistoric people in the Avebury region.<sup>16</sup> The heritage bodies agreed to deal with the claim on these terms but concluded “we take the view that this is not a direct and close genealogical link in the sense meant in the DCMS Guidance”. Taking account of DCMS guidelines regarding claims for cultural continuity, Thackray and Payne added: “Mr Davies and CoBDO make no claim for continuity of belief, customs and language between them and the human remains”, and:

English Heritage and The National Trust recognise that CoBDO’s associations with the Avebury landscape, to them a sacred landscape and a place of special pilgrimage, and their feelings for their prehistoric ancestors, deserve respect and sympathetic consideration. However these sites, landscapes and human remains have cultural and spiritual significance to many others as well (Thackray and Payne 2008).

Engaging in a consultation process, especially one which is transparent, is a positive development, reflective of the dialogic processes we have highlighted elsewhere (e.g., regarding managed open access for summer solstice at Stonehenge). The claim was countered in terms of the DCMS guidelines, because CoBDO postulated a genetic link, yet a link which is no more significant than for any other interest group or indeed most members of the public (the Druids were not asserting a “special relationship” with the remains as Hole (2008) assumes). As CoBDO did not and could not claim a continuing link of belief, customs or language, for which there is also provision in the DCMS guidelines, their claim was not addressed in this regard. So, although the report is sensitive to the Druids’ emotional attachments it does not take this into account over any other individual’s or group’s emotional interest. There is room for emotional responses in the consultation process, with the responses at least being heard, but problematically, there is no methodology for using such responses as evidence in themselves or for moving this aspect to a level which

<sup>15</sup> Available online: [www.culture.gov.uk/Reference\\_library/Publications/archive\\_2003/wgur\\_report\\_2003.htm](http://www.culture.gov.uk/Reference_library/Publications/archive_2003/wgur_report_2003.htm); [http://www.culture.gov.uk/reference\\_library/publications/3720.aspx/](http://www.culture.gov.uk/reference_library/publications/3720.aspx/).

<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that their claims were for British and European connections in general and not for Druid or Pagan groups alone.

involves negotiation.<sup>17</sup> While a spiritual or emotional connection may be awkward to deal with practically, empirically even, it is of no less import than a scientific view. Our point is not that Druids should be given special treatment over other interest groups; rather, it is that felt spiritual connections to the past must be dealt with respectfully, and that the DCMS guidance used to address Druid interests was inappropriate for this case and predetermined an outcome of retention. What is more, the arguments presented by the heritage bodies stem from a discourse of the scientific approach as axiomatic. This is reflected in the BABAO (British Association for Biological Anthropology and Osteoarchaeology) submission to the consultation in which the Druids' belief that "bones are people" is dismissed as a "philosophically untenable position" (Schutkowski 2009)—without argument to this effect.

Pagan attachments to "ancestors" similarly cannot be written off as nationalistic in order to close down dialogue. More often, as we have demonstrated, Pagans are not claiming a "blood-and-soil" or some other privileged, exclusive connection to the past. The DCMS guidelines indicate connections as involving genealogical descent or cultural community of origin including continuity of belief, customs or language, and country of origin. These have been critiqued by responses including that of *Honouring the Ancient Dead* (2009) which stated, rightly in our view:

the language of this Guidance is inappropriate for this case, the document having been developed for overseas claims such as those of indigenous Australians; being forced to use the Guidance has put CoBDO in a no-win situation. If a British group such as CoBDO had been able to talk of their significant "interest" as one of several stakeholders in the future of the remains, instead of needing to justify an exclusive "claim", the relevance and value of their input could have been heard. This is true for all ancient remains of British origin and makes it essential that an inclusive language be offered that is appropriate for the British situation.

## **Competing "Spiritual" and "Scientific" Discourses: The Redisplay of Lindow Man at Manchester University Museum**

The views expressed by the interest groups, as crystallised in the example of the Avebury Consultation, point to a range of very different epistemological and ontological positions from which the views are articulated, and these tend to be polarised as "spiritual" vs. "scientific". Room is made for Pagan interests, for example in the case of the Avebury Consultation, but these are nonetheless viewed (explicitly or implicitly) as irrational and emotional, and therefore less reliable and valid than scientific arguments which are understood as being built on sound rational argument and empirical evidence. This is by no means to say that Pagans have been ignored; during the Avebury Consultation the Museums Association duly congratulated

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<sup>17</sup> This is a point also made by HAD in their (2009) press release on the Avebury Consultation, available online: [www.sacredsites.org.uk/news/HAD%20Press%20Release.pdf](http://www.sacredsites.org.uk/news/HAD%20Press%20Release.pdf); see also Restall Orr 2009.



EH and NT for the prompt and sensitive manner in which they have dealt with this claim. In accordance with the MA's Code of Ethics they have developed a relationship with the British Council of Druid Orders (CoBDO) based on mutual respect and understanding.... They have paid appropriate attention to their procedural responsibilities and gathered detailed evidence under the recommended criteria....EH and NT have followed a robust and comprehensive ethical decision-making process.<sup>18</sup>

And, during preparations for the temporary display of the bog body "Lindow Man" at the Manchester University Museum (MUM),<sup>19</sup> museum curators consulted a variety of interest groups including Pagans. This is part of a wider cultural diversity agenda in the UK which since the 1990s has sought to represent ethnic minorities and other marginal groups, and so challenge the established convention that Britain is culturally homogeneous. The "Consultation Report" of a meeting held on 10 February 2007 includes a section (3.2) entitled "Spirituality":

There was broad agreement that the approach taken to Lindow Man needed to reflect that he had been a living human being and that he was most definitely a "he" and not an "it", that he was an ancestor and that he must be treated with sensitivity.... People felt that there is a spiritual dimension to Lindow Man and how he is treated on display, which also extends to allowing visitors to demonstrate their respect for him as an ancestor.

The Museum should explore the option to create a shrine near the Lindow Man exhibition where people could make offerings to the ancestors, of which Lindow Man is a representative, but not make offerings *to* Lindow Man.

A Pagan perspective on Lindow Man is very important. We want to emphasise his humanity. He certainly is not a museum object.

Lindow Man's discovery and excavation was an intersection of then and now, of us and him, that is still ongoing, evolving and certainly not over (Sitch 2007).

As a result, the exhibition included the display of objects from local residents and other interested parties in order to show that interest in Lindow Man, since his discovery, has its own history. These objects included one woman's "Care Bear" soft toy and, from a Pagan, some crow feathers. Furthermore, an opening event in April 2008 involved ceremonies conducted by Pagans, and an area was set aside for people (particularly Pagans, though not exclusively so) to make offerings. Such dialogue and negotiation, though important, can be read as problematic. Whereas the Avebury Consultation was initiated by heritage managers in response to an effort to deal carefully with Pagan interests in human remains, in the case of the redisplay of Lindow Man it was museum professionals who solicited non-professional points of view in the decision-making process. In *Contesting Human Remains in Museum Collections*, which includes a chapter on Pagan interventions, Jenkins (2010:6) argues that:

the strongest campaigning has been waged, not by social movements external to the institution, as they are frequently characterised, but by actors inside it. Senior curators, directors and policy makers within the sector have been instrumental in raising various manifestations of the treatment of human remains as a problem.... As indicated by the case study on Pagan claims-makers in Chapter 4, members of the sector find it difficult to articulate consistently a rationale for resistance.

<sup>18</sup> See <http://www.museumsassociation.org/17777>.

<sup>19</sup> These remains were displayed at MUM twice prior, in 1987 and 1991.

For Jenkins, the way in which professionals (archaeologists, museum curators, heritage managers) have dealt with challenges to institutional authority from Pagans and others is unwarranted. Locating this “crisis of cultural authority” (p. 6) historically, she suggests that “the new museology, a body of critical thinking on museums, exemplifies a broad self-questioning within the profession and an attempt to re-orientate the purpose of the institution by professionals. The problem of human remains emerged with these ideas” (p. 10). As a result, “the remit of the museum has moved away from an empirical remit towards an inclusive, at times therapeutic, model in response to a crisis of legitimacy, and seeks to play a role in the recognition of community identities” (p. 82). Concerned with this shift towards cultural inclusivity and sensitivity over scientific rationalism and empirical investigation, Jenkins notes that in consultations over the redisplay of Lindow Man “those consulted raised a variety of different concerns, all of which had very little to do with this particular bog body. In short, Lindow Man became a vehicle for their individual preoccupations” (p. 124) which “displaces cultural authority by presenting these interpretations as equal” (p. 126).

The implicit implication here is that the opening up of museum practice to external scrutiny and plurality of interpretation has compromised the voices of curators working according to empirical methodology—an institutional authority and scientific line of enquiry which was presumably more valid, because more “scientific” and authoritative, than the views of Pagans and other non-professional interest groups. But the new museology, alongside interpretative archaeology and decolonising anthropology, has pointed to the discursive nature of scientific enquiry too: empirical research does not float in an apolitical vacuum but is subject to the biases and prejudices of each human interpreter. As historians of science have shown, even if it is presented as value-free, scientific practice is sociohistorically situated. While for Jenkins “[d]escribing human remains as “the dead” ... works to humanise human remains” (Jenkins 2010:132), so treating human remains as inert specimens is equally a discursive construction, and one which privileges empirical research of a particular type over other ways of knowing.

Yet we agree with Jenkins in many respects, for example that defining human remains as a special category separate from artefacts is problematic. The onus in this case is on curators to treat human remains differently, “with respect. Responsibility for them should be regarded as a privilege. Museums owe the highest standards of care to bodies and parts of bodies within their collections” (Jenkins 2010:131). While Pagans tend to be characterised as sympathetic to this perspective, for many, human remains and artefacts are not separate but related intrinsically on “emotional” and “spiritual” levels. For them, the people who interred these materials clearly meant for them to be together, and in a particular orientation to landscape and to each other, an intention disrupted by excavation and storage. Crucially, for these Pagans, materiality and spirituality are entwined: “[t]he tangible is accepted as sacred in and of itself” (York 2010:76). And perhaps this is “the rub” which the interest groups must address: while scientific archaeology, as a rationalist, post-Enlightenment discipline, tends to mark a separation between “matter” and “spirit”—and can with its methods attempt to “deal with” matter, tending also to

avoid its opposite (unless it be the “dumping bag” of “ritual”)—Pagans are involved in a project of re-enchantment which removes this divide and reiterates an animic world. In some cases, this leads Pagans in pilgrimages not only to archaeological sites where this sacredness is said to be felt most strongly, but also to museum collections. Here, they “visit” and pay respects to, even offer ritual to, artefacts, and indeed human remains, which are seen to offer direct, tangible links to ancestral pagans. So for some Pagans too, distinctions between human remains and artefacts are problematic.

In any case, it is problematic to assert the pre-eminence of science over other forms of knowledge production, such as Pagan animisms. It would be arrogant for Pagans to claim a special relationship with prehistoric human remains and artefacts since their links to this archaeology are no stronger than those of other interest groups. But it is comparably arrogant for scientists to privilege empirical enquiry over other ways of knowing. As a result, the way forward must involve consultation and dialogue which treats multiple ways of knowing as desirable. In a democratic process, this will inevitably mean that the majority view, that of science as axiomatic and “common sense”, will prevail, at least for now. But at the very least, consultation and dialogue with Pagans shows due respect. More than this, we anticipate that as entrenched stereotypes of Pagans as “fruitloops”<sup>20</sup> and “fringe” increasingly soften, dialogue will lead to Pagans and other spiritually motivated interest groups—including local residents with their own meanings of landscape—being more involved in decision-making. This dialogue will always be moderated by the authority of heritage managers and other professionals, but a more balanced compromise might be reached. There are pragmatic and practical ways in which compromise can be reached, for instance by moving away from the assumption that “science” and “spirituality” are mutually exclusive and cannot communicate. Examples already in effect include the reburial of human remains without provenance (and therefore scientific value) held at Leicester Museum (e.g., “the Wymeswold skull” [Trubshaw n.d.]), and the facilitating of Pagan rituals at human remains where appropriate (Bienkowski 2006).

## Conclusion

Pagans’ attachments to place, with feelings of intense belonging (or topophilia) and of relating directly to the landscape and its other-than-human denizens, are becoming an important component in understanding not only Paganisms today, but constructions of environment as “heritage” and hence the unfolding story of “the British landscape”. The issue of sacredness pertaining to archaeological sites, landscapes and artefacts, and how such “sacredness” is constituted, is a matter of ongoing negotiation and

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<sup>20</sup>See our discussion of archaeologists’ comments on the Avebury Consultation on the World Archaeological Congress email discussion list (Wallis and Blain 2011).

debate, and it is important that this process continues. To this end, the *Sacred Sites* project is conducting ongoing research around the sites or places referred to in this chapter, and others. In particular, our project is currently completing research to chart the recent historical developments in the Thornborough henges story and explore the significance of these monuments from the perspectives of the key stakeholders, including Pagans; publications are in preparation.<sup>21</sup> It is also crucial that the interest groups—Pagans, alternative archaeologists, earth mystics, heritage managers, academic and field archaeologists and other professionals affected by these issues—engage with one another in settings which are conciliatory rather than confrontational. This is particularly the case with regard to issues of respect for and the reburial of human remains, which is an emotive issue. While the Avebury case points to the value of consultation and transparency, we have argued that there is still room for the interest groups to meet on level ground. In order to do this it is important to develop ways of understanding one another's position, and to move on from a stand-off between rationality and religion. We are therefore collaborating with a number of stakeholders in an edited volume on "Archaeology, Pagans and Ancestors" which seeks to facilitate this understanding, develop common ground and, more ambitiously, agree on practical guidelines for addressing respect and reburial. As a result, we hope that in the near future multiple ways of knowing will fruitfully be brought to bear on the issues, so as to better inform debate and decision-making.

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**Part II**  
**Relational Ontologies and Engagements**  
**with Landscape**

## Chapter 4

# Spirituality and the Material World in Post-Medieval Europe

Vesa-Pekka Herva

**Abstract** This chapter explores the relationship between spirituality and engagement with the material world in post-medieval Europe. Spirituality is often understood as the subjective experience of religion and the supernatural, but that may be too narrow a view and a different perspective is pursued here on the basis of a relational ontology and epistemology. It will be proposed that spirituality is embedded in and arises from the everyday experience of and engagement with the material world. This means that the archaeology of spirituality involves more than just identifying and interpreting particular types of finds and phenomena in the archaeological record. The relevance of spirituality to the study of various material practices in post-medieval Europe is considered through examples which range from Renaissance urban planning to the history and archaeology of a small town in the northern periphery of seventeenth-century Sweden.

## Introduction

It is clear that religion, especially Christianity and the Christian church, has shaped the modern Western world and its development in various ways, but spirituality has attracted relatively little attention in post-medieval archaeology. Spirituality involves personal experiences of formal religion, but is better understood in more general terms as a sense that there is more to the world than just meaningless matter, more than what modern natural science is capable of reaching. This supposedly subjective nature of spirituality is probably one reason why spirituality has seemed difficult to grasp archaeologically, except in relatively special cases where archaeological

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finds appear to have an indisputable connection to spiritual matters (e.g., Hoggard 2004; Merrifield 1987; Ruppel et al. 2003; see also Gazin-Schwartz 2001; Wilkie 1997). Spirituality may also seem fairly marginal in importance, albeit perhaps interesting in its own right, when compared to the canonized big issues of the post-medieval past, such as the development of new economic systems and the European colonization of the world.

This chapter argues that spirituality is an aspect of ordinary human engagement with the material world and therefore more central to the archaeological study of the post-medieval Western world than has been appreciated previously. Spirituality, in other words, is argued to be integral to everyday practical activities and experience of the world, not (only) religious-like contemplation confined within the “inner” space of the human mind. It follows that the archaeology of spirituality involves much more than identifying and interpreting occasional material expressions of personal religious or religious-like experiences. Indeed, spirituality is something that must be incorporated in the very frameworks of archaeological interpretation, not simply something of which evidence should be found in the archaeological record. This view on spirituality also calls for a different understanding of what magic is about.

That said, my aim is not to discuss at length definitions of, or relationships between, spirituality, religion and magic. Rather, it will be suggested that spirituality and magic are useful concepts for rethinking the dynamics between people and the material world in the context of the post-medieval Western world. This approach might at first seem an attempt to unnecessarily mystify or “over-spiritualize” life in the past, but the point is actually to emphasize that the fairly recent post-medieval past may not be quite as familiar as historical archaeologists sometimes tend to think (see also Tarlow and West 1999).

The chapter opens with a brief discussion of how and why (Christian) religion and the Enlightenment intellectual heritage have resulted in the marginalization and misrepresentation of spirituality. An alternative view on spirituality will then be considered on the basis of a relational ontology and epistemology. The rest of the chapter discusses the relationship between spirituality and material practices in post-medieval Europe from several perspectives, focusing ultimately on early modern Finland (which was a part of the kingdom of Sweden until 1809). The discussion operates on a fairly general and theoretical level until the last part of the chapter where the town of Tornio and its history and archaeology are considered. While much of the chapter considers other than archaeological material, implications for archaeological interpretation are mapped throughout the discussion.

## **Spirituality and Material Practice**

Spirituality is generally supposed to be a property of the human mind rather than the material world “out there”. Spirituality is equalled, or considered akin, to religious thought and experience, something that concerns matters beyond the world here and

now, matters that are broadly supernatural or otherworldly in kind. While spirituality entails personal experiences of formal religion, such as Christianity, all forms of spirituality are not necessarily “properly religious” of nature. A variety of philosophies and movements with spiritual dimensions has flourished in post-medieval Europe, including Renaissance hermeticism, theosophy and neo-paganism among others. These alternative spiritualities, along with folk spiritualities, are of interest here because they can be used to generate new views on the nature and significance of spirituality in general.

Alternative and folk spiritualities, or what might collectively be referred to as “magical thinking”, have been marginalized and their meaning misunderstood since the Enlightenment. The idea was more or less unanimously accepted in the Renaissance world, and until the later seventeenth century, that material things have properties which in today’s terms would be understood as magical, but which at the time were considered entirely natural (e.g., Goodrick-Clarke 2008:40–41; Henry 2008:8–9). The scientific revolution and the Enlightenment 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. Other ideas about the world and its workings did, of course, persist within esoteric traditions and folk thought, but Enlightenment rationality, which came to monopolize “true knowledge”, deemed beliefs in the spiritual properties of material things as false beliefs and superstitions.

The Enlightenment intellectual heritage has had a profound impact on the present-day understanding of the world, but the recent interest in esoteric traditions among historians of ideas has helped to deconstruct many stereotypical notions about the nature and significance of (early modern) spirituality and magic. For example, Henry (2008) has argued that Renaissance magic has been incorrectly identified with ideas and practices which were actually marginal to the Renaissance systems of magical thinking. Rather than some irrational folly, he argues, the study of (natural) magic was a serious study of nature and the natural, albeit hidden, properties of things (Henry 2008:8). The study of magic was not separate from rational and “scientific” pursuits in any straightforward sense because the very division between the natural and the supernatural was differently understood at the time.

Recent historical studies of magic have in part informed the view adopted in this chapter, but the study of magic on the basis of written sources—however critical and contextual—is not quite enough for appreciating the significance of magical thinking in the past. To begin with, historians of ideas tend to treat esoteric traditions in distinctively intellectual terms. This leaves the influence of magical thinking on actual material practices a more or less open question. The cases of folk magic described in early modern court records and related documents in turn are likely to give only a very fragmentary, de-contextualized and quite possibly misrepresentative view on folk spirituality and associated magical practices (see Herva and Ylimaunu 2009:241). There is always a gap between the historically documented forms of magical thinking and the actual role of magical thinking in everyday life and material practices. The archaeology of spirituality should therefore not focus or rely on documentary sources too much, or take them too literally, when trying to

identify and understand the material expressions of magical thinking. Indeed, particular isolated beliefs and their material correlates may not be quite as important as the more general ideas about the world and its workings reflected in different forms of magical thinking (see further Herva 2010b; Herva et al. 2010; Herva and Salmi 2010). This means, in essence, that there is a need to look at archaeological material “through” magical thinking, instead of simply identifying and interpreting specific material expressions of magical thinking in the archaeological record.

The implications of the above view will be discussed later, but one clarification must be made at the outset. It is clear that people have had more or less peculiar “superstitions” about the world and its workings until quite recently (and they still do). Finnish folklore collected in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for example, would appear to suggest that folk beliefs about spiritual entities and powers were associated with all kinds of everyday practices. Some of these belief-related practices in the past may have left archaeologically identifiable traces whereas others have not. Now, looking archaeological material through magical thinking does not mean that everything should be painted with more or less speculative notions about people’s beliefs. Rather, the point is that magical thinking can provide clues on how people in, for example, early modern Finland perceived and understood their world and how they related with it. Magical thinking allows seeing the very logic of everyday life and engagement with the material world in the past from a new and perhaps less presentist perspective. A relational ontology and epistemology provide a useful theoretical framework for that pursuit.

## **Spirituality and Materiality in a Relational Perspective**

A relational ontology and epistemology have recently been the subject of discussion in archaeology and other disciplines (e.g., Alberti and Marshall 2009; Bird-David 1999; Ingold 2006), but the full significance of relational thinking remains to be appreciated particularly in the context of post-medieval archaeology. Relational thinking collapses the boundaries between organism and environment, subject and object, mind and matter, and so forth. It follows that the human mind, for instance, is not something that exists “in” the brain, but is an emergent property of the interaction between people and the world around them. Likewise, when people engage with artefacts, the latter essentially become part of the former, extensions of the human perceptual–bodily–cognitive capacities (Clark 1998; Ingold 2000; also cf. Turner 2000).

Relational ontology basically proposes that neither organisms nor things have an unchanging “inner essence”. The identities and properties of all entities in the world are subject to continuous development and change—what entities “are” is defined by their past and present relationships and interaction with other entities. The world does not simply exist out there but is continuously being generated and coming into being (Ingold 2000, 2006, 2010). Science is one way of knowing what the world is like, but the world can also be known in other ways. Where science relies on and

produces abstract propositional knowledge, relational knowing is situational—it involves bodily engagement with things in specific contexts and awareness of the changes that particular activities cause in the interacting parties (Bird-David 1999:77). The relationally constituted world can also be engaged with and manipulated by various means, as causation is not limited to mechanical cause–effect relationships. Magic, for example, can be considered quite real and functional if taken as a means of manipulating material things by manipulating the relationships that are constitutive of those things (see also Greenwood 2009).

Relational thinking emphasizes active and dynamic mutuality between people and different constituents of the world around them. Things in this view make and manipulate people just as much, and in just as real a sense, as people make and manipulate things. This active nature of things has, of course, been discussed in archaeology for quite some time now, but a few quick remarks on the so-called agency of things are worth making in this context. In the relational view, the agency of things is neither a metaphor—thinking of objects as if they were humans—nor is it something that is “in” things. Rather, agency is a relational property which emerges when people engage with things. A key point of the relational perspective for the present discussion is that in dissolving the imaginary organism–environment and subject–object boundaries it envisions more dynamic and intimate relationships between people and things. Just as magic can be conceived of as a non-mechanical form of manipulating the relationally constituted reality, so too can spirituality be understood as a mode of connecting and engaging with a material world rich in relationally constituted properties, as the examples discussed in the following sections seek to illustrate.

Similar perspectives on spirituality and the nature of magic have been pursued within the anthropology of magic. Glucklich (1997:12) argues that magic is “based on a unique type of consciousness: the awareness of the interrelatedness of all things in the world by means of a simple but refined sense of perception”. Greenwood (2009) has similarly stressed that magic is not about belief or the supernatural but a form of knowledge. Magical practices, in her view, manipulate perception and consciousness which in turn restructure one’s relationship with the world. Greenwood also provides some examples of how artefacts can facilitate “magical” connections with reality. This theme of connecting with the world—with the rich relationally constituted reality—forms the core for the rest of the chapter. It will be argued that a spiritual dimension is involved in human engagement with various aspects of ordinary activities, environments and material culture.

## Spirituality and Built Environments

Historical archaeologists commonly address the social dimensions of space and the symbolic meanings of built environments (e.g., Johnson 1996; Leone 1984), but the significance of spiritual and cosmological factors may not have been appreciated in full. While the basic idea is well known that spatial forms reflect and reproduce

cosmological ideas, this issue seems to be addressed more often in distinctively pre-modern and non-western contexts than in post-medieval Europe. The possible magical or esoteric associations of some buildings, such as The Globe theatre (famous for its association with Shakespeare) in London and Renaissance Star Villa near Prague, have been noted (e.g., Marshall 2007:55; Yates 1966/1992; see also Sack 1976), but it often seems to be assumed that spatial organization and built forms in the Western world must primarily be understood in other than cosmological terms. Political, economic, social and other such factors are, of course, important for understanding urban and built forms, but the point here is that planning and building—like all activities—must also be seen as embedded in a broader understanding of what the world is like and how it works. This also means that separating the practical from the symbolic is at fault to begin with.

Lilley's (2009) recent research on the cosmological aspects of medieval urban forms illustrates that issue. He observes that while medieval towns have been subject to considerable research, the symbolism of urban forms has attracted fairly little attention. The city, however, was a key element in the medieval Christian worldview and earthly cities were to mirror heavenly Jerusalem. Various aspects of urban space were associated with broader ideas of what the medieval cosmos was like. Even such basic geometric forms as the square and circle were symbolically charged and served to connect cities to dimensions of reality beyond the purely physical ones. Certain activities performed in the urban space also reflected and reproduced Christian ideas of the cosmos (Lilley 2009).

While medieval principles of urban planning are not very well known, Renaissance architects engaged in an explicit theorization of planning. The cosmological underpinnings of Renaissance planning and building are clear in ideal and Utopian texts, such as Thomas More's *Utopia* and Tommaso Campanella's *Civitas Solis* (The City of the Sun). These speculative treatments may or may not tell something about actual practical planning, but the point here is that Renaissance theories of planning and building were clearly concerned with cosmic harmonies and correspondences. Shapes and numbers, for example, were not just shapes and numbers in the modern sense but possessed broadly magical properties (see Akkerman 2000:275–277; Kostof 1991:62–165; Sack 1976:317–319). “In no small way”, Akkerman (2001:142) writes, “Renaissance planning consisted of utopian schemes, and the carefully laid out streets of Renaissance new towns and public places were the fulfillment of an urban dream: an Ideal City that reflects the perfection of cosmos and wisdom through the symmetry and harmonious geometry of its streets and squares”.

The Renaissance world was richer and more complex than the world described by modern science and planning and building must be seen as embedded in that broader cosmological vision. All kinds of material things could have special properties and virtues in the Renaissance world where manifold spiritual beings and powers also operated, and where causation could take many forms. Networks of sympathies, analogies and correspondences linked everything in the cosmos together and enabled other than purely mechanical (i.e., “magical”) means of manipulating the material world. This relational nature of Renaissance reality explains why astrology was of considerable concern in the Renaissance: celestial bodies influenced the



characteristics of geographical regions as well as political events and human personality (see Campion 2009; Livingstone 1988:274–278; Sack 1976:314; Thorndike 1955). Renaissance planning and architecture, too, had to be related or adapted to that rich reality, its manifest and hidden properties and dynamics.

Renaissance ideas of planning and building developed in a world where the spiritual properties of things and non-mechanical forms of causation were taken for granted aspects of reality. However, Renaissance ideals of arranging urban space, with their emphasis on symmetry and orderliness, may also have been instrumental in the birth of modern rationalism. Akkerman (2001) has argued that geometrically ordered urban environments, which (re-)emerged in Europe in the thirteenth century and became more common during and after the Renaissance, made an important contribution to Descartes' thinking. "Laying the foundation of modern science, the paradigm of the geometrically perfect world had emerged from a geometrically perfect town: it is in this image that Descartes, as well as his contemporaries, were led to perceive the universe and everything in it" (Akkerman 2001:161).

Thus, the decline of the "magical" Renaissance understanding of the world may—somewhat ironically perhaps—have something to do with Renaissance ideals of planning and building, which in turn stemmed in part from notions of cosmic harmonies and the like. The development of the rational and scientific representation and understanding of the world, however, does not mean that reality ceased to be relationally constituted. And while the scientifically informed worldview came to dismiss the spiritual properties of material things, and to characterize the relationships between people and things in terms of the subject–object opposition, the spiritual aspect of human–environment relations did not simply disappear.

## Folk Cosmology and the Material World

Learned Renaissance concepts of spatial forms and cosmic harmonies may appear tangential at best to the topics and materials that historical archaeologists ordinarily address. However, sympathies, correspondences and special properties of ordinary things were of concern also in folk culture. Popular thought in pre-industrial Finland, for instance, envisioned a deeply networked world where causation was not limited to mechanical cause–effect relationships, and where all kinds of ordinary things from landscape elements to artefacts could have special powers. Manifold non-human persons and spiritual beings also existed in that world, some of which were associated with the wilderness and others with the domestic sphere. Non-human beings could manifest themselves in, for example, human or animal form or as natural phenomena (see, e.g., Asplund Ingemark 2004; Eilola 2003; Herva and Ylimaunu 2009; Sarmela 1994; Stark-Arola 2002).

People's lives in the context of Finnish folk culture, then, did not unfold simply in relation with some objective physical world, as described by natural sciences, but rather in relation with a richer "enchanted" reality where the material and the spiritual were inextricably intertwined. Ordinary activities from building a house to the

keeping of livestock had to account for the perceived special properties and powers of things. An important point emerging here is that things were not necessarily what they first seemed to be: certain animals in certain situations could actually be witches, certain bodies of water could be spiritual beings, and so forth. Knowing this kind of environment, and engaging with it appropriately, required continuous attentiveness to what was going on around people. A particular spring could sometimes behave and engage with people like a conscious being, but it did not necessarily do that all the time, whereas another similar spring could always be “just a spring”. Abstract, generalized knowledge about things was not quite sufficient to really know that world, but bodily–perceptual–cognitive engagement with particular things in particular situations was required. That engagement involved also a spiritual dimension, as the following examples illustrate.

Finnish folklore indicates that the decision of where to build a new house or farmstead was based not only on factors which would be considered practical and rational today. Some (types of) places were preferred or avoided for reasons that had to do with spiritual powers of certain landscape elements, such as particular species of trees (Korhonen 2009:262). It was also advisable, to take another example, not to build where a house had previously burned down to avoid the disaster from happening again (Korhonen 2009:262–263). Sleeping at a prospective building site was one means of finding out whether or not the place was suitable for a house because sleeping was a way of connecting with the spirit world (Korhonen 2009:263). The world experienced in sleep was apparently considered quite real in early modern Finland (Eilola 2003:178, 184–185; Vilkuna 1997), and sleeping can perhaps be understood as a means of seeing the real “this world” and its spiritual dimensions from a different perspective (see also Greenwood 2009).

The spiritual dimension of human–environment relations can be pursued further through the case of sacred trees, which also shows how people, places, materiality and spirituality are intertwined. Traditions of sacred trees and tree worship are known from various cultures and since ancient times. Frazer (1922/1993), for instance, wrote at length about the veneration of trees and various later scholars have similarly addressed the special relationship between people and trees (e.g., Cloke and Jones 2002; Goodison 2010; Rival 1998). The Finnish tradition of sacred trees probably dates from prehistoric times and continued well into the modern period. Bishop Mikael Agricola complained in the mid-sixteenth century that the Finns continued to maintain pagan practices, such as “worshipping” trees, over 200 years after their official (or nominal) conversion to Christianity (Haavio 1992:47–49). This tree worship continued to be an issue in later times also. The new church law of 1686 specifically forbade giving offerings to trees (Haavio 1992:53–55), which probably implies that such practices were still common. There is also a considerable body of folklore and folk beliefs about Finnish sacred trees, collected mainly in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

There are regional and other variations in the Finnish traditions of sacred trees, but the tradition that is of interest here concerns sacred trees within the domestic space. According to the tradition, a particular tree either by the house or farther away in the yard or field was considered to have a special bond to the household.

That tree could be of several species but tended to have a distinctive shape or size (Haavio 1992:47–49). Members of the household were to be “obedient” to the tree, treat it with respect, give offerings to it at various occasions and in no way harm it (Haavio 1992:37–38, 40–42). The tree itself was supposedly not venerated, but simply marked a household shrine for worshipping the household spirit (Haavio 1992:42–43). When considered in the relational view, however, it makes perfect sense to propose that the tree itself was considered to have special properties and powers, and not simply associated with some ghost-like entity which was separate and different from the actual tree. In any case, the relationship between the household and the tree was a very close one—the death of a branch, for example, was taken to mark the death of a family member. The tree was a family tree and the tree of destiny in a very literal sense (Haavio 1992:42–43).

It is beyond the present discussion to consider why people came to bond with particular trees, but the important thing is that they apparently did. Understanding that bonding in terms of symbolism in any conventional sense seems quite unsatisfactory and runs the risk of trivializing the relationship between the household and its spirit tree. That is, the tree was considered to contribute to the success of the household and the members of the household in turn regarded it as a person-like being—there was a two-way social relationship between people and the tree. In other words, social relations within the household were extended or externalized to the very land and place where people lived, woven rather intimately into household life. Rather than symbols of the family, sacred trees were family members. This is what, in my view, the spiritual dimension of human–environment relations is ultimately about: recognizing that the relationship between people and their surroundings is deeply reciprocal in a way that cannot properly be understood in terms of subject–object and other related dualisms.

## **Spirituality and Everyday Material Culture in an Early Modern Town**

This section discusses how spirituality was involved in everyday engagement with the material world in the small town of Tornio on a northern periphery of the seventeenth-century kingdom of Sweden. Tornio—today in the Finnish territory—has been subject to extensive archaeological research over the last decade or so. That research has addressed various topics from the early modern urban landscape to human–animal and human–artefact relations (e.g., Nurmi 2011; Puputti 2009; Ylimaunu 2007). The discussion below attempts to illustrate the usefulness of a “spiritual view” when considering apparently ordinary aspects of the urban environment and material culture, aspects which might not be thought of as involving spiritual matters in the context of the post-medieval Western world.

Tornio was founded in 1621 on a small island by the mouth of the river Tornio. Tax records show that a few farmers had settled on the island before the founding of the town and an important pre-urban market place had probably also been located

there (Mäntylä 1971:22; Vahtola 1980:503; Lundholm 1991:296–298). Given that trade was a main reason for founding Tornio and other towns in the northern parts of the seventeenth-century kingdom of Sweden, it is unsurprising that warehouses seem to have featured quite prominently in the urban landscape and also in early cartographic representation of urban space (Ylimaunu 2006). Warehouses were among the otherwise few individual buildings marked on the seventeenth-century urban maps of Tornio and other northern towns, which reflects their importance from the Crown's point of view (Herva and Ylimaunu 2010:93; Ylimaunu 2007: 77–79). Warehouses would also have been visible in the urban landscape. They were lined up on the harbour side and were probably higher than most houses in seventeenth-century Tornio (Ylimaunu 2006).

Warehouses were used for storing merchandize and thus had a readily understandable practical function, but there are reasons to believe that warehouses in Tornio also served a purpose which goes beyond the practical and symbolic significance of trade. A first useful observation derives from a survey conducted in Tornio in 1623. According to the survey, there were 30 warehouses and 27 houses in the town, but whereas all the warehouses were finished, various houses still lacked a roof, floor or windows (Mäntylä 1971:27–28). This probably indicates that the log houses had been built afresh at the site and their frames were still “settling”, whereas the finished log warehouses had been relocated from somewhere else, possibly from the earlier market place, and only reassembled in the town. The warehouses, in other words, had already accumulated a history and meanings before their relocation in the newly founded town. A second thing worth noting about warehouses is the persistence of their general location within the urban landscape of Tornio. The original harbour became too shallow for bigger ships to anchor soon after the founding of the town and the harbour area moved towards the south. Yet warehouses do not seem to have been relocated accordingly, although new warehouses were built around the relocated harbour (Ylimaunu 2006:34), but continued to line up the entire western side of the town throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Warehouses can perhaps be understood as a kind of monument in the urban landscape of Tornio. They would have embodied and represented the ancestry of the town and that way served for the townsfolk as a bridge in time and across generations. Warehouses connected the townsfolk to their pre-urban past and rural roots—a majority of the early inhabitants of Tornio were probably local peasants (Mäntylä 1971)—especially in the early phases of urban development. Adherence to traditional ways of life and thought is in evidence also in other ways in the urban landscape and material culture of Tornio in the seventeenth century (Herva and Nurmi 2009:177–178; Nurmi 2011). On the other hand, a threat of relocating the town due to the poor harbour was hanging in the air for about 100 years since the later seventeenth century. In such circumstances permeated with uncertainty, warehouses promoted a sense of stability and attachment to the place, a kind of spiritual anchor.

Warehouses probably facilitated people's connection to their past and the place that they inhabited on a subconscious level and more passively than, for example, the sacred trees discussed earlier. With their houses, however, people may have had

a more active two-way relationship which also involved a clearer spiritual dimension. It is well known that the relationship between people and buildings is dynamic in nature, and that houses in various cultures are likened to living beings (e.g., Blier 1983; Rapoport 1969), but relational thinking allows taking these notions a step further and beyond the subject–object dualism. I have argued elsewhere (Herva 2010a) that houses were actually—and not just metaphorically in the minds of people (cf. Rapoport 1987:12–13)—animate, sentient and conscious beings in seventeenth-century Tornio and elsewhere in the northern periphery of Sweden. This view holds that houses were recognized to act upon and engage with their inhabitants in various situations. Thus, houses as material things were perceived as person-like and spiritual beings with which people engaged accordingly.

This interpretation of houses as a species of non-human persons owes largely to a reinterpretation of the Finnish household-spirit tradition (Haavio 1942)—which bears similarities to the previously discussed tradition of sacred trees—from the relational point of view, but it is also directly linked to the interpretation of archaeological material. To begin with, a number of foundation deposits and other special deposits associated with building remains have been identified in Tornio and elsewhere (Herva and Ylimaunu 2009; Nurmi 2011:146–151). Those finds have conventionally been interpreted as lucky charms and protection from evil (e.g., Merrifield 1987; Hoggard 2004) and that way treated very differently from ordinary finds associated with buildings. In the relational view, however, such finds are not just isolated material expressions of superstitions, but must rather be understood against the broader dynamics of how people related with their houses.

In a world where the division between the natural and the supernatural was not drawn similarly as today, the making of foundation deposits and the like may be understood as a practical technique of constructing buildings and maintaining them, comparable to the careful fitting of logs or repairing of the roof. The incorporation of objects into the structure of buildings would have invested buildings with some special properties which would have facilitated the becoming of buildings into something more than “just buildings”. That, in turn, enabled people to connect and engage with buildings by other than purely mechanical means, contributing that way to the becoming of buildings into person-like beings (Herva 2010a:448).

Relational thinking and the theme of spiritual connection with the environment provide perspectives not only on the meaning of special finds but also on ordinary and apparently practical activities, such as the reuse of building materials, which is attested in the archaeology of Tornio and beyond. If buildings had spiritual properties, as argued earlier (see also Gell 1998:252–253), recycling of building material was not only a cost-efficient practice but also passed on those special properties, which may also be reflected in some Finnish folklore (Herva 2010a:449). The reuse of building materials infused a new building with “life force” generated within the earlier life of the recycled materials. New buildings were that way linked to—and indeed became one with—the greater cycles of life from the very beginning.

The development of personal and intimate relationships between people and their houses is easy to understand on the basis that houses were integral to successful human life but also quite vulnerable, which promoted attentiveness to and maintenance

of houses (Herva 2010a:445). The relationship between people and the land on which they lived may also be thought to have involved a spiritual dimension. To take but one example, all kinds of rubbish from bones to pieces of pottery and glass seem to have been lying around the yards in early modern Tornio. That rubbish may have ended up there accidentally or through intentional discarding, but it nonetheless textured the soil in a more or less visible manner. Whether or not people paid any conscious attention to it, the rubbish-textured soil would have subtly promoted a sense of being connected with the place (cf. Evans 2003:119–121), perhaps in a similar passive sense as the warehouses in the town did. People merge with artefacts which they use, as indicated earlier, but over time things also become identified with their owners and “abduct” properties from them (see Gell 1998). Rubbish on and in the ground, then, represents bits and pieces of people who incorporated something of themselves into the very soil of the land that they inhabited. Rubbish in that sense compares, albeit in very general terms, to the externalization of the household in the sacred tree.

The inhabitants of seventeenth-century Tornio formed some kind of special relationships also with certain ordinary everyday artefacts. There is fairly abundant evidence of wornness, repair and reuse of such everyday artefacts as ceramic vessels and clay pipes, which cannot satisfactorily be explained in economic or other such simple terms (Herva and Nurmi 2009:167–170, 173–174; Nurmi 2011). As argued more extensively elsewhere (Herva and Nurmi 2009), signs of wear and repair may have been considered a form of “patina”, visual indications of a long-standing relationship between people and particular artefacts (cf. Lucas 2006:42–45; McCracken 1988). The recycling of potsherds and pieces of glass into, for example, spindle whorls and counters can also be understood in terms of holding on to particular artefacts through tokens of them. The specific reasons why people became attached to particular artefacts probably varied, but long-standing engagement with certain artefacts, such as clay pipes, promoted a sense of continuity against the real and perceived uncertainties of life in seventeenth-century Tornio. Thus, personal artefacts provided something like a subconscious spiritual anchor to the world on a personal level, whereas warehouses and other features in the urban landscape served a similar purpose on a more collective level.

## Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the significance of spirituality in engagement with the material world in post-medieval Europe. It was argued that spirituality is an aspect of everyday human–environment relations and thus involves much more than the subjective experience of religion and the supernatural. This broader view draws from a relational ontology and epistemology which reject organism–environment, subject–object and other related dualisms, and thus open up new views on the dynamics of the relationship between people and things. All kinds of things in the relationally constituted world, from landscape elements to artefacts, can have

properties and powers which could be called spiritual in a broad sense. Spirituality, it was proposed, is ultimately about recognizing that richness of the relationally constituted world and people's deeply reciprocal relationship with that world. Various forms of magical thinking from Western esoteric traditions to folk beliefs can offer clues on how people in particular historical contexts in post-medieval Europe perceived and understood the surrounding world, and how the two-way relationships between people and material things actually unfolded.

The view pursued in this chapter means that a "spiritual approach" can be used in post-medieval archaeology to address a myriad of issues which may not seem to have any direct connection to spiritual matters in the sense they have conventionally been understood. Examples ranging from urban planning in Renaissance Europe to sacred trees in Finnish folk culture were discussed to illuminate the role of spirituality in human engagement with the material world. The history and archaeology of the small town of Tornio in the northern periphery of seventeenth-century Sweden provided further examples of how forms of spirituality were more or less actively involved in the townsfolk's relationships with everyday things from houses to personal objects. Rather than mystifying life in the relatively recent past, however, this chapter has sought to consider the dynamics between people and the material world from a new perspective.

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## Chapter 5

# Breath and Being: Contextualizing Object Persons at Paquimé, Chihuahua, Mexico

Christine S. VanPool and Todd L. VanPool

**Abstract** For almost 50 years North American archaeologists have applied the processual paradigm, which holds that culture is an extra-somatic means of adaptation whereby artifacts and buildings “functioned as tools.” Even 30 years ago with the push for postprocessual approaches that de-emphasized functional considerations in favor of other interpretations, such as ritual and cognitive significance, many features and objects were still considered passive items that were used to communicate religious or cosmological principles. Although anthropologists have long been astounded by how many of the various ontologies found throughout the world accorded a spiritual, active, living nature to some artifacts, features, and the landscape, the implications of this fundamental premise for artifact/human interaction has only been considered over the last decade by a handful of archaeologists.

In this chapter, we suggest that by adopting an animistic perspective based on commonalities (e.g., pots and houses have personhoods) such as those reflected in the ethnographic record, archaeologists can strengthen their interpretative frameworks for understanding and evaluating archaeological data. Further, we suggest that a similar ontology is reflected in the material remains from the site of Paquimé (formally called Casas Grandes), which is the ceremonial center of the Medio period (AD 1250–1450) Casas Grandes culture of northern Mexico and the southern Southwestern United States. Specific living beings discussed include the Mound of the Serpent, a long sinuous mound that has been interpreted as a retaining wall, and a small “utilitarian” jar that was placed under a water reservoir that has been interpreted as a ritual offering. We stress that while “functional” interpretations may initially seem incompatible with an animistic approach, they are important for

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understanding the roles and personalities of past living beings in the form of pots or effigy mounds. Sound functional arguments are not an alternative to a sound animistic perspective, but are instead its foundation, and an animistic perspective can help to further strengthen these functional explanations.

## Introduction

Our goal here is to further develop an analytic approach that will allow scholars to systematically study animism and the social role that spiritually potent beings play in the social relations that structure any given culture. Building on the excellent work of many others, we contend that the social identity of nonhuman beings is typically flexible, context specific, and based on their use within the society. Like humans, nonhuman beings are defined by “what they do in life.” “What they do” may change from context to context and over the course of the object’s life. We begin by briefly outlining animism and the reasons why archaeologists have been less active in considering its social importance relative to cultural anthropologists, religionists, and researchers from related fields. We then present a series of principles that we believe will help all researchers interested in animism study the role that animated objects play in social structures. Archaeologists, with our detailed considerations of the interaction between humans and material culture, are perfectly, perhaps even uniquely, situated to deal with these issues (Zedeño 2008). Our hope is that others can benefit from the insights archaeology has to offer. Finally, we present several case studies from the American Southwest that we believe help illustrate the various principles we propose.

## Animism and Archaeology (or Why Spirits in Matter Matter)

The basic structure of anthropological approaches to animism is outlined in Alberti and Bray (2009), Gell (1998), Harvey (2006a, b), VanPool and Newsome ([in press](#)), and Brown and Walker (2008). Anthropologists from the beginning of the discipline found that peoples throughout the world accorded a spiritual, active, living nature to some artifacts, features, and aspects of the natural environment (Tylor 1871). Edward Burnett Tylor used the Latin word *anima*, meaning “life, breath, soul,” to define the “theory of the universal animation of nature.” The living, spiritual nature found within the universe animated things (defined broadly) and provided them a role in the social systems that structure human behavior (Brown and Walker 2008; Zedeño 2008).

Although archaeologists are beginning to consider the material implications of human interaction with such nonhuman beings, we have been slower than others to consider the implications of animism (Brown and Walker 2008). Part of the reason

for this is that many of the dominant archaeological paradigms (e.g., processualism, evolutionary archaeology, behavioralism, cultural ecology, systems theory, landscape archaeology) focused on ecological and functional relationships, how artifacts were made and used, but rarely considered the nonmaterial roles artifacts might have played in the cultural system (Jones 2004; Sellers 2010). Under these functionalist paradigms, artifacts and features are tools that humans use to interact with each other and the landscape. While these approaches certainly are not incompatible with the consideration of human interaction with spiritually potent objects, it simply was not a primary focus of the research they framed. As a result, the research examined performance characteristics of these objects and the roles they played in the adaptive systems as they were used or modified by humans (e.g., Schiffer and Skibo 1997).

However, animacy and nonhuman beings are a reality in many ethnographically studied cultures throughout the world (Harvey 2006a; Viveiros de Castro 2004). Undoubtedly animism was present in the past too (Mills and Ferguson 2008; Losey 2010; Sellers 2010). Recognizing this has opened new questions previously unconsidered and allowed for new interpretive insights (e.g., Losey 2010; VanPool and Newsome *in press*). Furthermore, archaeology may play a unique role in animistic studies, in that it is the only discipline that can identify the long-term development and impacts of animate objects.

Despite whatever theoretical persuasion an archaeologist has, most would readily agree that artifacts such as shell trumpets and turquoise beads, animals such as bears and fish, resources such as maize and obsidian, and natural characteristics such as springs and rain were critical to past people and held special places in their religious systems (e.g., Dittert and Plog 1980). The ethnographic evidence is simply too great for a knowledgeable individual to advocate otherwise. We suspect that the failure of archaeologists to seriously consider the importance of nonhuman beings within the social systems rests on two related issues: (1) the difficulty that archaeologists have in identifying the social/symbolic role of artifacts, and (2) the thought that such roles are “imagined” or are at least incidental to the functional, ecological importance of an object. Thus, archaeologists did not study ontological issues such as animism because they were probably deemed irrelevant to understanding the archaeological record (Hunt et al. 2001). We disagree with both of these points for several reasons. First, numerous studies have shown that archaeologists can effectively consider the symbolic/social role of objects (Hodder 2011; Meskell 2003; Whitley 2001). Traditional methods including distribution studies, the direct historical approach, cross-cultural comparisons, material science, and morphometric studies can and have provided the basis for such analyses (Jones 2004; Mills and Ferguson 2008; VanPool and VanPool 2006). Building on these methods is one of the major focuses of our discussion, in fact. Second, the suggestion that the agency exerted by animated nonhuman beings is incidental to understanding the archaeological record is demonstrably false. Human interaction is always structured by social relations and the rules that govern them (Giddens 1984). Because animated objects fit within these social relations as *actors*, not just *objects*, they have specific rules that governed their interaction with humans and directly impact human behavior.

Kachina masks, for example, are considered living individuals in the Southwestern pueblos. They are not “just masks” that can be used in any old way. Instead, they must be fed, cared for, and respected (Ladd 2000:19). They dictate the behavior of those around them. Zedeño (2008:373) provides a similar example of medicine bundles from the Blackfoot and other northern Plains tribes. The medicine bundles are given to families to care for and become pleasant but demanding house guests. All of the people in the household must carefully monitor their behavior and curtail any actions that might be offensive to the bundle. Children must be spiritually cleansed and protected to ensure they are not endangered by the bundle’s spiritual power. In these cases, the nonhuman person is one of the most significant social actors determining people’s day-to-day behavior. Likewise, Zedeño describes how the animistic nature of ceremonial bundles causes their contents to be discarded in ritual contexts and independently of one another. Understanding the underlying ontology and its associated ritual system will be the only way that archaeologists can adequately explain these archaeological patterns of discard. Many other examples of how an ontology of animism works in thought and practice could be provided (see, e.g., Herva and Blain and Wallis this volume). In a larger ecological context, “functional” impacts may actually be the result of the social role of the objects, not the other way around (Losey 2010).

## Studying Animism Using the Archaeological Record

Below we identify some emerging insights based on several anthropological studies and use those to present three basic principles that we believe will help researchers interested in studying animism. Our goal is to synthesize these insights into a framework that can be more broadly applied and expanded. We will illustrate the points using examples from the ethnographic record of American Southwestern groups, but we believe the basic structure is broadly applicable.

*An Object’s Personhood is based on its Relationship with Humans:* The roles of all persons, human or otherwise, are socially constructed (Meskell 2003). Harvey notes that within (at least some) animistic frameworks the fundamental task for all persons is to become better persons of whatever type they are (2006a:12). Thus, humans should work to become better human people, turtles strive to become better turtle people (with their own attributes and idea of what “better” is), and obsidian strives to become better obsidian people in cultures in which turtles and obsidian are considered persons. A key component to this process is that human culture reflects relational properties of personhoods. Thus, the placement of a nonhuman person within the animistic relational matrix directly reflects the social role given to it. This is not a premise that is universally accepted. For example, Harvey suggests that nonhuman persons have their own social framework that humans can understand if they will only listen, and that this social framework is on parity with human social relations. Using a distinctly different framework, but reaching a similar conclusion, is Viveiros de Castro (1998, 2004) who reports that South American Amerindian

groups employ the concept of *perspectivism*, in which councils of spirits incorporate and control the various nonhuman persons, who each considered themselves “human” and who possess kinship and other social relationships independent of humans. From this he concludes that the human relational system is not central to an animistic framework. We disagree, at least analytically. The social relations that interest anthropologists are those that relate to human social relations. Nonhuman persons undoubtedly have attributes that are (or appear to be) independent of humans (e.g., migration patterns, color, environmental needs, decay and weathering patterns) that affect human perception of them, but the personhood that matters to humans is constructed within the human social framework and ultimately reflects it. We are not saying that humans do not conceive of *perspectivism* in which nonhuman persons have their own social relational system. And we are not saying that human understanding of (and respect for) nonhuman persons will not change if humans “listen” as Harvey (2006a) suggests. However, these will matter to humans (and consequently anthropologists) only in so far as they affect the human relational system.

Many factors can influence a (human and nonhuman) person’s social role, including age, gender, faction, cosmological categories, kinship, and power relationships. Any of these may and probably will affect human relations with nonhuman persons. At a minimum, all persons within an animistic framework have a social role based on spiritual power or metaphysical essences of some sort. Persons are not just objects, they are agents, and it is the ability to actively, directly impact their surrounds that is paramount to humans. For example, Zedeño (2008) reports that different linguistic structures are used for animate as opposed to inanimate objects among the Blackfoot and other Algonquian speakers of North America. This distinction takes precedence over other linguistically important characteristics such as gender. Objects are animate or inanimate first, with their other characteristics following from that distinction.

In addition to being active agents, animated objects have attributes such as gender, spiritual and physical power, importance to individuals/factions, utility, associations with other beings, and a host of other attributes whose significance may vary by culture and within each culture (e.g., Walker 2008; Losey 2010; Zedeño 2008). Durability and permanence may even be significant (Nanoglou 2009:160). Humans may be very mindful of the competing desires of humans and nonhuman persons, and may recognize that humans are asymmetrically reliant on these nonhuman persons (e.g., the reliance on fish and fishing weirs discussed by Losey 2010). Still, nonhuman people relate to the social system of humans in a meaningful, coherent way, and consequently reflect the attributes that humans find important. The fish weirs and other fishing implements Losey (2010) discusses, for example, mediate the relationship between humans and fish and act to bring the fish into the social framework associated with humans. Even when considered dominant, nonhuman persons will be involved in human social structures in ways that reflect the goals and perspectives of humans.

The Southwestern ethnographic record reflects the relations between humans and nonhuman persons, and the way that nonhuman persons reflect their social roles within human society. Bunzel (1992) illustrates the personhood of prayer sticks, a



class of objects specifically designed by bringing different attributes together (e.g., various bird feathers, cottonwood sticks, animal skins, paint) to create a new being, and how this nonhuman being's social role is contingent upon its relationship to humans, who specifically design them to act as emissaries for humans in the spirit world:

... We made our plume wands into living beings.  
 With the flesh of our mother,  
 Clay Woman,  
 Four times clothing our plumes wands with flesh,  
 We made them into living beings.  
 Holding them fast,  
 We made them our representatives in prayers (Bunzel 1992:485).

The prayer sticks are defined relative to their relationship to humans. Bunzel also reports that black pots, along with obsidian knives and arrow points, "thunder stones," and olivella (shell) rattles were "society members" (1992:490). These society members were brought up by the Zuni from the lowest of the four worlds where they were "the ones that were at the first beginning." Bunzel states that, "They are kept in sealed jars in houses where they are believed to have rested since the settlement of the village. They are 'fed' regularly at each meal by some woman of the house...and are removed only for the retreats held in their honor" (1992:490). These "society members" are powerful persons tied to the human relational system. The very acts of feeding them and taking them on retreats are completed because they are integral to human society.

Kachina masks are likewise powerful beings that embody the complex relationships we seek to illustrate here. The Kachinas are benevolent, anthropomorphic or zoomorphic persons that live in mountains, lakes, and springs (Bunzel 1992; Ladd 2000). They also embody the spirits of living things and are the ancestors who have died and become a part of nature (Parsons 1996; Wright 1973). They possess powers over nature, especially the weather, although their power is limited by higher deities. In a framework similar to Viveiros de Castro's (1998) "perspectivism," Kachinas have their own social system, gender and kin relations, and an existence independent of humans (Parsons 1939; Wright 1973). However, they have a dual nature in that they inhabit the masks for part of the year when they live among humans. During the remainder of the year, all the feathers and adornments are taken off the mask so that the kachina spirits return to their mountain home (Parsons 1996). As masks they are worn by the religiously trained male dancers who are literally said to be the Kachina spirit when wearing the masks during ceremonies, leading to a combined "object-person," in which the mask's agency is created by the interaction among multiple persons (the kachina and the human in this case). The masks remain nonhuman persons infused with spiritual power even when they are not worn and are cared for by women who feed them and ensure their physical and spiritual safety (Ladd 2000). However, the kachina have different associations and social power, created by the dual relationships of the kin structures of the kachina (e.g., the kachina chiefs are particularly powerful) and the particular faction/group with which they are associated in the specific Pueblo (e.g., certain kiva groups have different ceremonial roles and social power relative to each other and throughout the

year). Thus, the personhood of kachinas as a whole and individual kachinas reflects, and is in fact defined by, the social relationships that they have with humans. This brings us to our next point, which is that the attributes of personhood are based on a person's performance in social settings.

*An Object's Personhood is Functional:* Within an animistic perspective, personhood is defined relationally. Viveiros de Castro (2004) describes this as shifting an object into a subject through the identification of the object's relationship with other subjects. In practice, this necessitates that persons are defined by what they do. Gell (1998; see also Harvey 2006a:xi) rejects the existence of spirits in toto, but suggests an object's perceived agency is derived from its physical characteristics and associations. Humans conceive of objects as being alive because of their naturalistic associations. One of Gell's (1998) repeated examples is a temple idol, which has "secondary object agency" because it is shaped and treated as if it was a human. It is the object's role in the social system that dictates the personhood of the object, not the personhood that dictates its role. The statue's personhood, whether it is respected or reviled, whether it is powerful or incidental, is based on whatever the statue's associations are (e.g., a particular deity, the quality of the statue's manufacture, the statue's raw material). We agree with Gell (1998) that real-world characteristics (e.g., the sound of ringing pots, the feel of reeds, the presence/absence of water and wind) help determine how people perceive an object's animacy. However, we agree with Mills and Ferguson (2008:339) that this perspective may create an overemphasis on humans as primary and material as secondary.

Furthermore, we do not find it necessary to discount the spiritual significance of persons. Within an Amerindian perspective it is the spiritual not the material that is most significant (Gell 1998; Silko 1996; Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2004). Once an object's being has been established, the spirit becomes paramount in various relationships. Thus, a "statue" who becomes a nonhuman person may exert primacy in certain social interactions (e.g., dictating care and feeding). Hodder (2011) even illustrates how clay walls may exert primacy in human/object interaction as humans struggle to form and maintain them. This is seen in the kachina example presented earlier, in that the kachinas are central to and effectively control the ceremonial cycle that structures Puebloan life (e.g., Wright 1973:2). In these cases, and as a general principle, we suggest, an object's agency is derived from what the associated person *does* within the social system. Kachinas and the associated masks are, after all, classes of beings that *act*, which is the very basis of agency as it applies to an animistic framework. This in turn means that an object's personhood is based on context—what is being done and by whom. The same would be true for a temple idol, a clay wall, or any other object.

Mills and Ferguson (2008) provide an example from the American Southwest in which the agency of shell trumpets varies depending on their use in two different ritual systems. In one case, they served as the voice of the horned serpent, a powerful water deity, in ceremonies in which horned serpents ritually destroyed corn fields or lead kachinas into the Puebloan village. Within this context, the shell trumpets have "acquired" agency through their use in the ceremonies. In other words, the shell trumpets are not inherently the voice of the serpent, but only gained this status when used for this purpose. Although valuable, it also is not clear that shell trumpets

were always considered animate. They certainly were not a necessary component of the social system; when needed, ceramic or gourd trumpets could be used instead. Zedeño (2008:374) refers to this sort of agency as biographically created, in that the object achieves personhood through their association with other persons (see also Viveiros de Castro 2004:470). Shell trumpets were also associated with a warfare system, in which the trumpets could poison enemies. As opposed to their use as the serpent's voice, trumpets within this context were essentially animate. Using Zedeño's terms again, these trumpets have an intrinsic agency that transcends their association with other persons. Oral tradition even recounts their intentional, ritual discard so as to protect people from misusing their power. In other words, the affected trumpets always had the power to kill as an inherent part of their personhood. Expanding on their discussion, we would add that "breath" among the Puebloan people is the very life force/spirit of the cosmos (Brody and Swentzell 1996). It is the shell trumpet's breath coupled with the human blower's breath that funnels and amplifies the life force of the cosmos, thereby making the shell trumpet a deadly being.

In both of these cases, shell trumpets are animated beings who are defined by what they do. Yet they do different things and have different relationships within the relational matrix structuring the social system. In Gell's (1998:123) terms, they are "in the neighborhood" of, that is, have relationships with, different nonhuman (and human) persons. As a result, the nature of their animism varies and their characters as beings vary, despite their apparent uniformity as shell trumpets.

An additional example from the Southwest is found in pottery production. Pottery is made from clay, a significant nonhuman agent that we will discuss momentarily. The unfired pot has a life essence of its own, becoming a person during the manufacturing process (VanPool and Newsome [in press](#)). Once a pot is formed though, it undergoes the firing process, which is a dangerous "rite of passage" for the being. Pots frequently break during firing. As a result, the pottery is often fired at specially consecrated locations and offerings of cornmeal (a common Southwestern offering to nonhuman persons) are given to the fire, in hopes that the fire will be gentle and let the pots live (Trimble 2004:28). The firing process is a complex negotiation among persons. Humans, who have helped make a new being (the pot), use a special location (a nonhuman person) and cornmeal (another nonhuman person) to intercede with the fire (a nonhuman person) to convince it to behave as the human and pot desire. At each step, the personhoods of several actors are defined in regards to their relations relative to accomplishing a particular task. Their personhood is consequently context specific and related to "what it is that they do" as a being. Scholars studying animism can consequently anticipate that there will be variation in the personhoods of various classes of objects, just as there is variation in the personhoods of humans. This variation will reflect change in time, context, and other persons involved. We build upon this insight in our next point, the difference between intrinsic and created personhood.

*An Object's Personhood is Dictated by the Nature of the Object's Animacy:* This is a broad point that we believe will be culturally specific. At its core, we are suggesting that each culture will have different categories of animacy that will in turn affect

the personhood of nonhuman persons. Viveiros de Castro (2004:470) notes that, “Amerindian cosmologies do not as a rule attribute personhood (or the same degree of personhood) to each type of entity in the world.” As previously mentioned, Zedeño (2008) presents one such distinction between things that are intrinsically animated (and hence always nonhuman persons) and things that have biographical animacy (and hence were one time inanimate but became animate through interaction with other persons). For example, paint, an intrinsically animated object, can be used to animate lifeless objects among the northern Plains Indians. In other words, paint is used to transform objects with latent, potential animacy into persons with specific characteristics. However, the types of objects that can be animate will change from culture to culture. Some groups might consider only living things as potentially animate. Others might see everything or nearly everything as having innate animacy. Regardless of such variation, we suspect that nearly all animistic ontologies have different categories of animacy, and that these categories will be fundamental to understanding an object’s personhood.

One common category that we expect to find cross-culturally is the distinctions between “real, observable” persons and “hidden” persons (e.g., rattlesnakes vs. horned/feathered serpents). Real, observable persons include the objects that can be seen and touched. In the Southwest, these include the obsidian knives, prayer sticks, macaws, springs and shrines, kivas, and other types of persons archaeologists can directly recover/study in the archaeological record. The hidden persons are supernatural in the sense that they are not directly observable. They include kachina, horned serpents, and other deities who herd clouds and bring rain, watch from pools, and otherwise exert agency to provide or withhold the resources that humans desire. These persons can be represented in the real world (e.g., the puppets of the horned water serpent at Zuni), but the person itself cannot be directly observed by humans. Instead shamans, dancers, priests, and other religious practitioners mediate and interact with them.

When present, the distinction between directly observable persons and hidden persons can and we suspect typically will impact upon other persons. Nonobservable persons are always animate, with their animism intrinsic to their very existence; given that they cannot be observed, they are defined only by their intrinsic animacy. However, the objects that these persons use to exert their agency will become animate, even if they are not intrinsically animate. For example, Mills and Ferguson’s (2008) discussion of the shell trumpets used as the horned serpent’s voice indicates that these objects (as well as the puppets and associated paraphernalia) only gain agency through their association with the powerful yet unseen nonhuman person who inhabits them when needed. This is also the case with the previously discussed kachina masks. Thus, hidden persons will be associated with biographically animated objects whose primary role within the animistic framework is to allow humans to interact with them.

In addition to the hidden persons, some observable objects may be intrinsically animated. In such cases, human interaction with these persons will focus on direct negotiation with them. In Losey’s (2010) discussion of animism and fishing in the American Northwest, for example, fish are intrinsic agents with an inalienable ani-

macy, as are fishhooks and other fishing gear. By merely existing, these objects gain agency and animacy. Such animacy stands in contrast with biographically animated objects. We suggest that this difference results in different roles within the animistic framework. The focus of human interaction with nonhuman persons is to negotiate with innately animated persons. Biographically animated objects can be used to facilitate this negotiation. Thus, the distinction between innately and biographically animated beings is the difference between direct negotiation and using a “middleman” as a proxy. The “middleman” only becomes animated as needed. The biographically animated object will also likely have greater flexibility in regards to its relationships with other persons.

We wish to introduce another example to illustrate the variation that will impact personhood within each culture. Puebloan potters make a distinction between *Raw Beings* and *Made Beings*. *Raw Beings* are innately animate because they contain the cosmic breath (spirit). Many Pueblo people believe that an underlying metaphysic “breath” connects these materials with all life forms through their emergence from the Earth (which is the creator and mother of all organic and inorganic life) (Silko 1996). All things have a spirit and are connected by their shared fate of emerging from and returning to the earth (Bunzel 1992; Brody and Swentzell 1996; Silko 1996). *Made Beings* are also animated, but they are formed into new persons through ceremonies. A newborn baby is in fact considered a Raw Being until he or she is presented to the sun.

Pottery is a Made Being made from clay and human interactions. Cushing (1886) observed a Zuni woman who finished an *olla* say, “with an air of relief that it is a Made Being.” Pots consequently share a special link with humans, because both are produced from clay. This link is made explicit by Tewa scholar Rita Swentzell when she equates her famous artist daughter, Roxanne Swentzell, with the pots she makes, stating, “I have a daughter who is a clay person out of whom other clay people emerge” (1997:203). Even unfired pots are considered living persons (Houlihan 1980). This semantic and epistemological link is also reflected in the way Pueblo potters talk about their pots as “bodies.” Bunzel (1992:16) quotes a Zuni potter saying, “First I paint the stomach and then I paint the lips. I always use different designs on the lips and the stomach.” The bodies of pots and the bodies of humans are viewed as analogous.

The importance of the distinction between Made and Raw Beings is profound. As Viveiros de Castro (2004:470) notes, it would be incorrect to view every object as “uniformly” animated, although the way this plays out in the Puebloan cultures is very different from the South American groups he studies. Every aspect of ceramic production, from collecting the clay through the pot’s final discard, illustrates a complex history of how active agents encounter and negotiate with one another to produce the Made Being. Because the interaction between people and the ceramics they create/use concerns dialogue between the spiritual/metaphysical and material realms, they are typically marked with rituals (e.g., prayers with cornmeal when gathering clay, which initiates its transformation from the flesh of Mother Earth into a vessel with its own form, spirit, and purpose). Vessels undergo a transformative process and, once finished, are generally believed to have their own spirits, which appear to

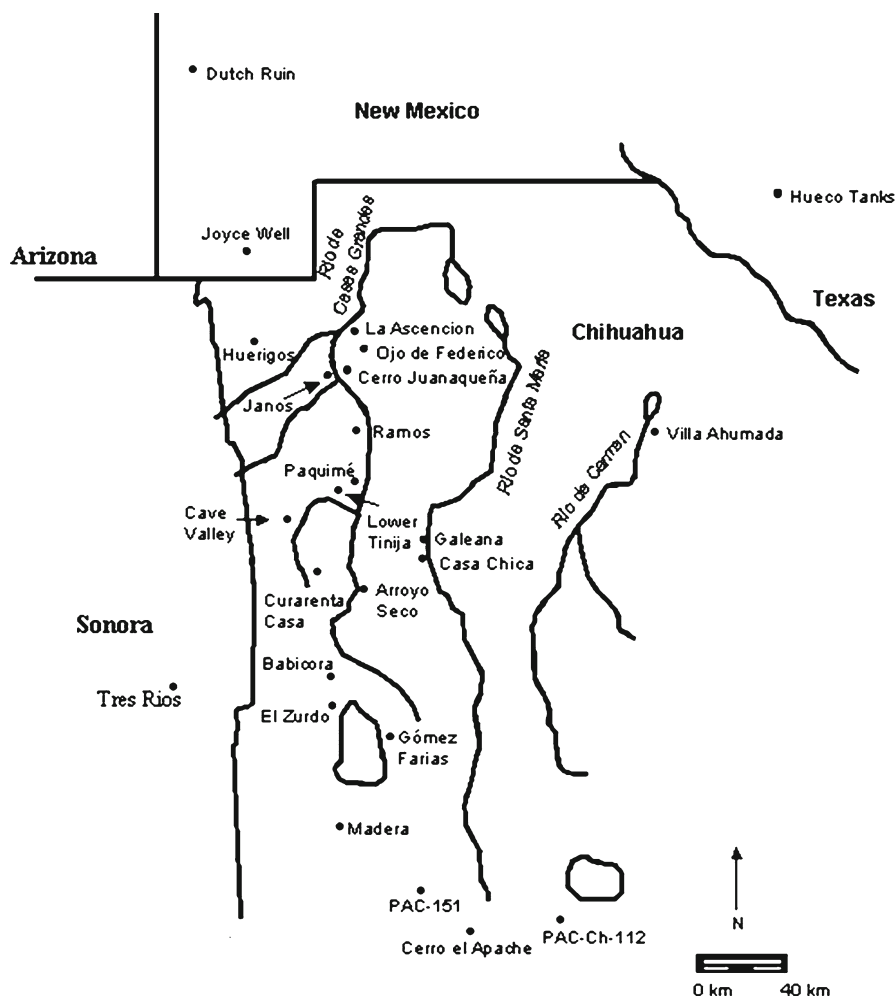


Fig. 5.1 Map of the Casas Grandes region

have played an essential role in the use and eventual discard of pottery in antiquity and historic times (VanPool and Newsome [in press](#)). Simply saying an object is “animate” is not enough. Those interested in animacy must further ask, “What categories of animacy are present within an animistic ontology?” and, “How do these categories impact the relations among persons within specific contexts and in a general way?”

We wish to briefly introduce several archaeological examples that will help illustrate the principles we have introduced earlier. These come from Paquimé, the central community for the Medio period (AD 1200–1450) culture in the Casas Grandes region (Fig. [5.1](#)).

## Nonhuman Persons at Paquimé

Paquimé was a large settlement that was home to an estimated 2,500–5,000 people. Only half of the settlement was excavated, but it has the highest concentration of imported Mesoamerican goods of any settlement in the prehistoric Southwest, including copper bells, hundreds of macaws (which were ritually sacrificed), and literally tons of ocean shell (Bradley 2000; Di Peso et al. 1974; Whalen and Minnis 2001). It also has Mesoamerican-style ritual architecture, including I-shaped ball courts similar to those used throughout Mesoamerica, platform mounds where public ritual could be performed, and a hand-dug well in the community's center that served as a ceremonial shrine for offerings and various water rituals (VanPool and VanPool 2007; Walker 2002). Mortuary and architectural data further indicate that Paquimé was socially complex with significant status differences relative to other Southwestern communities (Raveslout 1988; Rakita 2009; Whalen and Minnis 2009). In short, Paquimé was one of the largest religious and economic centers in the whole of North America.

The presence of an animistic ontology at Paquimé is indicated by evidence from ethnographically studied communities reflecting historical continuity with Paquimé (VanPool et al. 2008; VanPool and Newsome *in press*), as well as its ubiquity throughout the general cultural area's historic and prehistoric occupations (Mills and Ferguson 2008; VanPool and VanPool *n.d.*; Walker 2008). Many types of nonhuman persons are reflected in the excavated materials (VanPool and VanPool 2007:108–123). The most central of these is the horned serpent, which is reflected on virtually all Late Medio period polychrome pottery as either an icon (i.e., the entire serpent's body) or as a motif (only the serpent's head) (Fig. 5.2). It is also depicted as a platform mound (discussed below), in rock art throughout the region, and as a headdress worn by painted individuals who have been interpreted as being involved in shamanic-based religious activity, also discussed in more detail below (VanPool and VanPool 2007). Morphology of historic Puebloan horned serpent traditions reflects direct historical continuity with the Casas Grandes serpent (C. VanPool et al. 2008),



**Fig. 5.2** Icon and motif of the Casas Grandes horned water serpent



so direct historical analogy is a productive starting place to begin to understand the horned serpent's personhood. Most Puebloan people consider these serpents supernatural water entities that span and negotiate the upper world, the middle (or terrestrial) world, and the underworld. They can herd clouds in the air or move across land to create arroyos, but most of the time they are underwater creatures that cause earthquakes and control ground water at springs and in rivers (Bunzel 1992:515; Dutton 1963:49; Parsons 1996:184). Horned serpents in the Casas Grandes region have similar associations, being represented in rock art at springs and serving as one of the major deities of a religious system focused on water control and fertility (VanPool and VanPool 2007; see also Schaafsma 2001). Thus, both ethnographic evidence and archaeological context indicate the horned serpents were considered nonhuman agents who controlled the flow and availability of water.

We wish to clarify the relationships among persons (both human and nonhuman) at Paquimé. Several examples, some of which focus on human/horned serpent interaction, will be presented. We also wish to illustrate the significance of the distinction between persons that could be observed and those that were hidden.

*Animated Pottery.* As illustrated earlier, Puebloan potters considered pots to be Made Beings created through negotiations among humans, clay, fire, and other significant persons. With this in mind, we wish to briefly consider a particular pot placed at the bottom of Reservoir 2, one of the water reservoirs at Paquimé. The jar, a Playas Red, was in a shaft at the bottom and center of the reservoir. It was adorned with a necklace of shell and turquoise around its neck (Di Peso 1974:347). The jar also contained turquoise, shell, slate, and bovid horn core fragments (likely bison, but perhaps mountain sheep). Ethnographic analogy with Southwestern peoples suggests the shells, turquoise, and other objects are water offerings (Di Peso 1974; VanPool and VanPool 2007; Weigand and García de Weigand 2001). Elsewhere we proposed that the jar itself was an active agent intended to help bring the reservoir to life and preserve it in the arid and unpredictable Southwestern environment (VanPool and VanPool n.d.). It wears a necklace like those worn by the Casas Grandes people, reflecting the intentional metaphorical connection with people who also wore jewelry. After all, the materials used for the necklace could have been placed *in the jar*, if the jar was intended to simply hold offerings. The decoration of the jar with a necklace similar to those used by humans reflects a conceptual relationship between the two similar to that in the historic Pueblos discussed earlier. As an agent, we propose the jar's placement reflects its *active* role in the community; this Made Being served as an intermediary with the watery underworld to help preserve and maintain the water that was central to Paquimé (VanPool and VanPool 2007). The shaft that holds the vessel acts as a *sipapu* (an *axis mundi*—a portal between the underworld and the middle world; humans emerged through it from previous worlds) that allows the pot access both to the middle and the lower worlds.

The use of nonhuman agents as intermediaries with the spirit world has been ethnographically documented in the Southwest using rock art (Young 1988). We propose this phenomenon is manifested here. As a Made Being, this pot was a "gatekeeper" acting with its own power to negotiate with hidden persons, in



**Fig. 5.3** Casas Grandes faced-jar. Courtesy of Centennial Museum, University of Texas, El Paso, Catalogue No. A. 36.2.22

particular the horned serpent. This in turn reflects the functional nature of animated beings we discussed earlier. It also reflects how the agency of objects changes with context. All pots are Made Beings, but not all pots serve as intermediaries negotiating the relationship between horned serpents and humans. This individual vessel was a distinct person with a unique relationship within the animistic framework that structured Casas Grandes cosmology. In other words, not all pots are equal, and treating pots as a single class of animated Made Beings will ignore variation in individual cases. Sometimes this variation will be analytically incidental, but other times it may be (or should be) the focus of analysis.

Effigy pots give further insight into the nature of pots as Made Beings. These human effigies are globular jars that come in two basic forms: fully formed effigies and jars with heads. The fully formed effigies are elaborate molded human effigies with hips, buttocks, primary and secondary sexual traits, legs, and arms. The effigies' backsides were painted with the dualistic designs typical of Medio period iconography, but the fronts were often painted to show personal items such as clothing (e.g., belts, sashes, and leggings) and jewelry (e.g., bracelets and necklaces) (Di Peso et al. 1974, vol. 8:81–92). The details of the fully formed effigies suggest they reflect real people involved in various tasks such as smoking, breast feeding, and serving food (VanPool and VanPool 2006). According to Pueblo cosmology, these Made Beings would also have an active spiritual component that would transcend their significance as “portraits.”

In contrast to the distinctly decorated effigies are globular jars with molded faces that lack the embellishment and anthropomorphic bodies and general distinguishing features of actual humans (Fig. 5.3). Although the faces are anthropomorphic, they

do not depict individual humans performing tasks such as smoking. Archaeologists have easily interpreted the more detailed human effigies as portraits of specific humans, but the jars with the less-detailed faces have been more problematic. Di Peso (1974) suggested these effigies depict mythic ancestors, dead people (because they lack eyes), or generalized supernatural deities. However, this interpretation does not answer why these individuals were not depicted in greater detail. We propose that the generalized anthropomorphic depictions reflect the artist portraying the pot's face. In other words, the Casas Grandes artists intentionally gave these Made Beings faces, just as they intentionally adorned the Playas Red pot in Reservoir 2 with human-style jewelry. They sought to emphasize the animistic nature of these beings, in order to facilitate interaction with them and other persons. In contrast with the Reservoir Pot, the specific relationships the faced jars had with other persons are ambiguous, but we are beginning to study this issue in more detail, and hope that context and other archaeological information will help clarify it.

### *The Mound of the Serpent*

The Mound of the Serpent is a 113 m long, north to south oriented mound shaped like a horned serpent. The sinuous body was a retaining wall (45 cm high by 38 cm wide) that redirected water away from the city (Di Peso et al. 1974, vol. 5:476), but its head was a platform mound. The serpent had two solidified caliche blocks for eyes. The eastern eye (which faced towards the town) had a mortar hole bore through it, but the western eye had an incised “plumed serpent,” which had three backward-flowing lines similar to feathers flowing from the top of its head and from the middle hump of the back (Di Peso et al. 1974, vol. 5:478). The shape of the mound reflects an obvious connection between the mound itself and horned serpents. The Mound of the Serpent represents the horned serpent as a water control device; he is literally controlling water, making him the direct personification of a water-controlling, terrestrial serpent. In this personification, he is an active agent impacting the daily life of humans at Paquimé. The placement of the eyes as part of the construction of the serpent provides us further insight into its interaction with humans. As mentioned previously, the western eye was etched with a Mesoamerican-style plumed serpent, indicating that the Serpent Mound was either seeing a reflection of himself in the sky or was viewing another serpent to the west. The eastern eye, which faces the city, had a blank eye—perhaps to keep a watchful eye on the inhabitants. The creation of a water-retaining Serpent Mound, and its embellishment with additional serpent symbolism, emphasizes the connection between water control and the subsequent being. It reflects the ontological status of horned serpent persons with whom humans negotiate. The literal personification of the serpent as a being directly controlling water at Paquimé emphasizes its active role in controlling water, and thereby promoting and maintaining life at the settlement. The mound itself derived its agency from the innate agency of the horned serpent, and through context as a prominent platform mound visible to the thousands of people who inhabited the city

it was a significant nonhuman person protecting (and perhaps judging) the city's inhabitants. This example again reflects the three principles we outlined earlier.

### *Animacy and Hidden Persons*

The final example we present focuses more specifically on the third principle we outlined (the idea that there is variation in the spiritual and relational natures of animated persons), although it also reflects the other principles. There is a distinction in Casas Grandes symbolism between persons depicted as effigies and painted images. "Observable" persons, that is, the sorts of creatures with whom humans could directly interact could be depicted in ceramic effigies as 3D forms. This could include snakes, macaws and other birds, and other humans (see VanPool and VanPool 2006 for images). However, there is another class of beings that were depicted on pottery, but only as painted, flat images. These include horned serpents, a "double-headed macaw diamond" form that has been interpreted as a metaphysical deity (VanPool and VanPool 2006), a specific-formed bird that does not correspond to an "observable" bird species in the Casas Grandes environment, and anthropomorphic humans with macaw heads or large horns similar to those of the horned serpent. It also includes humans with specific markings that appear to be involved in ritual. We suggest that this distinction is meaningful and reflects the distinction between observable and hidden persons.

Elsewhere we have argued that the effigies of males smoking, and the painted images of people involved in ritual dancing, growing a horn with their ritual headdresses next to them, and anthropomorphs interacting with the horned serpent and double-headed macaw diamond reflect shamanic ritual (VanPool 2003; VanPool and VanPool 2007). Briefly, males smoked a potent form of tobacco, as well as likely fasted, engaged in bloodletting, went without sleep and water, and took other steps to initiate altered states of consciousness (VanPool 2003). These individuals, identified by the pound signs on their bodies (pound signs are limited to these individuals), then entered into a shamanic trance in which they traveled to the spirit world to directly interact with the nonobservable nonhuman persons and then returned to the physical world (see Viveiros de Castro 2004, for a similar discussion in which South American shamans interact with otherwise nonobservable persons). Within the sequence of progression through this journey, the images shift from molded effigies to painted figures. Thus, human males at the start of the journey who are engaging in smoking and other activities (e.g., masturbating) are depicted in effigy and maintain the distinctive facial and clothing markings reflecting them as individuals. In other words, these are human persons who are depicted as real, human persons. As the transformation continues, the shaman loses his specific, defining characteristics including clothing and genitalia until they possess only the distinctive pound sign designs. The horned serpent headdress the shaman wore is replaced by a horn that literally emerges from his head, and the human person transforms into an other-than-human (or perhaps not-wholly-human) person.

This individual cannot be directly observed, except by other shamans. At the climax of this transformation, the shaman has become a nonobservable spirit person, which allows him to interact with the horned serpent and other hidden persons. The shift in the medium used to depict the same individuals during the progression is meaningful. It reflects their animistic and spiritual status.

Another example of such a distinction between the literal, observable world and the painted, unobservable persons is the killdeer effigy (VanPool 2001:81). The top of this vessel is a molded bird, which has 7 of the 12 characteristics used by modern ornithologists to recognize killdeers (VanPool 2001:81). The depiction further includes drastically asymmetrical wings; Casas Grandes artists are typically very focused on symmetry, and the choice to have such asymmetry may reflect the killdeers' famous broken wing display it uses to lure predators from its nest. Below the effigy's spout is a painted design of what have been interpreted as macaws because of the over-arching beak and apparent feathers (Di Peso 1974; VanPool 2001). These macaws are arranged in a spoke-like manner typical of macaw burials at Paquimé, where hundreds of macaws were ritually sacrificed (but not eaten) and buried in formal graves. These dead, sacrificed macaws would not have been part of the observable world, and instead would have been transformed into nonobservable persons through the sacrifice. The juxtaposition between the living, observable killdeer person and the sacrificed, nonobservable macaw persons is consequently reflected in the use of a detailed effigy for the killdeer and the stylized, painted forms for the macaws. This example again reflects that the Medio period people consciously distinguished between persons who could and could not be observed. Not all animated beings were the same to them.

## Conclusion

We have identified three principles that we believe help structure the understanding of spirits within an animistic framework and illustrated how they are reflected in the archaeological record of Paquimé. These three constructs are: (1) the central placement of humans in their perceived animist frameworks, (2) the use of nonhuman persons' attributes and roles to define their relationship to humans, and (3) the realization that all animated persons are not uniform in their characteristics, influence, and power relationships. We hasten to add that we do not discount Viveiros de Castro's (2004) perspectivist framework in which humans accept that nonhuman beings have their own perceptions, conceive of themselves as humans, and organize their own animistic frameworks around themselves. However, in their own frameworks humans will focus on their own relationships with other persons, just as humans expect jaguars and other powerful persons to have animistic frameworks focused on themselves (Viveiros de Castro 2004).

In conclusion, we wish to emphasize there will be variation within the relationships that structure an animistic framework. This variation will be obviously present among different cultures as they organize their relationships based on the changing

availability and role of the various nonhuman persons (e.g., in some cases fishing hooks may be considered important nonhuman beings and in other cases they may be considered inanimate objects used to negotiate with other nonhuman beings). Perhaps less obvious is that this variation will be reflected through time in the same culture and even within a given culture at any given point in time. The meanings of kachina, for example, almost certainly changed through time during the development of the kachina religion over the last 700 years and the relationships (and hence meaning) of kachina as nonhuman persons may vary among the people interacting with them. The variation in the Hopi kachina by clan reflects this, with some kachina being central to specific clans and villages but largely incidental to other clans and villages (Wright 1973).

A consideration of animism has greatly benefited the study of human relationships with spirits. We find this to be an encouraging trend that is leading scholars to propose interesting new ideas and find useful avenues for studying past and present religious frameworks. This is certainly reflected in many chapters in this volume. Given our ability to examine long periods of time and variation within and among cultures, we are certain that archaeology will become a useful addition to this scholarship.

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## Chapter 6

# In Search of Cosmic Power: Contextualizing Spiritual Journeys between Cahokia and the St. Francois Mountains

John E. Kelly and James A. Brown

**Abstract** Religious observance historically incorporated journeys to sacred places for American Indian groups on the Plains and around the Great Lakes as an integral part of individual experience and communion with the spirit world. The history of such journeys is exemplified by the environmental contexts of several large ritual centers in the Mississippi river basin. They include the Archaic Period center of Poverty Point, the Middle Woodland centers such as the Pinson mounds, and finally the large Mississippian center of Cahokia. Material evidence reveals that the nearby mountains of the Ozarks, composed of caves, springs, and materials imbued with sacred power, were thus important as a destination for Cahokian spiritual journeys. An ancient volcanic remnant known as the St. Francois Mountains contains intrusive basalt dykes engulfed by the cedar glades of the Ozarks resulting in a ritual landscape of particular importance. Both basalt and red cedar were an important part of the material record at Cahokia and its surrounding communities. Given their power we argue that these materials were transported back to Cahokia as a token either of pilgrimages or journeys for vision quests. We explore such spiritual journeys so widespread among Native American Indians in both the recent and distant past.

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The shared worldviews of the indigenous peoples of North America are rooted and linked in a rich pre-Columbian artifactual and oral past that is still highly active today. One perspective into these worlds is obtained by understanding the nature of dreams and visions. In traditional Native American cultures, such a perspective is an essential part of the search for spiritual knowledge where dreams and visions represent contacts with primordial sources of empowerment. To perceive this search for empowerment requires an appreciation of the visionary experience, an experience which has often been denied or marginalized in the dominant cultures (Irwin 1994b:257).

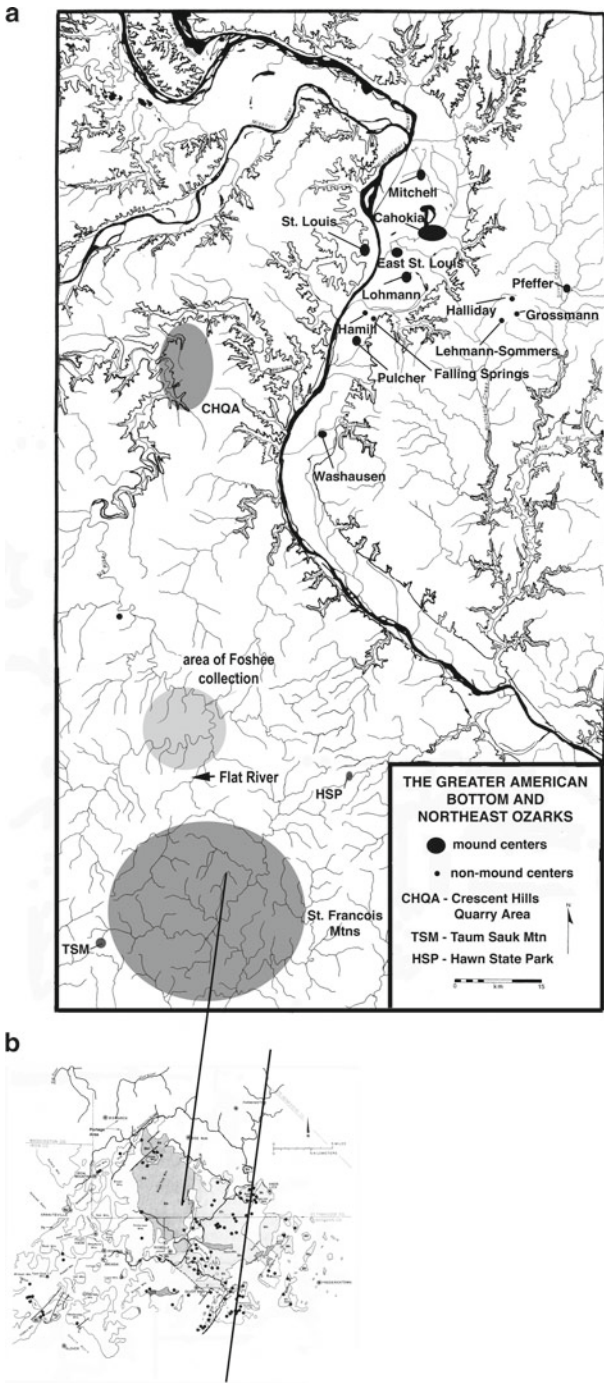
## Introduction

From time immemorial the conceptual worlds of human societies have found material expression in specific places on the landscape. Although the existence of precontact cultural placemaps has been recognized in abstract, little work has been devoted to an archaeological perspective. Not so long ago Parks and Wedel (1985:167) wrote respecting Pawnee geography that “the ethnographic and historical literature of the plains region contains only sporadic, frequently vague, references to geographical sites considered sacred to Indian groups. ... But the number of references to sacred places scattered throughout the literature is sufficient to attest to their undoubted existence for all tribes and to suggest their fundamental importance as well.”

The benchmark study that has quickened general interest in the North American literature subject is Basso's (1996a, b) *Wisdom Sits in Places*, which meticulously documents the map of contemporary Apache places, both sacred and profane. Recently the subject has drawn the attention of archaeologists and ethnologists of Great Plains societies (Clark and Scheiber 2008) following a much older fruitful collaboration on the map of special places in the Pawnee landscape (Parks and Wedel 1985). This chapter argues for the significant draw that places can have in archaeological models of ancient landscapes. We journey to the center of the North American continent where a sacred landscape known as the St. Francois Mountains located in the eastern Ozarks was embraced by the ancient inhabitants of the area surrounding the present-day city of St. Louis along the central Mississippi River. At the center was an ancient city known as Cahokia (Fig. 6.1).

Places in the special sense used here are locations accorded significance in the mental maps of human societies (Turner 1979). Although topography, geology, and cultural memory provide the visual cues that mark the places, their importance ultimately is based on cultural priorities. Those priorities include spiritual connections of a personal nature and locations deemed sacred or sacrosanct to the population as a whole. Historical events likewise accord significance to places and key episodes in mythological time that are tied to geography. Commonly, for example, mountains are the home of supreme deities.

Most relevant here is a sense of spirituality that is evoked by a place. Particular qualities are important. For archaeologists the qualities that are most useful are physical ones stripped of names and historical significance. Spirituality as defined by Swenson (1999:100) is the easiest to connect with archaeological evidence. It “is



**Fig. 6.1** (a) Distribution of sites within the Greater American Bottom discussed in the text. (b) Distribution of intrusive dikes within St. Francois Mountains

defined in only personal or experiential terms (not institutional or organizational), such as belief in God or a higher power, ....” This perspective falls in line with Insoll’s (2004) view that spirituality is only one component of religion. As a central theme in this volume, spirituality is an important and pervasive element in American Indian religion. While spirituality is often framed explicitly by reference to elements of the cosmos, it is experienced individually. Frequently, spirituality is expressed as a journey, either physically or one which takes place in the mind. While the latter is associated with shamanism, physical journeys are expressed as vision quests, which select for places deemed to be sacred or at least sacrosanct (Turner 1979). Such quests empower the individual in ways that serve to strengthen the social fabric (Albers and Parker 1971). While we cannot easily identify the footprints of those that have traversed the landscape, we can, however, recognize and thus establish those places and points that were potentially important to the success of any journey made whether to the top of a mountain or to a sacred center.

## Sacred Journeys

Special places need not be particularly sacred; sacrosanct would be a more appropriate description. A useful contemporary example would be World War II battlefield memorials in France. They are marked with regimental and individual monuments placed on the field of battle evocative of sacrifice by the dead. They attract visitors as places of commemoration and personal reflection, sometimes accompanied by the cutting of flowers to bring as mementos. These battlefield memorials are not sacred in the usual sense, although the grave markers and other inscriptions draw upon sacred motifs. Rather these places are sacrosanct and protected from desecration. Mementos removed as tokens of remembrance potentially become a proxy for the original place.

Much of the global literature on pilgrimages focuses on the Old World and Latin America, with only occasional references to North American Indian pilgrimages. Although these are more likely to be modern, many may be linked with much older religious traditions. Morinis’ (1992b) edited volume, *Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage*, examines a much neglected area of inquiry for anthropology. In the introductory chapters Morinis (1992a) and Preston (1992) provide important insights into the broader theoretical and methodological issues that need to be tackled if religious journeys are to be understood. Preston’s (1992) concept of “spiritual magnetism” is one that may help us better grasp the link between spirituality, sacred places, the act of seeking, and the religious experience. Spiritual magnetism is defined as:

... the power of a pilgrimage shrine to attract devotees. It is not an intrinsic “holy” quality of mysterious origins that radiates objectively from a place of pilgrimage: rather, spiritual magnetism derives from human concepts and values, via historical, geographical, social, and other forces that coalesce in a sacred center. It develops at a particular place of pilgrimage because of the interplay of traceable forces that seem mysterious to participants but have measurable referents in empirical reality. This attribution does not diminish or in any way disregard attributes of mystery, miracle, or sacrality assigned to the phenomenon by devotees. ... Places of pilgrimage are endowed with (1) miraculous cures, (2) apparitions of supernatural beings, (3) sacred geography, and (4) difficulty of access (Preston 1992:33).

It is the second item, to be discussed later, that is of particular interest as regards Cahokia. For the St. Francois Mountains we suspect the second and third criteria are also relevant to our analysis.

In general, North American researchers rarely use terms such as “journey” or “pilgrimage.” Instead such sacred trips for many North American indigenous people are characterized as a vision quest, which, as Gill (1982:97) states, “stands at the core of Native American religious traditions.” The impetus for such quests lies with the individual and their experience with the sacred (Benedict 1922; Irwin 1994b). Pilgrimages, when the term is used, characterize long journeys to specific sacred locations. For example, in northern Mexico small groups of the Huichol make a pilgrimage of over 600 km to collect Peyote for their religious ceremonies. As part of this journey a series of specific rituals is conducted (Schultes and Hoffman 1992). Another example is the current pilgrimages and vision quests made to Hot Springs National Park (known as Manataka by American Indians), in Arkansas. Not only are the springs sacred, but the surrounding landscape of mountains and caves attract American Indians and others (Ewing n.d.; Moore 2008).

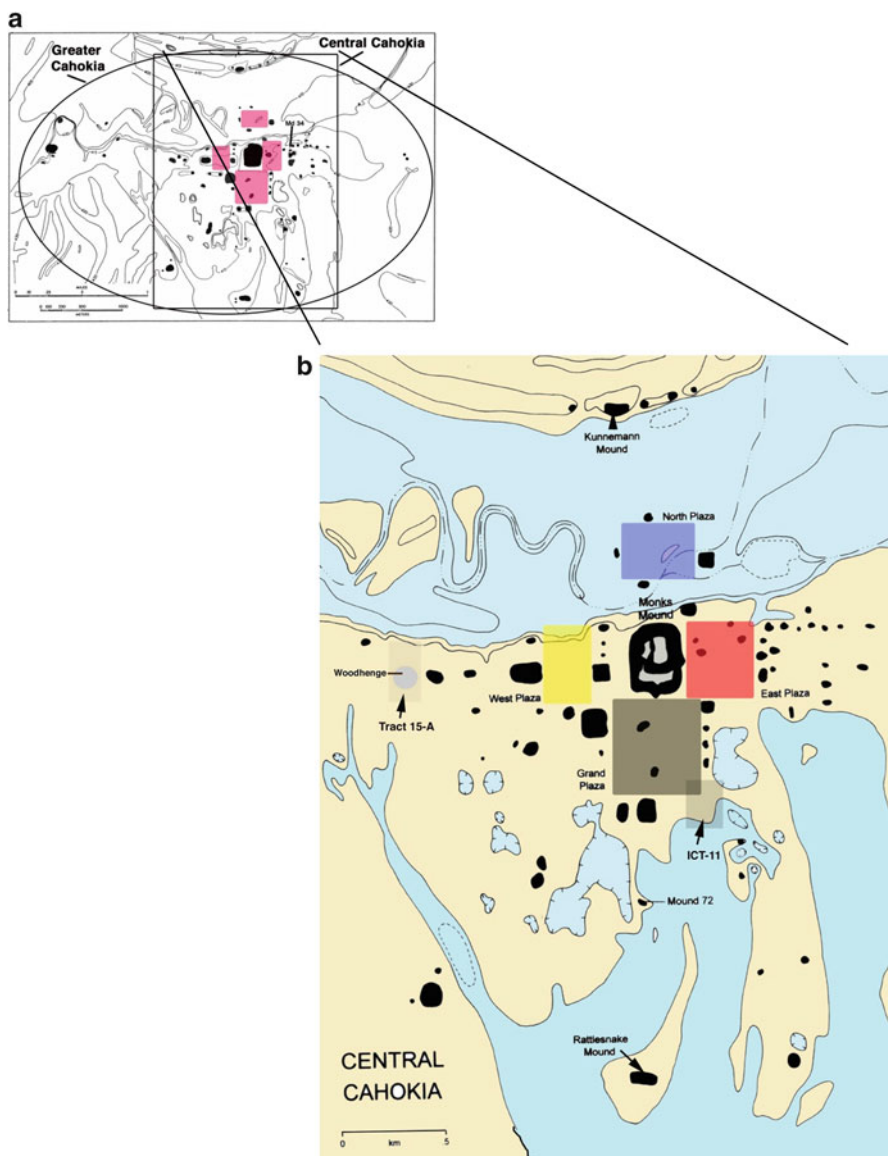
In the last few decades Cahokia Mounds has become a sacrosanct site visited by American Indians throughout the year. Each year the solstices and equinoxes are observed at one of Cahokia’s reconstructed sunrise markers, known as Woodhenges (Wittry 1977; Iseminger 2010) (Fig. 6.2). Among the participants in these observances are American Indians as well as “new-agers,” who gather atop Monks Mound to observe the sun’s rising to the beat of a drum. Occasional small gifts are left as offerings by some of those attending.

## The Archaeology of Sacred Journeys

Ancient resource acquisition has been viewed typically as a problem in optimal efficiency and it has been framed theoretically by the least cost principle. Recently, attention has turned away from this mechanical model and its western-based perspective. Archaeological examples of contradictory rationales are mounting: far-flung acquisition of soils, rocks, and other materials has been discovered to have been targeted to the exclusion of nearby resources. The sole reason for this often “extravagant” behavior is that the qualities sought are not obvious, or not necessarily sought for their economic value. Customarily, the nonpractical motive has then been attributed to the process of status competition. This may work for rare, highly visible materials used in an unusual manner and deposited in elite graves. But what of hard-to-acquire materials whose deployment bears no mark of exclusivity? It is these that are the subject of this chapter.

Bradley (1999) was one of the first to explore ancient pilgrimages in Britain, although the subject was one of the thematic issues, the “Archaeology of Pilgrimage,” of *World Archaeology* in 1994 (Graham-Campbell 1994). For ancient North America two areas, the Southwest and Midwest, have physical evidence of “roads.” For the Southwest some of the best known examples are the roads of Chaco Canyon





**Fig. 6.2** (a) Central Cahokia during the Lohmann/Stirling Phases with areas discussed in the text. (b) Greater Cahokia

(Windes 1991; Wicklein 1994). In the Midwest pilgrimage has been used to characterize the Hopewell “Road,” which served to connect what archaeologists call the Hopewell complexes of earthworks and enclosures at Newark to similar earthworks over 100 km to the southwest near Chillicothe in Ohio (Lepper 1995, 2006).



## The Structure of the Cosmos

Oral traditions present the American Indian world as a multilayered cosmos (e.g., Irwin 1994b; Reilly 2004; Lankford 2007a; Brown 2011; Duncan 2011). The major three of these are the “Upper World” of the sky, “This World” of the terrestrial surface, and the “Beneath World” (Lankford 2007a, d). The first of these is the part of the cosmos where heavenly bodies reside. For the Osage the daytime sky is synonymous with the sun; the sky at night is associated with the moon and stars. This distinction plays out in other associations connected with life and death. The sun is associated with the east along with day, birth, life, male, and red. This stands in stark contrast with the west, associated with the moon, night, destruction, death, female, and black (Bailey 1995:33). The east–west distinction is tied to a conception of the world as part of a never-ending cycle. Preceding sunrise the Morning Star rises as either Venus or Mars; after the sun sets the same “star” trails behind the sun as a harbinger of the night sky.

Of the multitude of stars in the night sky, a number have specific meanings that make them an important part of the cosmos. In general, major astral bodies and constellations stand for specific spirits and deities and their places of abode (Reilly 2004; Lankford 2007c, 2011). The Milky Way, for example, is the path that the dead take on their journey into the heavens (Speck 1931; Lankford 2007a, b). For the Osage they are greeted at the beginning of this journey by the constellation Orion, viewed by native peoples as a hand, and located near the juncture of the Earth’s surface and the sky. This represents a portal guarded by “Old Woman who never dies” (Bowers 1992; Reilly 2004; Lankford 2011).

The more visible portion of their universe is the layer of earth where people, animals, plants, and other seemingly inanimate objects reside (Lankford 2007d). But those elements such as rocks and mountains, among other “inanimate” objects, are very much alive and imbued with power. In fact native peoples generally do not differentiate between inanimate and animate (Brown 2007a:11). Beneath the earth is a dark, parallel world that stands in symmetrical opposition to the bright daytime sky. The beneath world and its minions of snakes stand in stark contrast with those creatures of the sky, such as the birds, and are often in a state of constant battle with each other (Brown 2007b). Among the Dhegiha Sioux, the spirits of the upper and lower worlds reverse their positions diurnally (Duncan 2011:29). At night the sun lies beneath the plane of “This World” only to be reborn at sunrise.

At the center of the world is the sacred tree (Hall 1997; Ridington and Hastings 1997; Duncan 2011), whose leaves and branches extend upward into the heavens with its roots firmly anchored in the world beneath. It connects the various layers of their cosmos as a cosmic pole or *axis mundi*. Among many societies, especially those on the prairies such as the Omaha (Ridington and Hastings 1997) and Osage (Dorsey 1885), the sacred tree was at the center of their communities with each community seen as a microcosm of the universe. Often characterized as the “venerable man,” the sacred tree was also the place where the thunder-beings resided. Although the significance of this will be examined later, we know that the pole marks the center of earlier pre-Columbian communities of the American Bottom by the seventh century (Kelly 1990a, b).

## Making the Journey

Moving beyond the overall structure of their cosmos we can examine how individuals were an integral part of this matrix. Throughout one's life each person moves through a series of life-altering events, some related to changes to physical being such as puberty; others are of a social nature, such as marriage. These rites of passage are fully integrated within the wider universe. One of the earliest rites of passage for a child is that of puberty. For most American Indians, children's preparation for this rite of passage begins before the biological change occurs. Individuals are required to isolate themselves, undergo fasting, take purgative medicines, and subject themselves to ritual purification through sweats and plunges into cold water. The intent is for the child to begin to communicate with the supernatural and to acquire a guardian spirit (in some instances multiple guardians) that will guide him/her through life's journey. During this process the individual may undergo a vision and acquire a name, power, and song as part of creating a linkage to the supernatural. A journey is often an important component in the search for a guardian spirit, although rarely is this journey to a sacred place identified as a travel routine amounting to a pilgrimage. High places frequently were sought by individuals, especially young males, seeking spiritual solace and to communicate with the supernatural. It is not unlikely that the same locality was repeatedly sought out, much as caves often were sought out by Paleolithic peoples of Europe (Lewis-Williams 2002). The Black Hills of South Dakota to this day are, for example, a sacred place for many Plains peoples (Irwin 1994a:229).

Among the more socially and politically complex Southeastern societies where many individuals had less privileged access to the spirits, socially authorized religious practitioners, such as priest or shamans, restricted access by requiring some form of payment. Individual clans and other social bodies often monopolized access for their members. For the Chickasaw, specific guardian spirits were linked to a clan and were the same as the clan "totem." According to Speck (quoted in Benedict 1923:17), the vision part of the guardian spirit had:

become split off, and is here the prerogative of the shaman. The aspirant had to buy from old shaman the instructions for diagnosis, the herb, and the songs. The real power, however, came from "the little people of his clan"—his ancestors, that is, in the sense of the words, conceived as spirits living in the woods. To seek them, the candidates fasted in the woods alone and were entirely naked except for the red ceremonial paint, while "the little people of his clan" cared for him, and taught him in all detail all he should know.

Individuals making the journey to the St. Francois Mountains may have been restricted to membership in certain clans linked to their spiritual rights. For the Osage, the cosmos was divided among the 24 clan priesthoods into 168 parts (La Flesche 1921, 1939; Bailey 1995). Osage society was organized so that each clan priesthood was responsible for a segment of knowledge essential for the proper conduct of the annual round of ceremonies. The clan priests dealt with the visible universe, while another yet smaller group of tribal priests focused on the invisible world.

## Cahokia as Cosmological Center

We begin with an historical perspective on the largest mound group dominating the large ritual centers of the Mississippi Valley and its numerous tributaries. These are places on the landscape where people came together to celebrate the creation of the cosmos (Kelly 1999; Byers 2006). This process was initiated during the Middle Archaic when earthen monuments were created in parts of the lower Mississippi Valley (Gibson and Carr 2004) eventually culminating with the unique Late Archaic center of Poverty Point (Gibson 2000). Middle Woodland centers although organized differently reify this older pattern and by the time Cahokia is created we have a landscape that, unlike the earlier “vacant” ceremonial centers, incorporates the living and the dead within a living community.

Cahokia, the center of this discussion, is an American Indian ritual city extant during the first half of the second millennium CE. For purposes here we focus on the broader world-view shared to varying degrees by Indian societies of the eastern Woodlands of North America. We draw on this cosmological knowledge to better understand archaeological materials with the underlying premise that the material record has meaning and that meaning is best understood in terms of both its cultural contexts but equally important its natural contexts.

After a brief period of initial development as what can best be characterized as a “mega-village” at the beginning of the eleventh century, Cahokia was rapidly converted by the middle of the eleventh century into a vast landscape of earthen monuments and plazas (Kelly and Brown n.d.). At the center stood Monks Mound and a cruciform arrangement of four large plazas covering an area of 150 ha (Fig. 6.2b) (Kelly 1996; Kelly and Brown n.d.). The community epicenter was the focal point of religious activity for over a century. From this core, the community consisted of adjacent residential areas with smaller plazas and attendant mounds that sprawled throughout the 15 km<sup>2</sup> of what we regard as Cahokia (Fig. 6.2a). Numerous small farmsteads and specialized ritual nodes linked to larger villages and other towns with mounds and plazas characterized the cultural landscape around Cahokia. Because of its size, organization, and hinterland, Cahokia is increasingly being seen as an incipient city (Kelly and Brown n.d.). To understand the cosmological linkage of its configuration, however, we need to turn to the cosmology of American Indian societies as previously described. The purposiveness to the construction of this earthen “mountain” is underscored by its erection to a maximum height of 30 m within a few decades (Schilling 2010). A large post representing the cosmic center was planted in a pit 3.5 m deep into the summit of Monks Mound immediately south of the largest (800 m<sup>2</sup>) building on the summit (Reed 2009).

The size of the surrounding settlement increased abruptly and effectively accommodated a sizable influx of population both from the immediate region and more distantly. It is estimated that the regional population within a 30 km radius of Cahokia by the beginning of the twelfth century CE ranged between 20,000 and 50,000 people (Milner 1998:124). While the number of people residing at Cahokia has been a subject of debate (Milner 1998, 2006; Pauketat and Lopinot 1997), the

plazas surrounding Monks Mound were sized to accommodate more people than we have evidence for. This metaphorical mountain marked the focus in this ritual city where people came to participate in its creation, to honor the sacred principles essential in its creation, and above all to partake of the cosmic energy channeled by the mound.

## **The St. Francois Mountains in the Sacred Landscape of Cahokia**

The Ozarks some 100 km to the southwest of Cahokia are an uplifted area of great geological antiquity. It was an area inhabited by native peoples since they originally entered the region some 13,000 years ago. Surveys and excavations over the last century have documented occupations extending from the Late Woodland into the Mississippian periods. The Late Woodland occupation tends to be fairly extensive. However, by the end of the late Emergent Mississippian and the beginning of the Mississippian period of the eleventh century, there appears a significant decrease in population. Undoubtedly this relates to the emergence of Cahokia, although a small mound center was established along the lower reaches of the Big River (Fig. 6.1a) during the twelfth century. By the onset of the thirteenth century people appear to have returned to the northeastern part of the Ozarks as part of the dispersal of populations from Cahokia and surrounding American Bottom (Milner 1998, 2006). Our interest here is the eleventh and beginning of the twelfth centuries, when evidence of occupation is quite limited.

The Ozarks' most prominent feature, the St. Francois Mountains, is a rolling area of low eroded peaks. While there is little evidence of occupation, undoubtedly American Indians in the past were drawn not only to the St. Francois Mountains in southeast Missouri, but also to Cahokia as sacred places within their respective landscapes. We do not know whether pilgrimages, per se, or vision quests were made to the St. Francois Mountains. Given Cahokia's uniqueness on the cultural landscape in the central part of the North American continent, it undoubtedly was a place where sojourns were made in order to observe the sacred nature of this center but also to participate in rituals integral to the pilgrimage's success.

The source of Cahokia's importance was its propitious location to tap into cosmic power. Undoubtedly a number of factors fed into this locational advantage. One is the proximity to a convergence of a number of distinct physiographic and environmental areas (Fowler 1974). A hitherto neglected element in this embodiment is Cahokia's relative proximity to the Ozarks physiographic province, to the southwest, along with its low mountainous terrain known as the St. Francois Mountains. Many lithic materials, such as chert, igneous and metamorphic rocks, and an array of minerals, were obtained from the Ozarks (Kelly 1980). The St. Francois Mountains are composed of the remnants of a pre-Cambrian volcanic cone composed in part of geologically narrow (1–3 m wide) "slivers" of dark, black basaltic dikes and sills (Tolman and Robertson 1969) distributed discontinuously throughout this hilly

terrain (Fig. 6.1b). Basalt<sup>1</sup> is one of those unique raw materials employed by Mississippians in the manufacture of large axe-heads (Pauketat 1998; Pauketat and Alt 2004; Koldehoff and Wilson 2010).

The exposed rocks in the mountains were imbued with power because of their proximity to those forces in the heavens (Parks and Wedel 1985; Diaz-Granados 2004). These seemingly inanimate materials were indeed alive. Historically among many groups such as the Blackfeet and Lakota Sioux (Irwin 1994a:221–226) stones were believed to embody some of the oldest spirits. This prompted the inclusion of special rocks in many medicine bundles. For the Omaha, black stones were thought to have been struck by lightning and thus were connected with the thunder-beings (Fletcher and La Flesche 1911). In this context the “blackish” basaltic sills and dykes of the St. Francois Mountains begin to take on special significance transcending their inert form. Recent oral traditions may be linked to places such as the St. Francois Mountains.

The St. Francois Mountains are elevated over 400 m above the Mississippi floodplain on which Cahokia is situated. Although not as visibly dramatic as other mountainous regions in North America, the St. Francois Mountains undoubtedly represented an important place on the landscape for many reasons to indigenous peoples of the mid-continent. From a distance the higher peaks subtly extend above the surrounding peaks (Fig. 6.3). To reach these peaks, journeys of over 100 km may have been made either along an ancient overland trail that corresponds to US Route 67, or along a number of major streams whose headwaters emerge as springs and rivulets amongst the numerous volcanic rocks.

The St. Francois River was a natural conduit into the mountains for sojourns of individuals coming from the south in the northern part of the lower Mississippi River Valley (Morse 1980; Morse and Morse 1983). The river originates on the western slopes of the St. Francois Mountains near the highest mountain, Taum Sauk, and exits into the broad expanse of the lower Mississippi Valley after flowing around the volcanic cone in a clockwise manner. The fluvial route that may have been accessed by those from the northern American Bottom and Cahokia would have extended from the Meramec River to its tributary, the Big River. Like the St. Francois River this stream has its source at Taum Sauk, but on its north side. From here the Big River and its numerous tributaries drain a significant part of the northeastern Ozarks immediately north and west of the St. Francois River and Mountains. It was possible to portage between the St. Francois and Big Rivers in an open area just west of St. Joe Mountain (Kelly 2010). The Big River is a very sinuous, northward flowing stream that eventually joins the Meramec near the Crescent Hills (Fig. 6.1). The Crescent Hills cover a large area along the lower Meramec and Big Rivers and are the primary source of the “white” chert that dominates the late Emergent Mississippian and Mississippian lithic assemblages of the region (Kelly 1980, 1984;

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term basalt in a generic sense for fine-grained aphanitic igneous rocks (see Pauketat 1998:39). John Kelly is working with Professor Robert Dymek, geologist, at Washington University on the identification of the material using geo-chemical and petrographic techniques.



**Fig. 6.3** A view towards the St. Francois range from Knob Lick Mountain. Image from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St.\\_Francois\\_Mountains](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._Francois_Mountains) (photo by Wikipedian Kbh3rd, uploaded from Wikimedia Commons. Permission is granted to copy, distribute, and/or modify this document under the terms of the GNU Free Documentation License)

Koldehoff 1987). In the headwater area of the Big River, veins of lead were also readily accessible (Walthall 1981). Although no basalt exists in the Big River drainage, a possible Mississippian axe production workshop(s) has been identified by Koldehoff and Wilson (2010) in the upper reaches of the Big River approximately 10–25 km north of the closest basalt dyke/sill.<sup>2</sup>

The landscape of the Ozarks today is shrouded in a luxurious growth of deciduous forests dominated by oaks and hickories. Also quite evident are numerous stands of red cedar especially in the highly dissected and xeric rocky terrain of the upland hills. While these taxa were undoubtedly present in the distant past, this biotic landscape, however, has to a large extent been shaped by Euroamericans who began to make their presence known in the early eighteenth century. Beilmann and Brenner (1951) examined historic documents prior to 1850 in which the biota are described. They note the higher portions of this landscape were prairies, oak savannas, and glades, and thus the view shed of nearby mountains was greatly enhanced because of their open nature.

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<sup>2</sup> The Koldehof and Wilson (2010) study used material collected by the Foshee family from cultivated fields within a 10 km radius of Desloge, Missouri, near the junction of the Flat River with the Big River. These collections occurred between 1930 and 1990. Unfortunately the materials were not separated by site.



One of the species important to people of Cahokia was red cedar, which can be found in the Ozarks today in large stands. As a wood, as well as its evergreen branches, it was strongly associated with everlasting life and the life-force (Douglas 1976). The wood was used in the construction of large ritual buildings such as temples and other sacred structures such as the Woodhenge posts. Historically, it was a sacred species and was also used by the Omaha for one of their sacred posts (Ridington and Hastings 1997). While red cedar can be found today along the bluffs near Cahokia, the most likely source was the Ozarks. Obtaining these sacred parts of the landscape was more than a simple matter of acquisition. Drawing on the work of Fletcher and La Flesche (1911), Ridington and Hasting (1997) describe the ritual processes involved in the removal, transport, preparation, and erection of the Omaha sacred posts.

Unfortunately we have no clear sense of what the biotic landscape was like at the beginning of the second millennium. In some respects the Ozarks stand in marked contrast to the landscape surrounding Cahokia where the site and much of the flat floodplain is characterized by a variety of aquatic habitats whose margins are delimited by thin bands of trees. The slightly higher and dry land is primarily floodplain prairies. In another respect, however, the Cahokian landscape with its numerous mounds does mimic the St. Francois Mountains, albeit on a much smaller scale.

## Cahokia and the St. Francois Mountains

Buttes were where the animal spirits had their lodges among the Pawnee, the Mandan, and the Hidatsa (Parks and Wedel 1985; Bowers 1992). For the Pawnee the buttes in Nebraska and Kansas and other sacred places were where the lodges of the animal spirits resided (Parks and Wedel 1985). Among the Mandan the Earthnaming bundle drew collectively on the rites associated with each of the 12 sacred buttes (Bowers 1992). We strongly suspect that this was the case for the various “peaks” that make up the St. Francois Mountains, although we lack any evidence at this time. Thus selected individuals would have attempted to establish connections with the spirit world that resided in a myriad of places within the mountains as part of vision quests that were prevalent among groups from the Plains, Great Lakes, and Prairies (Benedict 1922, 1923; Irwin 1994a, b). Little is recorded about the use of this area by indigenous peoples historically, although one story does relate to the highest mountain, Taum Sauk, and the creation of a waterfall.

...it is said that Taum Sauk, the chief of the Piankashaw tribe, had a daughter, Mina, who was in love with a warrior from the hostile Osage tribe. The falls were formed when Mina threw herself off the mountain to her death after her people had killed her Osage lover in a similar manner. The Great Spirit sent a bolt of lightning which split the mountain top, and a stream of water flowed over the ledges, washing away the blood of the lovers. You can still see blood-red flowers, known as Indian Pinks, that grow along the banks of the stream each spring (Kramer 1998).

A journey to the St. Francois Mountains would have traversed many different natural worlds, including a vertical ascent through layers of the cosmos. Ritual



journeys to the peaks would place any individual in closer contact with those spirits residing in the sky of the Upper World. After the verticality of the mountain peaks are factored in, the combined impact of elevation and geology would result in a powerful statement. Thus, one objective of the pilgrimages is to capture special powers embodied in the material objects, animate and inanimate, and incorporate them within individualized sacred bundles. As we shall see, what we believe is that pieces of basalt from the St. Francois Mountains were respectfully collected as mementos and returned to Cahokia, in much the same way that flowers are removed from the battlefield memorials of France as tokens of remembrance.

Access into the highly dissected and hilly environment of the Ozarks entailed first crossing the low lying and watery world of the Mississippi Valley. The Ozarks are noted for springs and for caves and rock shelters tucked away in the narrow valley walls. Rock wall surfaces are places where many rock-art sites have been documented (Diaz-Granados and Duncan 2000). These were portals into the underworld and the powers related to fertility, death, and the regeneration of life. The rock-art highlights the importance of these concepts through the beautiful display of symbols on their surfaces. Also depicted are those forces such as the birds, thunder-beings, and lightning that dominate the Upper World. These sacred images were the spirits that would be encountered as part of the spirit quest. This area may have been seen as one of liminality in which individuals would have undergone rituals of fasting and purification before ascending the mountains and encountering the spirits that dwelled there.

## The Evidence

The St. Francois Mountains are the most likely source of a few of the lithic materials made into artifacts recovered from Cahokia and its satellite settlements. Basalt (Kelly 1980, 2010; Koldehoff and Wilson 2010) and other igneous and metamorphic materials were the most likely materials selected. Some chert and other minerals such as lead were present along the margins.

Although a long-term relationship existed between peoples of the Central Mississippi Valley and the American Bottom and the Ozarks, at the end of the tenth century, this connection increased for the northern area of the American Bottom. Relatively large nucleated villages with populations in the low hundreds are present throughout this area, culminating in the large nucleated center at Cahokia (Kelly 1992). It is during a brief period of a few decades in the eleventh century that a major shift took place in material culture that has been termed the “Big-Bang” by Pauketat (1993). It is in the context of the negotiation of sacred space that we have the beginnings of craft production in the form of basalt axe-heads at Cahokia (Pauketat 1998).

Pauketat’s recognition of basalt axe-head manufacture in the form of knapping debris from a context within a residential area 1 km west of Cahokia’s center brought to our attention a crafting workshop associated with the Big-bang and the

foundational pre-Big-Bang Emergent Mississippian occupation at Cahokia. The amount of basalt material recovered from both Emergent Mississippian and the subsequent Mississippian use of this area exceeds 33 kg. Approximately 4% by weight comes from Emergent Mississippian context, the remainder comes from Lohmann phase Mississippian context. In plotting the distribution of this debris, most (nearly 70%) comes from the southeastern portion of the residential area as presently defined at Cahokia. Ironically this area where axe-head production took place was abandoned by the beginning of the twelfth century CE and replaced by a sequence of at least five large postcircles. Where preserved the posts are red cedar, a species endemic to the Ozarks. The procurement of at least 48–64, 6-m long poles up to a ½-m in diameter may have involved trips to the Ozarks.

As noted earlier another possible Mississippian axe-head production workshop(s) was identified somewhere in an area just north of the St. Francois Mountains. Unfortunately the specific contexts are a bit vague, however, Koldehoff and Wilson (2010) argue on the basis of the size of the complete axes that the workshop is most likely Mississippian. We disagree with their interpretation that this workshop was under Cahokia's control. Alternatively, it may be related to ritual journeys to this area in which basalt materials were collected and taken to a specific location presumably of a sacred nature where large axes could be produced. Locating the exact site—which remains unknown—may involve an examination of the landscape and those places that may have had sacred attributes such as a spring. It is important to note that the area in which the materials were recovered includes the junction of the Flat River with the Big River. As previously discussed (Kelly 2010), the Flat River flows through a possible portage area just north of the St. Francois River (Fig. 6.1b).

The recent discovery of an axe-head cache including a number of mega-axe-heads at the early twelfth century AD Mississippian village of Grossmann in the uplands to the east of Cahokia (Pauketat and Alt 2004) nicely complements the workshop data at Cahokia. Unlike the data from Cahokia, there is no evidence of production at Grossmann. The Grossmann cache is but one of a number of such caches that Pauketat and others have been able to document throughout the region.

As described (Pauketat 1998:39) the raw materials from Cahokia were a “homogenous suite of aphanitic igneous rocks that appeared to have originated from the St. Francois Mountains in southeast Missouri.” These differ from the local glacial cobbles in that they have “highly weathered, iron-stained, and angular surfaces characteristic of blocky veins of intrusive basalts and diabbases....” “Preliminary petrographic inspections” tend to confirm the connection. Pauketat also notes another source of pre-Cambrian rocks along the upper reaches of Aux Vases Creek that drains east into the Mississippi River near Ste Genevieve, MO. Pauketat and Alt (2004) describe the movement of these materials up the Mississippi River to Cahokia. Although Mississippian peoples residing at the later (post 1200 CE) Common Field mound center and the nearby Bauman site (Voight 1985), where basalt fragments were recovered, may have journeyed to the Hawn Park area, it would have been difficult to transport this material up the Mississippi River. We suspect that the more likely route was down the Big and Meramec Rivers to the Mississippi.

Of interest is the material distribution not only at Cahokia but throughout the region. Not only has basalt knapping debris been recovered from a number of areas within Cahokia (Kelly 2006, 2010), but also at outlying sites such as the Washausen site, a small late Emergent Mississippian and early Mississippian mound center (Chapman 2005; Bailey 2007). This unique place is located opposite the Meramec River, our proposed conduit via its north–south tributary, the Big River, to the St. Francois Mountains. Here the basalt knapping debris is distributed around the plaza and concentrated in the area southwest of the northernmost mound (Chapman 2005; Kelly 2010). There is also some indication that large axes were being produced here. Several other sites in the immediate vicinity have also produced basalt knapping debris. Large blocks of raw basalt have been recovered from the Hamill site just north of the Pulcher mound center, a potential early rival center to Cahokia located 20 km to the south during the eleventh century (Kelly 1993, 2002).

## Discussion

Given the social and religious complexity of Cahokia, it is difficult to know the extent to which vision quests were an integral part of journeys to the St. Francois Mountains. We can make a case for the sacred nature of the St. Francois Mountains and that Cahokia was sacrosanct as well. The evidence and argument draws heavily on the ethnographic record and the underlying cosmology that is shared to varying degrees from the Plains into the Great Lakes and south across the prairies and into the southeastern woodlands. Our efforts at understanding Cahokia rely to a large extent on the Osage (La Flesche 1921, 1925, 1928, 1930, 1939; Bailey 1995) and their cosmic knowledge shared by different kin groups under the direct control of clan priests and tribal priests. Thus this practical organization provides us with a framework for understanding the spiritual connection between Cahokia and the St. Francois Mountains.

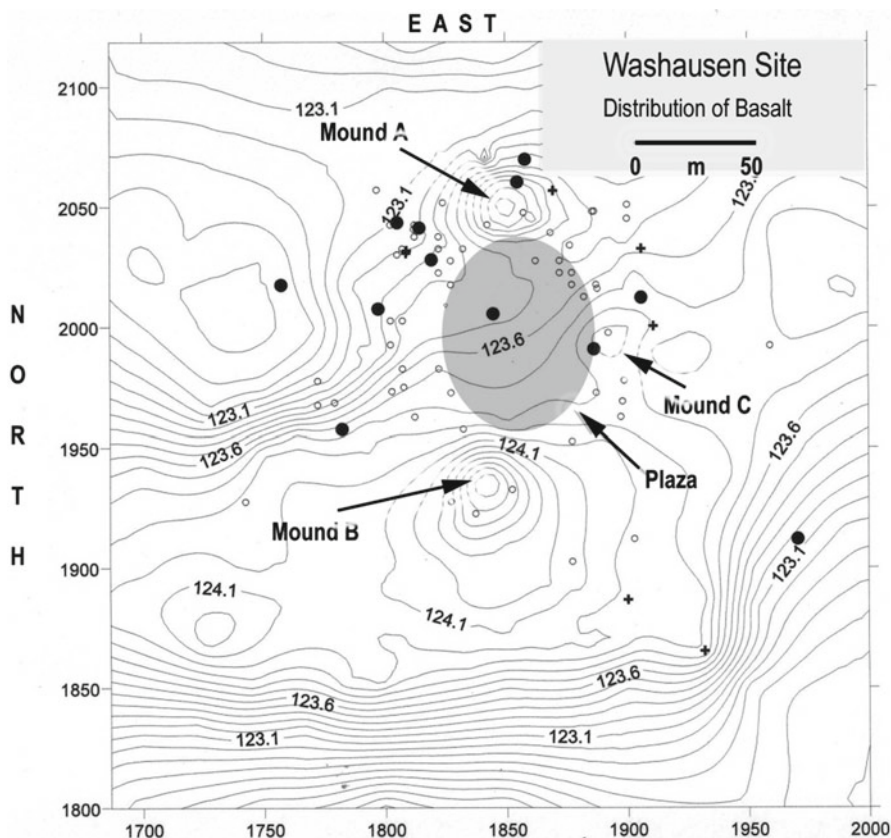
Aside from the practical use in the production of basalt axes, the raw material had sacred qualities that imbued them with certain power. The basalt material data comes in several forms: large finished axes, many of which have been found as caches; areas of axe-head manufacture at Cahokia and in the Ozarks near the source of the basalt; and scattered fragments at certain locations within Cahokia and outlying sites. Of particular interest is that the fragments of basalt are unevenly distributed, not only within sites but also between sites. Initially the fragments from Cahokia, referred to as knapping debris, were thought to represent the by-products of production identified from residential workshops predating the Woodhenge (Pauketat 1998). While we lack excavated evidence of this activity at other locations, the sporadic yet visible occurrence of these basalt pieces is suggestive of other uses. These uses would relate to their place of origin, presumably the St. Francois Mountains, and other qualities such as color that imbue them with a level of power accorded other sacred materials such as quartz crystals.

We can highlight several aspects of this debris that at this stage of the ongoing analysis provide some meaning and direction. High places and rocks are some of the most sacred places that American Indians can visit. They exhibit the utmost level of power in terms of the strength associated with the spirit beings that inhabit them. The question arises as to the procurement of this material. As stressed earlier we do not believe that this was an economic activity and instead was one imbedded in their cosmology. If our assumption that obtaining basalt required special trips to a sacred place such as the St. Francois Mountains is correct, then one of the most common trips historically was the vision quest. Vision quests were not about getting some type of material but the experience of the individual and the connection made with spirits that would become part of that individual's life in the future. Was everyone capable of making a journey or was it restricted in scope? If the St. Francois Mountains are part of the sacred knowledge, then that knowledge would be handled by those individuals in certain social groups, such as the clans or subclans, much in the same way that sacred items are, and have been, crafted (Kelly 2006).

We know, for example, that the Puma clan as a constituent of the Earth Moiety for the Osage had as one of its life symbols, three colored "boulders," one of which was "black." Turning to the ritual use of axes, in the Osage war ceremony the "battle axe" or "club" known as *I'-tsi'* is the responsibility of the Elder Sky (*Tsi'-zhu Wa-no'*) clan of the Sky (*Tsi'-zhu*) moiety and is presented to the four *Xthe'-ts'a'-ge* of the Sky moiety (La Flesche 1939:14–15). In the Omaha *He'dewachi* ceremony a sacred pole is erected, after which a woman with the "Mark-of-Honor" ritually attacks the pole with an axe four times at the location of the four cardinal directions (Fletcher and La Flesche 1911; Ridington and Hastings 1997:63–66). Whether there is a connection we of course do not know, but this does provide insights into the complex nature of how ritual knowledge was shared.

We must consider at this stage of this study that several types of journeys were undertaken. One may have simply been the vision quest made by individuals to the St. Francois Mountains expressly for a spiritual connection. Odd fragments of basalt from the dykes could have been mementos of the journeys. Presumably some of these basalt pieces may have been incorporated into sacred bundles. At this time we do not have a clear understanding of the presence of scattered basalt fragments from surface contexts. At the Washausen mound center basalt fragments are scattered primarily on the northwest side of the plaza, southwest of the northern-most mound, A (Fig. 6.4). This would seem to suggest that the basalt would be associated with ritual activities that occurred around the plaza. They may have been employed in certain rituals and were simply discarded after their use. We cannot determine whether they were buried after use or were simply associated with axe-head production.

The procurement of basalt for the manufacture of the large axes may have been a different trip, one in which those individuals who had made the spiritual connection could safely return and bring back larger quantities of this sacred rock. If our crafting model is correct, then the manufacture of the axes may have been completed by different individuals from other clans. At Cahokia there is no indication that the axes were completed on Tract 15-A; instead this part of the process may have been completed elsewhere at the site. What is important is that some Cahokians found it



**Fig. 6.4** Distribution of basalt materials from Washhausen Site (11MO305). Key: *Open circle*—basalt debitage; *filled circle*—basalt petrographic analysis; *plus*—axe fragments

crucial to participate in their society by undertaking journeys into a spirit-laden landscape. As noted earlier, the journey covered a number of different parts of the natural landscape. It may have involved seeking out sacred places such as caves and rockshelters where rituals were performed as part of spirit quests that prepared them for the ascent into the sacred mountains and contact with the black rock associated with the thunders who resided here. While some of the material returned to Cahokia was suitable for the production of large axe-heads, most may have been no more than powerful mementos of the journey.

## Conclusion

A clear and strong link between Cahokia and the St. Francois Mountains is the manufacture of axe-heads from St. Francois basalt and the use of red cedar in monumental architecture. Trips encountered a landscape of sacred locations that extended

not only into mother earth but also pushed upward into the heavens. The axe-heads were produced from a raw material imbued with power associated with the mountain, and the utilitarian items produced were in turn a source of power that was used in some instances to attack and kill sacred trees that were transported back to Cahokia. A large axe-head labeled “Monks Mound” given to the Smithsonian Institution in 1905 by David Bushnell was manufactured from basalt and along with the large pole found on top of Monks Mound serves to reinforce the various symbolic linkages that tie Cahokia via material culture to the mountains some 100 km to the southwest. The next step in our pilgrimage is to better understand where within the mountain the basalt came from and the nature of the journeys taken.

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**Part III**  
**Playing the Field: Archaeology,  
Ethnography and Oral Traditions**

## Chapter 7

# Accessing Past Cosmologies through Material Culture and the Landscape in the Philippines

Victor Paz

**Abstract** This chapter presents an argument on how we can access past cosmologies through an appreciation of archaeological context. The possibility of tracking down continuities that link past cultures to contemporary ones will be presented. The chapter will define, for example, what makes specific caves relevant to the spirituality/cosmology of a people, and also argue that it is possible to understand and track down the continuity of cosmological components. This may be done through the study of material-culture left behind by people from past cultures, and by studying people from living cultures in a common landscape. Supporting data come mostly from the archaeology of Palawan Island, Philippines, where the author has done a decade of research. Information from the archaeology of Island Southeast Asia will also be drawn into the discussion.

## Introduction

Most of us are interested in knowing how past cultures saw their world. All of those interested in knowing the past contemplate, in various degrees, how people/individuals may have understood the world around them. We specifically want to know the nature of their spirituality. To know past spiritualities entails knowing cosmologies, or how people organize in their minds and in their societies, the way their universe takes on cohesive meaning. The challenges in attempting to know

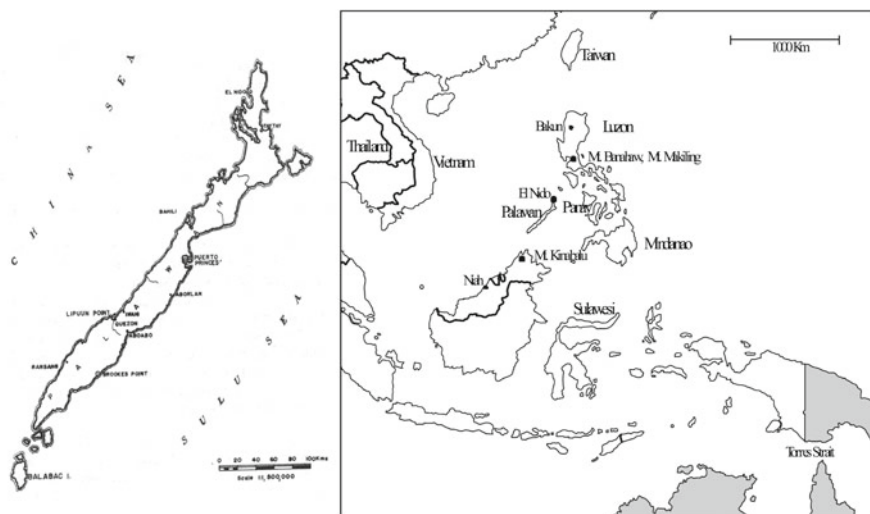
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**Fig. 7.1** General location map and enlarged map of Palawan

past spiritualities are daunting. So much so that for decades a tendency amongst archaeologists has been to limit their studies to literate cultures, or take a pessimistic view concerning the possibility of addressing the challenge (see Hawkes 1954; Binford 1989).

More recently we have seen archaeologists less intimidated by the challenge, who have earnestly tackled questions of spirituality in antiquity. To name a few examples, there are studies of Auregnacian Germany (Porr 2010), the ancient Greek world (Renfrew 1985; Peatfield 1992), and South American animism (e.g., Sillar 2009) that strongly address this topic. Closer to our region some examples are the study of Buddhist archaeology (Barnes 1995), work done on the Kaim Hitam site in Sarawak (Szabó et al. 2008), and the Torres Strait ritual sites studies (McNiven and Wright 2008; David et al. 2005). In the Philippines, the best example has come out of direct ethnographic analogy inferred from the iconic Manunggul jar (e.g., Fox 1970; Salazar 2004) (Fig. 7.1). This is a c. 2000 years ago (kya) intricately designed primary burial jar coming out of Manunggul cave site in central Palawan. At the top of the jar-cover there is an appliqué figure of a “ship-of-the-dead” with two passengers. These writings on past spirituality in the Philippine archipelago did not present in much detail the reasoning behind their inferences. They mostly saw the strong ethnographic connections they provided as a sufficient explanation.

Unfortunately, we cannot ignore the question of whether a time gap of millennia between the archaeological and ethnographic means they can be directly linked. It is common for most sites and assemblages in the Philippines, when it comes to “spirituality,” to limit the discussion to the direct archaeological context (see Dizon 1998), and rarely does it go beyond the description that they are ritualized

(e.g., Barretto-Tesoro 2008). Here I shall discuss how we could attempt to access past cosmologies, and with enough data and knowledge, access past spiritualities both from the nonliterate past, and from the shallow time-depth of literate but poorly documented cultures in the Philippine archipelago. I think the time is ripe to address systematically, with caution, the challenge of knowing past spiritualities from Philippine archaeological assemblages.

In the epistemology connected to knowing past spiritualities there are still major questions at hand. For example, the critique and ensuing debate since the 1950s on the value of ethnographic analogies for understanding the archaeological record needs to be addressed seriously (see Wylie 1985), as does the anthropological debate on emic/etic limits (see Headland et al. 1990). With the flourishing of alternatives to purely positivist or hypothetico-deductive approaches, and the acceptance of more multivocal presentations, the challenge of looking into past spiritualities is seen in a more favorable light. There is optimism that approaches could indeed be developed to understand satisfactorily this subject matter. However, it does not mean that addressing this topic is now less daunting. The key is to continue to improve on the rigor of our reasoning when we try to tackle complex topics such as spirituality. This exercise in reasoning and rigor is to the considerable benefit of academic disciplines interested in knowing the human past.

What we outline above are just some concerns that further discourage the pursuit of questions that deal with past spiritualities, especially for cultures within time-depths devoid of written accounts. The Philippine past is a case in point. Wylie (1985:97–106) has already comprehensively argued for the soundness of analogous reasoning, stressing the interplay between multiple sources supporting an inference, and the importance of establishing the specific relevance of these sources. While the debate goes on, I would take Wylie's position as a starting premise for this discussion. Let me begin by stating that concerns with spirituality deal directly with understanding consciousness, which is central to keeping a society together (see Durkheim 1947), and consciousness can be highly personal and largely connected to the ego. It is, as Blackmore (2005:7) states, a "subjective experience or phenomenal experience," or "the ineffable subjective qualities of experience"; clearly its emphasis is on the individual. However, I take as more relevant Edinger's definition of "consciousness" (1984:36), when he defines it as an "experience of knowing together with an other, that is, in a setting of twoness." Within this view, even an individual's unique expression of a group's consciousness will have to fit or engage with a collectively viewed experience. In other words, at all levels, the kind of consciousness reflected in archaeology is very difficult to differentiate.

If this is the case, a collective consciousness will be difficult to deeply understand, even with the best conditions where there are literature/documents to consult. It is doubly difficult if done solely from the archaeological assemblages. One will have to be able to differentiate what is an individual's sense of a culture's cosmology and what truly comes from a collective understanding. Take, for example, the many pottery types and designs seen as votive vessels from sites coming from one time-depth, usually called the "metal period" in Island Southeast Asia. What does this mean? Is this an individual's, a community's, or a generation's expression of



their cosmology? The only certainty for all possibilities is that the action of placing vessels at a specific place denoted a certain spiritual meaning; the remains accumulate when done with some regularity—convenient to study archaeologically.

It is easier to argue for an expressed collective consciousness if we look at how space is made relevant. A clear example of such a space-type that is easily defined with set parameters would be caves and rock-shelters. There is definitely a collective consciousness that associates these landmarks with a certain community or individual, and in turn, responding to a group-cosmology at a specific time. We can easily establish the locus of a cave and it is worthwhile studying the specific physicality of a cave's interior and its immediate location. For the purpose of this discussion, limestone karst formations that tower over vegetation will be emphasized.

Given the difficulties of going straight to the collective consciousness of a specific culture in time, I suggest that we take a step back and look at patterns within the frame of possible "collective unconscious" behavior. While clearly inspired by Jung (1983), I would define "collective unconscious" in material culture as an unarticulated feature/component that is regarded as appropriate to be represented in the context of a specific cultural element, e.g., artifact/landscape forms, motifs, and symbols. Most of the time, these elements are not articulated or cannot be consistently articulated by agents as to why they are expressed or why they exist as such. I see a direct correlation with spirituality and the collective unconscious through cosmology in this manner: it starts as a conscious expression that is central to a specific cosmology; the cosmology changes/transforms; the expressions persist but are not fully articulated in the new order; the expressions continue to persist, existing only because they are seen as "appropriate"; they are, however, not articulated. By tracking what forms or expressions persist through time as purely in the collective unconscious, we can place ourselves in situations where we could actually get to a meaning of the past in relation to a cosmological whole. I see this as achievable especially when juxtaposed with a good knowledge of present spiritualities/cosmologies that we systematically connect with archaeologically recognized expressions of spirituality. Once we have established a good chain of connections we can start to make sense of the collective unconscious expressions represented at various stages of the cosmological shift or change, and know what it is all about.

What we hope to achieve in this approach is to find ways to strengthen the chain of reasoning that will allow us to understand past cultures better. A crucial first step is to recognize the patterns that can be established from assemblages of artifacts in good contexts and with established time-depths. As mentioned, it is proposed that the patterns concerning spirituality could be appreciated in the initial stage as a reflection of a collective unconscious. It is equally important to know the ethnographic present and the corresponding cosmologies of relevant cultures. Once again, we do this by appreciating the patterns seen in the material culture, not in its collective consciousness, but in the characteristics of its possible collective unconscious that may be connected to a past expression. Another parallel component is a study of geographic landscapes. One can then look at continuity of artifactual forms in a stronger context, and the corresponding continuity of behavior. From these established patterns, we will be in a better position to address spirituality at the level of

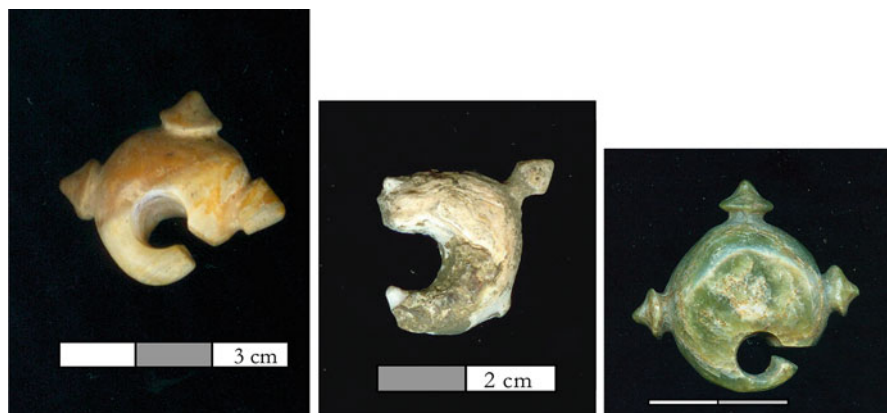


Fig. 7.2 Examples of *lingling-o* artifacts found in Ille, two made from shell and the third from jade

specific cultures, and at the level of individuals as unconscious players in the transmission of continuities of behavior and culture.

A quick and incomplete example to illustrate this approach could be seen in the persistence of a specific artifact form through time. A *lingling-o* is an ethnographic term, which comes from the Ifugao culture and refers to an assemblage of metal ornaments that are still extant as earrings and necklaces, and also as tourist trinkets (see Maramba 1998). Otley Beyer adopted the name for jade artifacts recovered from Philippine archaeological sites, and since then it has become the accepted label for a series of forms on a ring-like design that has a slit opening (Beyer and De Veyra 1947; see Solheim 1969). It has already been established that one type of *lingling-o* design, the “bicephalous,” were earrings in Mainland Southeast Asia c. 2000 to 1500 years ago (Reinecke 1996; Loofs-Wissowa 1982). It is assumed that the other forms, such as the “tri-pointed” design and the “flat disk,” were also earrings in their original function. There is no consensus as to what they actually represented or their role in articulating a spirituality. It is worth mentioning in this example the emphasis most scholars place on the value of the raw material from which these archaeological *lingling-o* artifacts were made, specifically jade, and how that revealed long-distance exchange and trade around the South China Sea as early as two millennia ago (see Bellwood and Dizon 2005; Iizuka and Hung 2005). I argue that the *lingling-o* is equally significant for the persistence of form, and that the raw material that was used to fashion it was secondary to the power of its form, for various cultures in the past through to the current ethnographic Ifugao group. Once the significance of the design is demonstrated, what could now be done is to determine what a stylized form represents, and to establish the significance of this form in a culture’s spirituality (Fig. 7.2). This will then take us closer to knowing its contextual meaning.

We may be hard put to explain, and agree, on the specific meaning that the *lingling-o* has at any given point in time, but it is not difficult to accept that it is not simply an

ornament. It was an object that was centrally placed in a cosmological expression in a still undefined precise time and place in the past. It persisted through time and culture because it carried a collective unconscious trait that made it appropriate to be reproduced and worn. To illustrate further what we mean, let us consider the symbol of a crucifix. Be it made from gold, ivory, or luminous plastic, the material definitely may point to the symbol's status in a given society. Nevertheless, what is more significant is that no matter what material was used, the form of the crucifix is consistently reproduced. The form therefore is more meaningful than the material used to make it. However, the crucifix has an almost universally accepted meaning, because it is still central to the Judeo-Christian cosmology that dominates many societies today. This is not the case for most archaeological material that is mainly mute when it comes to specific meaning. We therefore fall back on the persistence of form, which, I argue, is carried through by a collective unconscious; this could best be argued if there is a strong demonstrable connection amongst the various past cultures as well as the current ones. This point is developed further in the next section.

## A Cultural Link in Time

In Island Southeast Asia it may be argued that this approach to the study of past spirituality could be demonstrated with some high degree of certainty—that is, if we agree on the premise that we could establish a direct cultural continuity between the past and the present. This is where the phenomenon of the spread of the Austronesian language family is relevant. It is a good baseline for cultures in and around the Philippine islands. There are over a hundred Philippine languages spoken by an equal number of ethnolinguistic groups; all are Austronesian. The language family dominates Island Southeast Asia, the entire Pacific, parts of New Guinea, and islands in the Indian Ocean (Bellwood 1991; Bellwood 1997; Blust 1995; Pawley and Ross 1995). There is no strong debate on Austronesian being the common ancestral language to all current Philippine languages. There is also a general consensus that the Austronesian culture brought pottery technology, rice cultivation, and rectangular stone adze working to the Philippine islands and most of Island Southeast Asia. The debate is on what scale and what magnitude of process created this homogeneity—was it due to population movement of native speakers, or was it because of constant interaction amongst non-Austronesian and Austronesian cultures? Was it within a short time period or a long-drawn out process? Whatever the case may be, it is clear that current Philippine cultures have strong affinities and they can be rooted to the historical dominance of Austronesian language-based cultures. With this in mind, historical linguistic reconstruction of vocabulary can help us get to spiritual meaning. It can also allow us to expand the connections to cultures that exist or existed in other parts of the Austronesian world.

A key mechanism behind this commonality is population movement of native speakers coupled with constant interaction between non-Austronesian and Austronesian-speaking cultures (see Bellwood 2005; Solheim 2006). One could

safely argue for strong connections between Austronesian and other Philippine cultures within a time-depth of 4000 years (Bellwood 2005; Blust 1976; Spriggs 1989, 2003). On top of this, current Philippine cultures heavily exhibit the trappings of a Judeo-Christian cosmology, which is mixed with an unarticulated amalgam of older Austronesian and pre-Austronesian cosmologies. A deeper understanding of these unarticulated past cosmologies is a clear goal of our approach. Understanding the collective unconscious connection brought about by the shift in cosmology from a non-Austronesian to an Austronesian-based worldview can take us closer to answering this challenge. The underlying collective unconscious behavior seen in the remains of ritual action observed in the archaeology can then be addressed. This is a step closer to the understanding of collective conscious action.

## Landscape Meaning

At another level, the appreciation of the landscape and its features should be seen as imbued with collective unconscious elements. We are not yet ready to explain in detail the processes and the contextual social elements of the beliefs and practices of what we have recorded in the archaeology. We are confident, however, that we can do this, for example, in how Minoan peak sites are currently viewed by archaeologists (Peatfield 1992), and the attempts to articulate animism in various South American sites (see Alberti and Bray 2009). My thinking parallels these approaches whereby landscape knowledge was actively integrated with the archaeological resource. While also not in the position to address a detailed understanding at site level, our information is sufficient to see that there is a clear basis to argue for the persistence of “appropriateness,” which makes cultures use the same locales across time. The collective unconscious transmission of “appropriateness of use” and admixing cultures across time is seen as a sound answer to the question of persistence of use, rather than the clear and conscious transmission of a spiritual expression across millennia.

Moreover, it is worth mentioning that the limestone karst formations with their meaningful caves, central to this discussion, could pass the criteria for a “shrine” set by Renfrew (1985:18), and further articulated by Peatfield (1992:60–75) for “peak sanctuaries” in the study of Aegean archaeology. They are by themselves “attention-focusing” within the landscape of the Dewil Valley, and attention-focusing activities were done within these venues. The shades of light illumination at the cave mouth, between the light of the outside and the total darkness of the inner cave, can be seen as a “liminal zone” between “worlds”; as such they are the focus of ritual activity. There is also the “presence of the transcendent and its symbolic focus” in the form of meaningful speleothem formations, such as flow-stones that resemble what people would like to imagine. Lastly, there is clear evidence of “participation and offering” manifested in the archaeological assemblages and ethnographic accounts. Aside from being caves, there must be something about the specific physical and locational characteristics of these caves that is significant.

Drawing from the experience of surveying cave sites across Palawan, I realized that there are characteristics that are connected to caves that make them meaningful to people in various times in relation to votive offerings, burials, or in other words, echoes of spirituality. These elements are the shape of the cave mouth, the cave having a breathing/venting characteristic, a meaningful feature, and the presence of water (seasonal or constant). I have not discerned (yet) a pattern that makes the cardinal directions of cave mouths a crucial feature. We shall apply these criteria to the Dewil Valley caves.

## Aspects of the Dewil Valley Archaeology and Landscape

At the northern end of the long main island of Palawan is the municipality of El Nido. Within this predominantly rural land is a valley called Dewil (Fig. 7.3). It is a fairly small valley that spans roughly 7 km long and 4 km wide. Within the valley are limestone karsts formed during the Jurassic (Foronda 2010) that dominate the landscape. There are nine main limestone towers in the valley, all named in the language of the local historically dominant ethnolinguistic group (Cuyonin) in northern Palawan. Four of these towers are clustered and called Makangit; the others are called Kulanga-maliit, Kulanga-malaki, Istar/Star, Diribungan, Sinalakan, and Ille. The Istar and Diribungan towers are the largest formations—the only ones that are clearly visible from the sea at boat-level. Kulanga-maliit and Ille are the smallest towers—less than 90 m tall. We have established, at least at Ille, that these towers attracted human attention as early as *c.* 14 kya (Lewis et al. 2008). While all these karst formations in the valley are dotted with many caves, not all known caves have obvious archaeology in them.

As previously mentioned, there are characteristics associated with a cave that make them relevant. The shape of the cave mouth or an opening near the cave mouth resembles, in a rough way, features of a human face. Sometimes the effect is more vivid from inside the cave rather than from outside. The east and west mouth openings of the Ille cave do not resemble a human face; however, one must understand that the level of the platform's surface is much higher now, and half of the feature of the cave entrance is buried or has changed due to cave collapses. At Pasimbahan there is such a feature, but located above the cave entrance. The best example in the valley is Lagatak cave in the Diribungan tower, where jar burials and votive pots were placed inside circular speleothem depressions. Wind coming out of the cave seems to be relevant. This is due to a venting effect when there are at least two openings at opposite ends of a cave network. It is not hard to imagine how wind coming out of a cave was appreciated spiritually. All the major cave sites in the valley have the effect of “breathing.” Cave features from speleothems and cave forms are harder to establish as meaningful unless there is an ethnographic practice or a direct archaeological deposit within the feature. This can be demonstrated in the site of Ille and Pasimbahan-Magsanib, where meaningful flowstone formations are read/interpreted by viewers depending on their inclinations.





**Fig. 7.3** Dewil Valley landscape showing most of the limestone karst. View of Pasimbahan-Magsanib from approach Left; view of Ille Karst Right

All the archaeological sites in caves have archaeological assemblages that are votive in nature. The Pacaldero cave in the Sinalakan tower contains anthropomorphic jar covers for secondary burial jars. There is also an iconic earthenware vessel shaped like a stylized bird/turtle with incised scroll motif at its back. This vessel

could hold liquid, and had a stopper for a head. As a side note, bird and turtle representation play a significant role in the current ritual-materiality of the Tagbanwa group of Palawan (Fox 1982; Roces 1977) and in several ethnolinguistic groups across the Philippine archipelago (see Maramba 1998; Fernando-Amilbansa 2005). All these artifacts may be dated by motif association to around 2000 to 1000 years ago. The anthropomorphic jar covers lie roughly within the same date-range as the assemblage of similar jars found in Southern Mindanao, which are radiocarbon dated to around 1900 years ago (Dizon and Santiago 1996). At this stage of our study, however, we shall focus our discussion on the Ille and Pasimbahan-magsanib sites. These are the two current best examples where we can reason that they are shrine/sanctuary/places for worship with a substantial temporal stratification.

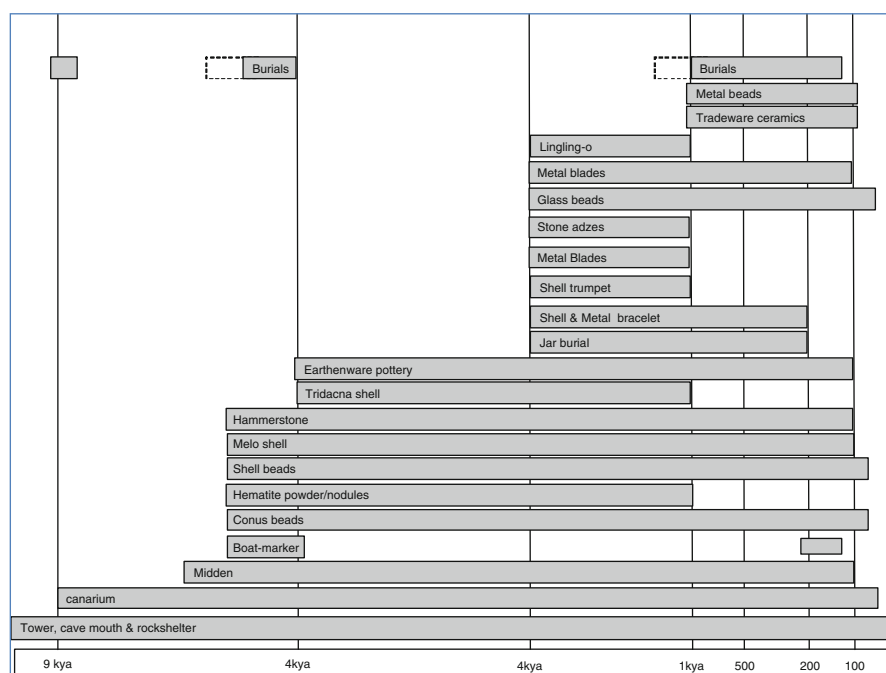
## **Presenting the Ille and Pasimbahan-Magsanib Sites**

In the valley of Dewil, the two best studied sites are called “Pasimbahan.” For ease in discussion we shall call the Pasimbahan cave site found inside the Ille karst “Ille,” and the Pasimbahan-Magsanib found in the Istar karst within the Magsanib district, “Pasimbahan.” The Ille and Pasimbahan sites were first excavated in 1998 and 2008, respectively. Both are still undergoing active excavation and study under the Palawan Island Palaeohistoric Research Project, an international research project led by the University of the Philippines, the National Museum of the Philippines in collaboration with University College Dublin, Ireland. The project aims to contribute, among other objectives, to our knowledge of people–landscape interaction across time (see Paz et al. 2009). The well-stratified dates at Ille are a good anchor for the accuracy of the relative age estimates of archaeological assemblages found across the valley (Fig. 7.4). We can see at various time-depths the interplay of assemblage characteristics that show remains of spiritual expression. Equally significant is the role of the landscape features, i.e., the towers and the specific caves that were utilized within them.

### ***9000 Years Ago***

As noted above, the oldest radiocarbon-dated archaeological assemblage in the valley goes back to *c.* 14 kya (see Lewis et al. 2008). While one can argue that the few stone flakes and animal bones found in this layer may indicate the ritual use of Ille, this will not be argued here. Until we augment the artifactual information for this time period—even if it comes from other sites in the valley—we shall not push our inference by relying mainly on the landscape context. We shall wait for a robust balance of information to be unearthed.





**Fig. 7.4** Presence of artifacts and features through time at Dewil

The earliest period where we could actually see the presence of remains connected to a spirituality goes back to 9 kya: the well-dated remains of a defleshed, then cremated, individual whose intentionally shattered bones were placed in an organic container and buried in a shallow pit (Lara 2010). This individual was in a cremation cemetery of at least seven cremations (and still counting) located in the current Ille platform, just by the east mouth of Ille cave. Associated with the cremated human remains were charred *Canarium* spp. nut fragments (Carlos 2010). *Canarium* spp. are usually large trees with fragrant sticky resin (Merill 1912:273). We could argue that these plant remains were likely not just the random by-product of fuel for firing, but were intentionally chosen for food and for their resinous properties. We also know that the nuts, bark, and leaves of most *Canarium* spp. when burned create a desirable smoke. Ethnographic accounts from the region attest to this plant family's use in this manner (Burkill 1966:430–435), and thus we may be seeing the remains of ritual firing to create the effect of incense smoke.

At Pasimbahan-Magsanib, we may also have the same horizon of archaeology; however, the current oldest deposit—composed of chert flake scatter, combustion features, and animal remains—is not yet sufficient to infer convincingly that it belongs to the narrow time corridor of c. 9 kya. We need to date this assemblage directly.

## *Before c. 4000 Years Ago*

The archaeological components that we find significant at Ille comprise shell midden layers without ceramics, two burials, and charred *Canarium* nut fragments. The stratigraphic layers that are relevant to these features do not have direct dates. They are, however, bracketed by the isotope dates of 9 and 2 kya. While we wait for the results of isotope dates from the *Conus* spp. shell disks worn by the individuals associated with the two burials, the details of the excavation inform us that these features are stratigraphically below layers associated with ceramics, and are therefore not likely associated with the Austronesian time-depth. These layers are also associated with shell utilization and consumption. Burial 874 cut through an ceramic layer predominantly of bivalve shells. The burial had a well-defined marker made of limestone slabs set to resemble a boat. To represent what could be the “prow” of a boat, the marker included a dark and roundish andesite rock lying on its side; this was cut on both ends. The cuts on the stone allow it to stand on its narrower side to resemble closely a prow, especially when seen at its location sitting at the tip of the southernmost limestone slab. The highly fragmented burial underneath the marker was covered in red pigment. It had a round andesite hammerstone in the middle of its chest, a clutch of 14 well-packed halves of *Batissa/Polymesoda* spp. bivalves on the right chest—one inside an organic pouch—two large bailer shells (*Melo* spp.), a necklace of *Conus* spp. disks in between monkey (*Macaca* spp.) teeth, and a highly weathered crystalline rock on the left side of its head (see ASP 2006).

Burial 727 is the other burial, which was likely contemporaneous with the boat-shaped marked burial. This context is also not associated with ceramic remains and was buried extended, not wrapped, and without a clear marker. The individual was holding a *Turbo marmoratus* shell; the arms had *Conus* disk armlets, a hammerstone by its hip, and at the side of the left hip of the individual was a cluster of materials comprised of two pig canine teeth and three univalve *Polinices tumidus* shell beads (see Lewis et al. 2006). It has already been argued by Paz and Viales (2008) that this cluster of artifacts are what remains of an ornament slung across the chest with which the individual was buried. We find good echoes in the ethnographic present that describe similar ornaments as amulets. This kind of reasoning, which I think is sound but not sufficient, is similar to Childe’s (1956:51); he stated that an analogue drawn from the same region or ecological area is likely to give the most reliable hints as to what the archaeological material is about. It must be emphasized that this may show a continuity of practice, but not necessarily have the same meaning as what is recorded in the ethnographic present. We have recorded in the Dewil Valley that the Cuyon population used to wear ornaments of *Conus* disk and glass beads slung across the chest that were seen to have protective powers (see Fig. 7.5). The ethnographic literature also shows much variation in how such an ornament is appreciated as an amulet (e.g., see Cole 1922 for Tinguian; Cole 1956 for Bukidnon).



**Fig. 7.5** *Top left:* Cuyon informant wearing reconstructed ornaments made from *Conus* shells, plant beads, and cowrie shells. *Top right:* Shell bangles and metal just before retrieval in the Pasimbahan site. *Bottom left and right:* Examples of stone adzes found in Ille

So far, there is no clear correlation at the Pasimbahan-Magsanib site for this kind of burial assemblage. There are similarities in the votive offerings associated with a shell and animal bone midden, and worked *Melo* shell covering a hammer stone at a stratigraphic layer that included a rock pile and chert flake scatter.

### *c. 4000 to c. 2000 Years Ago*

At this general time period, coinciding with what many call the “Neolithic” in the Philippines, Ille revealed remains of bailer shells that were clearly grave goods in the previous period. But they were found as fragments (mostly refittable) reworked

within the sediments of the site due to the later periods of extensive burial activity (see Vitales 2009). There were also deposits of *Tridacna* spp. (giant clam shells) that were not reworked and may have been left on the ground as part of some offering. Just as in the older period, there were also remains of charred *Canarium* nut fragments recovered. At Pasimbahan-Magsanib there were also deposits of whole *Tridacna* shells, and fragments of *Melo* shells.

In both Ille and Pasimbahan-Magsanib, the shell midden deposit associated with all of these other materials may be seen as possible ritual food consumption. It is common for archaeologists to see a shell midden as significant for what it can say about subsistence strategies. The midden layers we have at Ille and Pasimbahan are generally dominated by bivalve shells, several other marine shell species, pig and deer bones, and various small animal bones. They also have combustion features that commonly reveal nut fragments. Rather than simply seeing these middens as refuse coming from subsistence consumption, it is equally valid to see them as refuse of ritual consumption and votive offerings through time. Patches of combustion features within the middens that contained fragments of *Canarium* nuts may point to incense burning in the context of ritual acts.

In Island Southeast Asia generally, this is the period when pottery appears in the archaeological record. It is possible, therefore, that the pottery sherds from the Ille site do belong to this early time period, even though they were found in secondary deposits. They include regional types associated with the introduction of pottery to the archipelago, such as paddle-impressed, and red-slipped with circular impressed designs. These pots are remains of votive offerings that were likely left at the surface of the rock-shelter. Exposed to the elements, they would have broken easily, scattered, and reworked by later diggings and in-filling activities. At Pasimbahan-Magsanib, the assemblage is not as remarkable. Most of the sherds are small fragments though not highly weathered and the remains are not substantial in comparison with Ille.

### ***c. 2000 to c. 1000 Years Ago***

This time scale coincides with the commonly accepted “Metal period” in the Philippines. At Ille, fragments of jar burials were recovered with the shell midden. When first surveyed in 1998, jar burial sherds were observed at the surface inside the first chamber of the cave (see Paz 1998). There were also many fragments of highly decorated earthenware pottery from various vessel forms that may be strongly inferred as remains of votive offerings. One whole votive pot, however, was not decorated: an earthenware jarlet that was buried by itself without direct association with any of the other artifacts (see Eusebio 2006). There were fragments of worked bailer shells recovered, and in two instances, whole worked *Melo* shells were excavated, which were not associated with burials. *Tridacna* shells were also recovered in these deposits. There were also charred fragments of *Canarium* nuts amongst lenses of combustion features.

There are artifacts recovered from this general period that were likely votive offerings and were intentionally buried or placed in crevices between large rock-falls at the front of the west mouth of Ille cave. A trumpet shell was found (Solheim 2004) in an overhang of a large boulder, which I think comes from this general period. There was also a “T-shaped” bracelet made from *Tridacna* shell found inside a crevice of the rockfall, together with a fragment of a *Melo* shell artifact, and shell beads (see Vitales 2009; ASP 2006). This type of bracelet is common in the archaeology of Mainland Southeast Asia (see Higham and Bannanurag 1990), but is the first of its kind found in the Philippine islands.

Some artifacts we suspect come from this period, though they were found in secondary contexts nearer the surface. This was mainly due to the reworking of the sediments done by many burial episodes and large tree root action. Based on regional comparisons there are two types of artifacts that could belong to this period. There are the three-pointed design *lingling-o* artifacts made from jade, and a fragment of a jade bracelet with incised decoration (ASP 2006; Paz et al. 2009). The jade source of one of the *lingling-o*, including a bracelet fragment, was matched to a source in Fengtien, Taiwan (Hung et al. 2006). The second type is the rectangular polished stone adze (Fig. 7.5). These adzes were never found with the burials on site. Conventionally, this artifact-type should belong to the “Neolithic.” Nonetheless two of these recovered adzes showed highly technical sharpening of the edges similar to the beveling technology observed on metal blades. This suggests that they could be contemporaneous with metal technology (see Pawlik 2007). I therefore assign these adzes to a younger period of the site until we find them in situ in the 4 kya period deposits.

The Pasimbahan-Magsanib site is equally rich for this period. Though there is still no clear evidence for jar burials, there were several remains of ritualized activity within one area of the site along the far end of the rock-shelter in relation to the cave mouth (Trench A and B). There was a trumpet shell (*Charonia* spp.) with a hole made at the shoulder, nearer the apex of the shell; it was covered by rocks. There was also an offering of bangles (two shell and one copper alloy) on top of each other that seem to be dropped straight from the arm of the wearer into a small pit and buried (see Fig. 7.5, top right, also Paz et al. 2009).

At the current mouth of the Pasimbahan cave there is a large flowstone with two major rimstone (gours) pool formations; one is a pronounced terrace towards the southeast (into the cave chamber) and the other slopes towards the northwest. The formation was still active when people were around. This is supported by the fact that the northwest rimstone terrace was covered with archaeological deposits of consumed and processed shells, pig and deer bones west of it (Midden 2). At the southernmost edge of the flowstone, which is nearest to the entrance of the cave, is a stalagmite-like formation that developed a moss cover. This formation has a notch-hole at its base. This portion of the flowstone must have been meaningful at least during this period, because on top of this flowstone portion, at the first southeast rimstone pool, there was an ossuary of human bones with remains coming from at least three individuals. A metal point was recovered with the bones. The entire deposit was covered by calcium carbonate-cemented hematite.

At both Ille and Pasimbahan, there was a layer of shells that, again, may be seen as the remains of ritual consumption. These middens are mainly composed of remains of *Nerita*, *Tellina*, *Gafrarium*, and *Polymesoda* shells, and animal bones from pig, macaque, civet, monitor lizard, and snake. The midden also had a scattering of various types of shell, glass, and stone beads.

### *c. 1000 to c. 100 Years Ago*

At this period the relevant assemblage and information coming from Ille is centered on the more than 70 burials so far excavated in the platform/rockshelter portion of the site. Scattered within the backfill of these burials are sherds of pottery, likely votive, including tradeware ceramics coming from China, Vietnam, and Thailand. No burial has yet been found with grave goods that include pottery of any kind. Some individuals, including infants, had necklaces or armlets of Indo-Pacific glass beads. Accounts inform us that during the 1960s, in the first chamber of the cave, there were many fragments of brown jars with dragon designs. These jars inside the cave could possibly have held secondary burials.

Activity at the Pasimbahan-Magsanib site was different from Ille in this period. There were no primary burials. There was, however, evidence for large (but not storage jar size) tradeware ceramics that may have held the human remains recorded as scattered across the rockshelter. These few jars broke in antiquity and were buried through natural processes. Inside the cave and in a drain-hole/crevice at the southern wall of the cave chamber were observed sherd concentrations of tradeware ceramics. There was also a feature uncovered in the rockshelter (Trench A and B), with four large rocks set amongst fist-size stones and a scatter of bivalve shells.

A most interesting insight comes out of the excavation of a stone marker composed of natural and worked limestone rocks. The marker was set on the surface of a flowstone inside the cave—perhaps at least around 200 years ago (Fig. 7.6). It was buried in just over 10 cm of guano deposit and was made to resemble a boat. The marker was set on the westward sloping flowstone towards a rounded pebble-lined stream—like a boat moored by the bank of a river. The dried-up waterway is now well covered with guano. Excavation traced its path to start from inside the cave, augmented by water running from the southeast rimstone of the meaningful flowstone. This waterway emptied to the south into the same hole that opens to a crevice channel, where we find many earthenware and tradeware ceramic sherds. I infer that these features were seen as complementary to each other: as part of a comprehensive rendition of a cosmology that represented the sea/river, boats, and perhaps beings represented by animated natural features inside the cave chamber, such as the flowstone figure. The cave chamber/vault as a whole, including the drain-hole, must have also served a specific meaning in this symbolic representation. A scaled-down model of a culture's cosmology such as this will have similar renditions in other sites in the region. The "Painted Cave" (*Kaim Hitam*) in the Niah complex, Sarawak, is one good example where colleagues saw a cosmological



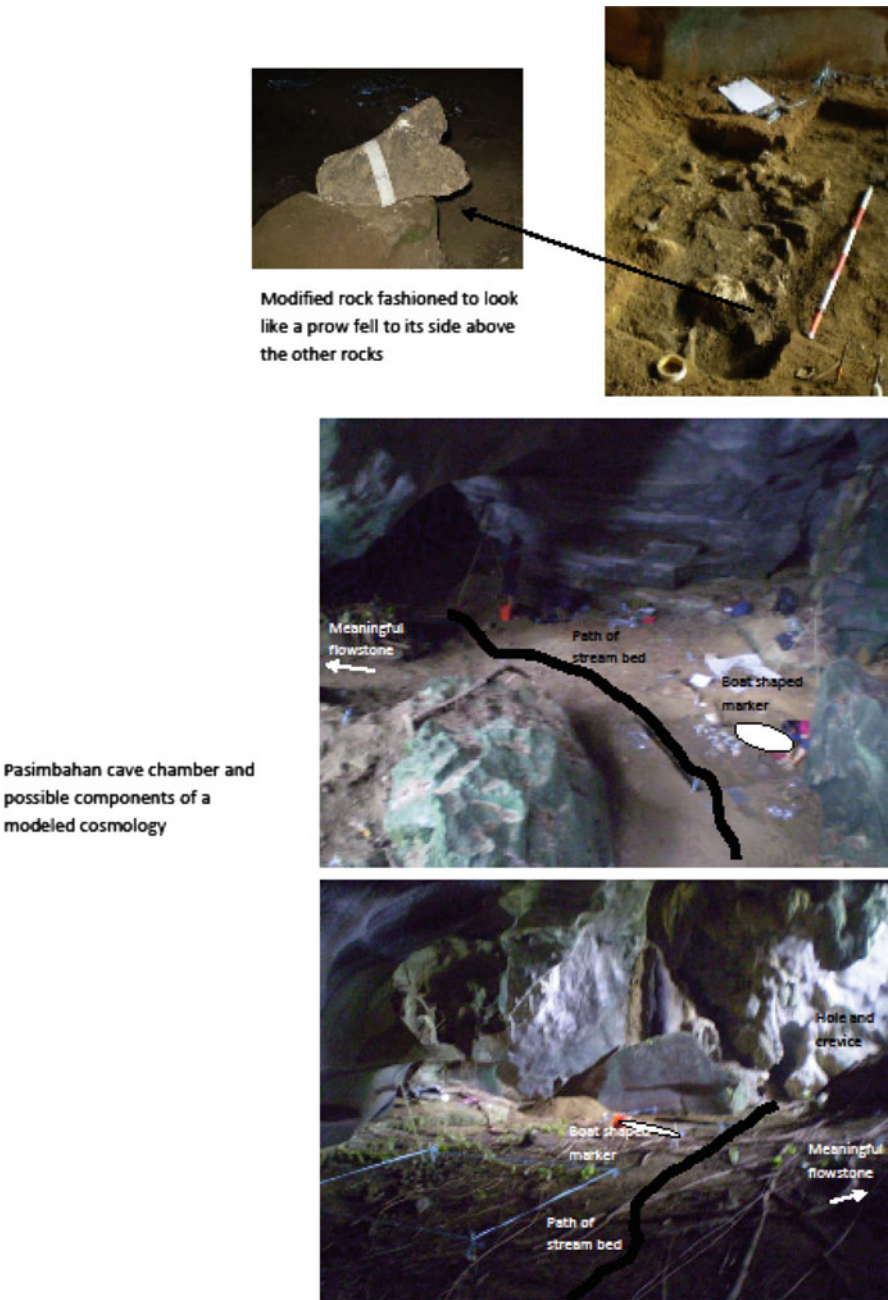


Fig. 7.6 Boat marker and chamber, Pasimbahan site



model in a similar manner (Szabó et al. 2008). It was argued that the actual wooden boats inside this site, the rock paintings and the waterway that passes through the cave complex, were all seen as relevantly connected.

### *c. 100 to Present*

For Pasimbahan-Magsanib and Ille there is clear evidence that they still maintain significance to cultures that lived in the last century, and to those currently living in the valley. The names of the caves are telling. “Pasimbahan” means “worship place”/“church-like” in the Cuyon language. At Ille there is no clear archaeological evidence of its spiritual utilization, except perhaps if we consider as a recent offering, the juvenile wild pig skull that was recovered in a small cave next to the Ihian trench along the west-end of the Ille rockshelter. This tunnel-like cave ended in a hole over a meter deep, where the pig skull (in very good condition) was found at the bottom during the initial 1998 survey.

What is more substantial is the information collected from informant work since 2004. The current dominant population in Dewil traces their lineage to people who came from the town of Ibajay, Aklan, in the Visayan Island of Panay. The first generation of settlers came to the valley in the early 1960s. They were mostly landless peasant families attracted by the “frontier” nature of El Nido, Palawan in the 1960s had no large feudal-based landlords and land ownership was mostly not formally regulated by the state, which gave settlers the opportunity to acquire their own land. The dominance of settlers from Aklan can be supported by the naming of the village inside Dewil as “New Ibajay.” Eustaquio Danay (Dudoy), now a 75-year-old resident of New Ibajay, was one of the first young men who came over from Aklan. With the young Libudan couple (current owners of the land next to Ille) they cleared the forest in front of Pasimbahan-Ille in 1965. Dudoy remembers seeing just at the entrance of the west mouth of the cave a slightly buried stack of ceramic plates with three “khaki-colored marbles” inside the topmost plate. He remembers that it had “Dragon” printed on some of these plates, which places the wares within the last 100 years at most. These plates were likely left at the cave entrance for votive reasons.

In 1968, Dudoy joined a group of seven New Ibajay residents and did a *panghatid*—an Aklanen ritual for healing through the intervention or appeasement of “spirits.” They did the ritual to cure a sick child from the village. It was done to the east of the cave mouths of Ille, not at the cave entrance itself because, as Dudoy pointed out, there was a living balete (*Ficus* spp.) tree near the mouth at that time, and the people leading the ritual did not consider it appropriate to do the *panghatid* near the tree. They established their ritual space on top and around a termite mound. The group brought with them much food including a live pig, and a carved wooden “tao-tao” (human form) image—complete with arms and a detailed face. The pig was butchered on-site and cooked. At the same time they made a wooden platform on top of the termite mound, on which they placed the dish from the butchered pig

and the other food stuff as well as the tao-tao. The sole woman in the group led the offerings and spoke to the spirits. She was a *babaylan* or a priestess/healer; the *babaylan*'s spiritual role in Visayan society has existed, at least, from the time the Europeans were writing about the Philippines in the sixteenth century (see Scott 1994). After the offering, the male counterpart of the *babaylan* made seven sticks from a branch of a tree and cleaned it well of its bark. These sticks, perhaps to represent the members of the group, were also placed next to the food and tao-tao. After the ritual, they left the food and tao-tao behind. Dudoy, however, does not recall any remains of such an offering around Ille when they cleared the forest or in the years after. They were also not aware at that time that the Ille cave was called "Pasimbahan" by the Cuyon population in Dewil. Rather it seemed instinctive for the *babaylan* to choose this cave opening amongst others in the tower, or for that matter, other caves in other towers inside the valley.

In the late 1990s, Ille was transformed for a short period of time to a worship place of the local seventh-day Adventist church. What is interesting to note is that a former barangay captain (village head), one of the leaders of the church, is a nephew of the male counterpart of the *babalyan* who did the *panghatid* ritual in 1968. Also, the people who frequented the cave from the village of New Ibajay see the stalactites and flowstones at Ille as images of church bells, and statues, which unfortunately inspired treasure hunting activity in the cave—using these meaningful cave features as guides or signs. Perhaps these features were also animated by people in the past via rituals.

The Pasimbahan information is equally interesting. By this period, the flowstone was definitely seen as meaningful. In 2006, before the start of the archaeological study at the Magsanib, the couple who own the adjacent land to the site, Romie and Rosie Fines, frequented Pasimbahan. They contemplated the meaning of the relevant flowstone by the current mouth of the cave. They came to the conclusion that it was a figure of a person (like a "Tao-tao" or "idol") with a cloak on its head, which covers its shoulders, and that it was a sign telling them to dig a spot just in front of it. They dug up that area, regretting that they had, because Rosie "felt drowsy" throughout the digging. They, however, did not stop until they uncovered two blades—a long blade that was bent to a "U" shape, and a smaller dagger-like blade encrusted with glass beads of various colors. When we excavated the same spot in 2009 (Trench D), we were expecting to find a disturbed burial that accompanied the bent blade and dagger. No human remains of any kind were recovered, which makes me think that the blades were buried intentionally as votive offerings. The good condition of the metal tells us this was done not too far back in the past, and must be just around a hundred years or less.

The "tao-tao" flowstone held more direct evidence of ritual practice. Inside the hole at the base of the figure Romie found a green jar small enough to fit the hole. It had a dragon design. Inside this jar were three whitish (khaki) marbles, similar to what was reportedly found inside Ille cave. This jar was later stolen and sold as an antique by a villager. There was also a medallion wrapped in a piece of paper with writing and a string. It was wedged at the roof of the hole. Romie now wears it as an amulet and when it was shown to me, it was a stylized design of a church with a

bellfry, underneath was a word intentionally scraped out, but still can be read as “Belgique.” It was clearly a tourist trinket that someone transformed into an amulet and deposited in the hole. I do not see it as a coincidence that a stylized church pendant was made into an amulet and placed in a cave that is called “Pasimbahan” or “church-like.”

## A Further Look at the Dewil Patterns

Much can be said from what we have uncovered from the Dewil Valley. A firm step toward knowing past spirituality is to look out for patterns that show collective unconscious behavior. The persistence of artifact forms and assemblages through time is a tell-tale sign. Having done this, and establishing time-depth horizons, we can closely study the ethnographic present, and we push the past and the present together to create the conditions for us to get to the details of expressions of cosmologies and their meaning. To start with, the limestone towers held an appeal for expressing spirituality, at least in the last 9000 years. I argue that the towers by themselves are already meaningful. They may even be seen, at least in the last few centuries, as similar to how certain mountains in the region are seen as sacred, such as Mt. Banahaw and Mt. Makiling in Luzon, and Mt. Kinabalu in Sabah, Borneo. The Luzon mountains are stand-alone volcanoes while Kinabalu is the tallest mountain in Southeast Asia. I suggest, in this light, that one reason why the megalith cultures that were prevalent in Borneo and the Malay Peninsula are not as obvious in the Philippine islands is because the cultures in the archipelago may have chosen to reflect its cosmology directly on the natural landscape. When no natural features such as limestone karst formations and imposing mountains exist in a given landscape, people used their spiritual template of representation to create alternatives. This must have been generally done in the form of scaled-down models. Such a scaled-down representation can encapsulate a cosmos or a specific element of their spirituality (Fig. 7.6). We shall pursue this point when we further include ethnographic knowledge later in this discussion.

Pulling back to the Dewil Valley, the caves and rock-shelters were consistently relevant in the span of 9000 years. It is unlikely that there was a complete change in the population of the area, and thus there must have been continuity of populations amidst the changing cultures, and the adding-on of new populations from cultures that share a similar Austronesian influence. Therefore, it is likely that a collective unconsciousness existed that we could study, spanning at least 9 kya, and at a better resolution within the last 4 kya. The patterns that exist at the level of assemblages of artifacts vary throughout this time. The only relevant materials consistently present are the charred remains of *Canarium* nuts, which I think is primarily a by-product of a desire to create meaningful smoke with the mindset of ritual. It does not mean, however, that the nuts were not consumed, or the branches used to augment firewood. The burning of plant parts, especially the nut, from trees belonging to this genus is

relevant, because it does not matter whether it was done consciously or not; the smoke and scent produced by the activity must have added to the ambiance of a ritual situation. It is, as mentioned, attention focusing.

The evidence presented here from the two sites under discussion shows also a pattern of change. There was clearly a change in ritual behavior and relevant artifacts, which may mean a change in spiritual value. The landscape was ritualized more for votive reasons than for burying the dead. There was clearly a change in ritual activity from 9 kya to just before 4 kya: from rituals associated with intricate cremation burials to extended burials, one with a boat-shape marker, and an assemblage of grave goods and body ornaments, i.e., hammerstones, *Melo* shells, various shell bead types, *Conus* beads, monkey and pig teeth, and hematite nodules and powder. The offering and consumption of food in front of the cave also comes into practice. We can argue that this was a substantial change in cosmology. The change in the following 2000 years is seen in the introduction to the ritual practices of earthenware pottery and *Tridacna* shells as votive artifacts. The sites were also completely dedicated to ritualized use, excluding burying the dead. Over the next 1000 years we see another shift in the ritual practices, burials in jars, and a new set of meaningful artifacts were included, i.e., metal blades, glass beads, stone adzes, shell trumpets, shell and metal bracelets, and *lingling-o* ornaments. In the last 1000 years, it is only tradeware ceramics that enter the assemblage of known meaningful artifacts. We observed the persistence of metal blade, glass beads, shell and metal bracelets, jars both earthenware and stoneware, hammerstones, *Melo* shells, shell beads, *Conus* beads, *Canarium*, and the accumulation of refuse from food processing for most of the given time period. The Pasimbahan-Magsanib cave became a model of a cosmological outlook, complete with a representation of a boat and a river, just to name the most obvious.

Perhaps central in the patterns we observe as far as meaning is concerned, are not the specific materials and their associated forms, but rather their relationship with how people made them relevant to their body. Most of these artifact types are bodily ornaments—bracelets, armlets, earrings, dangling body ornaments—and though there is no clear correlation, some of them could have been head and fabric decorations. Worn by the individual, it is likely that they were meaningful and expressive of the desire to live safely in harmony with the recognized powers of the cosmology. The point is that it was appropriate for a person to have and to wear a bracelet, armlet, or the like. The shape, fashion, or individual meaning of any specific ornament was secondary to the expression embodied in the wearing of it.

In this manner, a shell bracelet/armlet will have the same role as a glass/stone bracelet and a metal one. It is likely that the two shell and one metal bracelets that were offered at Pasimbahan are equally significant to the interaction desired with the spirit world for just being bracelets or armlets. For artifacts that are clearly not body ornaments in the assemblages, such as *Melo* shells, hematite, trumpet shells, and *Tridacna* shells, they must directly deal with the elements of the ritual. In other words, they may closely represent components of the cosmology that are reproduced in the ritualized space of a cave or rock-shelter within the limestone towers.

## Using Ethnography

We now look further at our ethnographic knowledge in order to put more details into our discussion. Let us add support to the meaning given to the limestone towers as “megaliths” or cosmological representation. The relatively nearby examples come from the Kadazan group of Sabah, Borneo and the Bajaus of the Sulu Archipelago; both are directly south of the main island of Palawan. The Kadzan constructed megaliths to mark the distribution of property, status feasting, tests of bravery, funerary rites, and memorializing (Heng 1998:61). In other words, the stones were for direct cosmological representation of social relational details, indirectly linked to their cosmology (see Heng 1998). The upright stone grave markers of the “sea nomads” or Bajau culture in the Sulu Archipelago are also considered as megaliths (Heng 1998; see Fernando-Amilbansa 2005). It is significant to underscore that a megalith—a meaningful stone—can be as small as a grave marker or as big as Mount Kinabalu.

Another good example to mention is a shrine I documented that belongs to the Bakun community in the Cordillera range of Luzon. Under a singular large boulder in the middle of a rice terrace, a shelter constructed with concrete hollow-blocks was integrated underneath the boulder’s overhang. It was made for a dug-out coffin burial. With the coffin they included the horns of a *kalabaw* (water buffalo) and a tao-tao the size of a person. I see this shrine as a modeled representation of a “mountain-with-cave,” which was created in the middle of the rice terrace for a specific purpose related to how the community viewed the person buried inside the shrine. The area is surrounded by high peaks with known caves, and yet they chose to make the monument in the middle of the rice terrace. There must be a direct link between the rice terraces and the construction of this shrine. It is not hard to imagine that similar responses took place at various locations in the Philippines for very specific reasons of spiritual expression.

On a smaller scale, the representational power of the artifacts can already be associated with our current knowledge of existing cosmological views in the Philippine archipelago. Take, for example, the consistent representation of the “sun” for the Tagalog ethnolinguistic group through known history in the Tagalog region (Fig. 7.7). Votive earthenware pottery coming from the last 1500 years had as a common motif a “sun burst” (Barretto-Tesoro 2008; Valdes 2003). I argue that some of the artifacts found in the ritual context are there because significant elements of the cosmology are directly represented in these artifacts. A clear example is the bird figurine found in the valley, which has direct echoes in the cosmology of many of the ethnolinguistic groups today in the Philippines. Directly represented at Ille and Pasimbahan is the boat, which can link the pre-Austronesian cultures with the later Austronesian-dominated cultures. The *Conus* disk and the *Melo* shell both represented spirals that can easily be seen as the sun or a sunburst, and in a ritualized context this makes good sense. There was also the first sign of using hematite, most likely to create the effect of red. In Tagbanuwa cosmology, we find the sky elements of the universe held by two large tree trunks that elemental spirits had to constantly



**Fig. 7.7** Examples of *Conus* spp. shell disks and a *Melo* spp. shell artifact. The natural spiral designs were most likely seen as representations of the sun

paint with the blood of victims of epidemics (Fox 1982). It may be that hematite covering of artifacts and human bodies is associated with blood and its corresponding value in a cosmological outlook.

Returning to the description of scatters of broken decorated pots, I am cautious in using the pottery design motifs found at Ille—and there are many—until we can understand the proper time-context of these pots. It holds a good amount of potential, which can later be linked to a pan-Philippine and Southeast Asian outlook. For the meantime the highly fragmented pottery remains and their highly disturbed context on site may tell us something about how these pots were deposited. We can find insights from chronicles of Iberians who tried to understand the cultures that they encountered. One particular example is Fray Placensia who was then a missionary and an avid observer (and judge) of the cultures he encountered. Describing the rituals of the Tagalog culture of Luzon in the late sixteenth century he mentions that: “They performed ... ceremony by cooking a jar of rice until the water was evaporated, after which they broke the jar, and the rice was left as an intact mass which was set before the idol.” Variations of this behavior may explain why we find many fragmented votive earthenware sherds in this period. We may also hypothesize that the practice was also done in the earlier periods associated with votive pots.



There is also good ethnographic and archaeological work worth mentioning done in the Torres Islands between New Guinea and Australia. The ceremonial kod sites featured shrines of trumpet shells (*Syrinx* spp.) and sea cow bones, and they were dated through a suite of radiocarbon dates to 400 kya up to contemporary times (McNiven and Wright 2008; David et al. 2005). In these ritual sites they also find *Melo* spp., which Hadon in the early twentieth century associated with headhunting rituals, “clan totems and membership and the propitiation of life essences at the kod sites” (David et al. 2005:76). I believe that study of these kod sites is relevant to what we are seeing in the Dewil Valley, especially with the association of shells made into trumpets and the presence of *Melo* shells. We shall, however, not pursue this angle further in this chapter.

Another point I want to stress is the place-name “Pasimbahan.” As mentioned, all the caves that have archaeology directly relevant to this study were named “pasimbahan” in the Cuyon language. The root word is “simba,” which means specifically to worship; the word comes from an older word “samba.” Incidentally, there are two other caves in the valley called Pasimbahan and one in the town proper of El Nido; all have archaeological assemblages that can be associated to ritual activity. Also, the term “pasimbahan” is understood with the same meaning in all major languages of the Philippines. These place-names could easily be older, but I choose to be more conservative in placing it in the last 500 years.

Finally, I would like to mention a cautionary insight from the ethnographic study of the Tagbanuwa, the dominant ethnolinguistic group in central Palawan, and a minority population in El Nido, a few families still living in New Ibajay. Fox (1982:147–148) concluded in his study that the religious practices of the Tagbanuwa are much more developed and formalized than their articulation of their cosmology. The former, Fox observed, had uniformity of practice across communities of Tagbanuwa, and could be articulated by almost anyone; the latter, the responsibility for “doctrinal explanation,” is generally assumed by the religious/ritual specialists of the community. There is a similar observation made in the ethnography of the Tana Toraja in Sulawesi: nonspecialist folks offered different versions of specific patterns of their creation story, or did not provide a coherent cosmogony. Only the ritual specialist provided substantial information to the anthropologists, and these were mostly contained in a number of invocations which accompanied certain sacrificial rituals (Tsintjilonis 2004:431).

The implication of this observation is significant. It tells us that rituals can carry on without participants really articulating the underlying reasons. The ability to explain the details of the cosmology is limited to a few members of the community, which then makes it susceptible to multiple explanations, especially if the doctrine is not codified in writing. This is why there could exist several versions of the same creation story in a community, or several versions of articulations of a specific ritual. It is no different from the introduction of Christian practices to Philippine cultures, where the religious specialist is a priest, and until Vatican II in the 1960s mass was delivered in Latin—a totally incomprehensible language. It did not stop the population from diligently hearing mass and taking in the sermons of the priest, which for most Filipinos was in English—a language vaguely understood by the



majority of the population. My thinking in this matter is eloquently reflected in Peatfield's (2002:55) reaction to the study of Aegean religion where he stated that: "It is what the worshipper does that is of primary importance, not what he or she believes or says about it." Looking at the common elements of the ritual may be the best way to get to a constructed version of a past cosmology that reflects a collective consciousness. Given such insights, the work of the archaeologists looking at past spiritualities demands more rigor behind the methods.

## Conclusion

What we attempted to present in this chapter is an approach to get to past spirituality. It proposes that it can be done, and should be done with a clear line of reasoning that allows a reader to follow the presentation, knowing exactly up to what point they are willing to accept the analysis, and where they start to have a problem with it. This is not the place to go into too much detail regarding what we know about reconstructed cosmologies coming from archaeology. Nevertheless, we can go as far as to say that we have pushed, based on sound reasoning, the ties of the ethnographic present with the archaeological past. We have argued that it is no accident that sites remain ritually significant through long periods of time and several culture changes. The artifact assemblages and the landscape context support this, as well as the stratified nature of the sites that show the changes in the ritual practices. I infer that these changes will have to do with the influx and interaction of cultures that come from other parts of the Philippine Islands and the South China Sea Basin.

The result is the change in cosmological facets, which cannot be articulated in detail as yet, but can be observed in the changes that took place in the ritual practices—a component of a culture's spirituality that is more articulated and consistent. Our study allows us now to say that there are components in the archaeological assemblages that lead us to possible cosmological elements that persist, such as the limestone towers, the caves, the use of smoke, trumpet shells, etc. Then there are elements that may represent the engagement of the individual with their cosmology, as represented in ornamental materials that are worn and made meaningful, such as bracelets, armlets, necklaces made of shells, glass beads, stone beads, etc.

We can make all of the above statements through the reasoning that we have made explicit in this chapter: at an unknown point in the past, there were iconic representations of a cosmology. The cosmology changes for one reason or another and led to the changes in ritual behavior; persistence of form and behavior from this point on enters the realm of a collective unconscious and is transmitted by a people's sense of appropriateness. At all stages, there are only very few people who could articulate the cosmological expressions of their spirituality—the religious specialist. The articulation takes many versions at any given time, and the transmission through rituals and offerings may be articulated by the practitioner. But the underlying cosmological framework mostly remains unarticulated, and therefore is susceptible to change without the need for an external trigger. The emphasis, therefore, on

studying the collective unconscious strengthens the base of the reasoning behind our inferences.

I follow the cautious trail—attempting to provide an approach that will link the ethnographic present to the deep past, through a clear chain of reasoning demonstrated from archaeological context in linear time. We can access past cosmologies when we have enough material that we can understand using the approach outlined in this chapter. The fact that within a specific landscape we can see similarities side by side with the unique expression of one's origin myths, ritual paraphernalia, religions, spirituality, suggests that a good approach is to look at the general patterns that come out in the study of the archaeological data and synthesis, while keeping it anchored to a specific landscape and culture. We can postulate how ethnographic cosmologies or spiritualities are very similar to those in the past (especially within the time-depth of the Austronesian language expansion), without being the same.

Needless to say, the ongoing work in the Philippine archipelago will, in the near future, give us more information for understanding past spiritualities, and for connecting these understandings with the larger human experience in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. More urgently, we are in the process of further dating the sites of Pasimbahan-Magsanib and Ille, which will improve our time-depth resolution of other artifact assemblages coming from these sites. The ethnographic and historical studies from the perspective of spirituality of the Philippine archipelago and the neighboring areas, e.g., Sarawak and Sulawesi, are continuing. It remains a complicated task. Let me end by saying that our interest in knowing the archaeology of spirituality in the Philippines is a central concern. The elucidation of the foundations of the current "Filipino psyche" or consciousness is a heritage concern that inspires us to know the past better for the sake of the living cultures.

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## Chapter 8

# From Holy Hiis to Sacred Stone: Diverse and Dynamic Meanings of Estonian Holy Sites

Tõnno Jonuks

**Abstract** Throughout the history of religion in Estonia various holy places with different meanings and purposes have been used. In some cases the importance of a particular site has been preserved in distinct prehistoric and historic religions. As holy places generally lack archaeological artifacts and other features, oral tradition has been used as the main source. But since folklore is difficult to date it has left the impression that holy places belong to a timeless past, forming a certain kind of amorphic entity. The current study is based on holy sites known from oral tradition which have been in use in the framework of different religious systems in the past. By using these I will try to show the date range of these holy sites and stress their dynamic aspect. Adopting these case studies as analogies it also becomes possible to speculate about former holy sites which have lost their meaning in recent folk religion and oral tradition but are recognizable within the landscape. As a result we are able to see holy landscapes of the past in a more diverse way and understand past religions better in their initial context.

## Abbreviations

- H        Archive of folklore collection of Jakob Hurt in the Estonian Literary Museum
- RKM    Folklore collection of the Estonian Literary Museum

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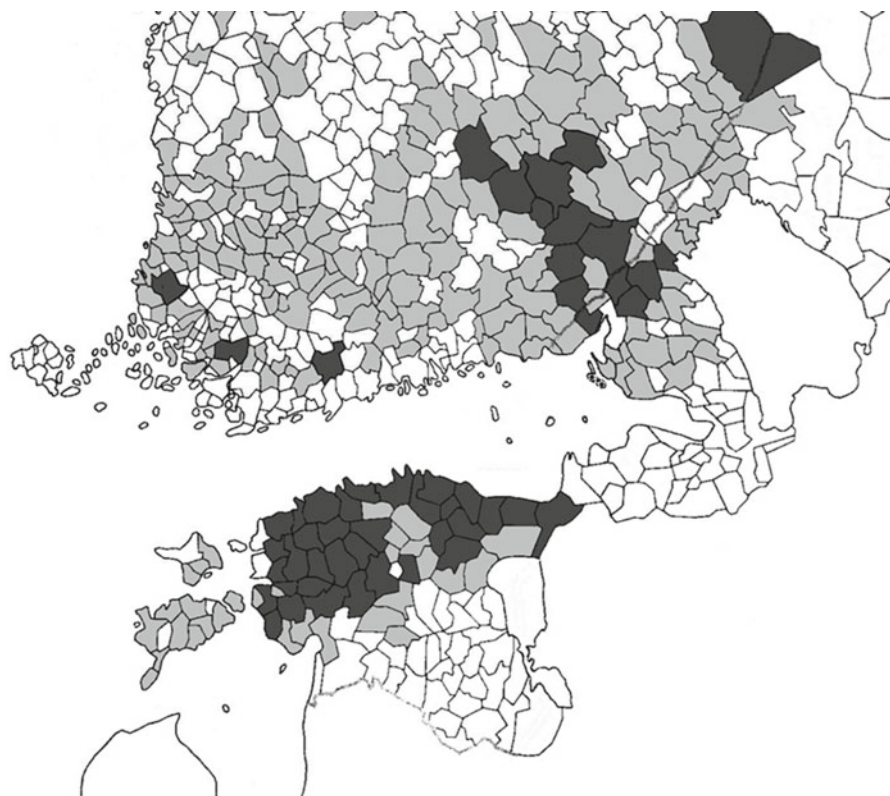
## Introduction

Non-Christian holy sites first attracted the interest of researchers in Estonia towards the end of the eighteenth century when the romantic vision of the holy site as a hillock covered with oak forest (e.g., Merkel 1798; Knüpfner 1836), adopted from the West-European cultural space, was produced. This concept was used until the beginning of the twentieth century (for the research history, see Jonuks 2009b). In the course of the nineteenth century the range of researchers changed; thus Estonian scholars, who used local folk tradition, replaced the former Balto-German Enlighteners, who based their works mostly on chronicles. In the course of this change, the emphasis of the research problem was also transformed and early in the twentieth century a new concept of a holy site—the *hiis*—was formed. *Hiis* could be located in a range of different landscapes and holiness might be ascribed to hillocks, flat areas, depressions and valleys as well as smaller swamps and wetlands (Eisen 1920). The variety of landscapes has been stressed throughout the research history of the twentieth century, and that aspect has been considered one of the characteristic features of holy sites in general, where holiness can be connected with different landscapes, as long as they are distinguished from their surroundings and are clearly delimited (Anttonen 1996; Kaasik 2007:27). Following from the problem of sources, where the oral tradition—from the end of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries—clearly dominates, a certain timeless picture has formed about the holy and *hiis*-sites, according to which *hiis* is an “ancient” holy place with traditions and evidence for use which, in the majority of cases, goes back for centuries and even millennia. However, attention has not previously been paid to the different religions which have been known throughout the history of Estonia and which have all affected the way the holy site is understood.

## Hiis

While no specific terminology has been used for the majority of Estonian holy sites and they are included under universal terms of offering sites and holy trees/stones/springs, this is not the case with *hiis*-sites (Fig. 8.1). The toponym of *hiis* has spread predominantly in the southwestern and southern part of Finland, the Karelian Isthmus and North and West Estonia. These regions are connected by belonging to the Balto-Finnic language group, but in many aspects they differ from each other in their specific histories. In the *hiis*-area of Estonia and southwest Finland, similar processes can be followed while the past of the eastern region is different. Extensive colonization from Finland to Karelia took place in the second half of the first millennium, which brought about the “emergence” of archaeological sites (Uino 1997). It is possible that during this period the *hiis*-concept was first established in Karelia.





**Fig. 8.1** Distribution area of the concept of *hiis* in Finland, Karelia, and Estonia. Data from Koski 1967, Jonuks 2007

In analyses of *hiis*-sites the main focus has been its etymology with different etymological starting points proposed. The interpretations, based on loan words from the Sami languages which associate *hiis* with the word *sieidâ/šejte* (offering or holy site) or the word *sii'dâ* (village, camp) (Bergsland 1964), are no longer considered plausible. Two possible initial words, *hiiði*, *hiiþi* (bushy, stony hillock, a place outside ordinary life) (Koski 1967) and *sid*, *sidon* (side, brink) (Hofstra 1988) can also be seen in the North-Germanic languages. Alongside the theory of loan words, the suggestion that we are dealing with a specific Balto-Finnic word which denotes the woody holy sites in the surroundings of the Gulf of Finland also has some degree of support (Mägiste 1983:344). The earliest reference to the *hiis*-word in written sources dates back to 1694 (Catechism 1694), but on the basis of the linguistic dates and the semantics two thousand years has been suggested for the age of the *hiis*-concept (Jonuks 2007, and references therein). In one way or another, *hiis* denotes a holy area but not specifically trees, stones, springs, etc. The term *hiis* may be associated with any of these, but in this case it serves as an adjective, referring to their holiness.

The earliest and the most famous description of Estonian *hiis*-sites originates from the beginning of the thirteenth century when the chronicler Henry describes how two priests in 1220 baptized the counties of Järva and Viru and how they:

baptized three villages on the border of Viru county, where a hill and a very pretty forest was where the local people said that the big god of Osilians was born who was called Tharapita and who had flown all the way to Ösel from this place. And the other priest went, cutting down the figures and faces [*imagines et similitudines*] of their gods that had been made there and they were surprised that they did not bleed, and believed more the sermons of the priests (HCL, 1961, XXIV: 5).

Despite its attractiveness, we are dealing here with a single text where figures have been described in *hiis*. The reference to figures itself is a loan from Genesis I:26 and due to the exceptionality of the description it is very difficult to decide how genuinely it reflects the former *hiis*-sites. It is possible that this loan is an example of the style of the medieval missionary chronicler, using the stereotypes of the period to describe the pagan holy site (see also Tamm and Jonuks 2013).

Throughout the Middle Ages and the modern era *hiis*-sites have been mentioned predominantly in connection with descriptions of the idolism of local people. These texts mostly concentrate on the identification of the *hiis*-sites and the offerings there, including texts about the worship of stones, trees, etc. (see Sild 1937). In the descriptions of the *hiis*-sites trees have generally been considered the most important component referred to by the Latin (*lucus sanctus*) and German (*heilige Hain*) equivalents (e.g., Hupel 1774; Boecler 1854). The common and permanent feature of these texts, however, is the ban on damaging groves, which remains the most characteristic motif in the *hiis*-tradition of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, both in the local folk tradition and in the descriptions by the Balto-German authors.

The earliest summarizing descriptions about *hiis*-sites are found in the texts by the Enlighteners of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries:

In some places there is one, in some there are many trees—mostly spruces; these are located on hills, fields, by springs, and other places. Peasants, who are not afraid of punishment, bury their dead people in these places. It is strictly forbidden to go in these holy groves (*abergläubischen Haine*) and to worship these. Some landlords ordered peasants to cut the trees but with all the threats and admonitions have achieved nothing and eventually had to take an axe and give example to those fearful. Sacrificing wool, wax, yarn, bread, and other things is still a custom among them; they place these gifts in holy places or into tree hollows. Also, the rivers and springs receive gifts. (Hupel 1774:153) (Fig. 8.2).

However, these descriptions should not be treated as straightforward reflections of the former holy sites from the pre-Christian period; rather we are dealing here with modern folk religion where similar bans and habits were valid for the roadside crosses and chapels. For the Lutheran priests of the modern era who made these records, there was no actual difference between the rituals conducted in the prehistoric offering sites and those conducted in the pre-Reformation holy places. Most likely, the rural people themselves did not think in these categories either, and all such sites formed the uniform folk religion. The creation of this differentiation and the stress on the continuity with pre-Christian holy sites only became important



**Fig. 8.2** The oldest drawing of an Estonian holy tree at Kaavere by E.P. Körber from 1802. *Source:* *Alterthümer der Ostsee-Provinzen in Abbildungen gesammelt und beschrieben* von Edvard Philipp Körber. Manuscript at Estonian Literary Museum (192 ŌES, M.B.62)

in discussions from the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries, especially in popular writings, where proof for the continuance of the pre-Christian religion for centuries has been sought.

## **Folk Tradition: The Main Source for Holy Sites**

The number of topics reflected in the oral tradition concerning both *hiis*-sites and holy places more broadly is varied, but the two subjects represented most frequently are offerings and bans. Although the subject of offerings is strongly present in folk tradition with numerous texts, a strong trend towards stereotypes can be observed: offerings to holy hills, *hiis*-sites, stones or other places are mostly stressed, with the purpose of healing, gratitude or bringing first fruits. While reading these texts the emphasis on classical motifs can be seen; also the majority of texts are stereotypically clean and similar (Rommel 2007). Although criticism of the sources of folk tradition has not been popular, this characteristic within the tradition relates to what may be referred to as “dead folklore.” There is something behind the texts, but the majority of informants have not participated in these rituals themselves and have most likely not witnessed them with their own eyes. Stories are told which emphasize that one had to behave in *hiis* in a certain way, but most of the informants are clearly lacking personal experience.

Even though it is obvious that people rarely have personal experiences at holy sites, or these have not been told to folklorists, places associated with oral tradition are indicative of sites with special meaning. In the following I thus take up the

position that an important place within the landscape is referred to by a folkloric text. Folk tradition concentrates on places important in people's minds, which signals that the place is/has been significant for the tradition bearer. Folk tradition that has been preserved and can be studied now can actually derive from rather later times and may not be connected with the initial meaning(s) of the place. However, the concentration of tradition refers to special places in the common landscape.

The generalization that *hiis*-lore is about stereotypic and "empty" motifs cannot be extended to the whole tradition, however, and there are plenty of texts which allow the conclusion that the practice of offerings to *hiis* and other holy places was still alive, for example, in the 1880s:

People used to take him [the god Hie<sup>1</sup> of Haakla] all kinds of things as offerings, like new crops, wool, meat, sausage, bread, white bread, herring, salt, etc. with the purpose and the prayer that Hie would protect them and hold them from all unfortune that inhibits living. In order to keep animals away from the holy site, a high fence was built. Nevertheless, the holes for Hie were revolting to see with the pieces of cloth and meat and all other food mixed together, they started to stink (H II 17, 127/9 (2)).

These kinds of emotional texts indicate that people had actually seen the offerings, and were not solely reciting universal and widespread stereotypes. This all shows that, despite the spread of stereotypical national romantic motifs influenced by the literature, the oral tradition of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries can still be used to study traditional holy sites and their meaning. Next to offerings, another and almost compulsory topic in the *hiis*-tradition concerns bans, the purpose of which is to protect the sites against all threatening activity. Mostly the ban on cutting or destroying trees, twigs, and plants has been emphasized and sometimes fences have been erected around the sites to protect them. Similar traditions are known for other comparable holy sites, for example, the Mari *küsoto* and the Udmurt *lud* (Lintrop 2003) in present-day western Russia. In addition, a ban on violating holy sites is characteristic for humans, and examples can be found from almost all regions and all religions where sacred areas are used (e.g., Insoll 2006:231). Thus, similar traditions can also be found for the majority of Christian churches and chapels in Estonia (e.g., Jung 1898:220).

Although *hiis*-lore has been studied extensively, the bans in *hiis*-sites have often been interpreted directly and without source-critical approaches (e.g., Loorits 1932; Kaasik 2007, and references therein). Folklore has been considered authentic; it is thought to adequately reflect the behavior of past people and their attitudes regarding *hiis*-sites. In recent years certain changes can be followed, which offer a slightly more source-critical treatment alongside the more common view. Ülo Valk has suggested that the *hiis*-lore which, as a rule, has been projected into the past does not reflect "the direct attitude to nature, but rather the idea of how it should have been" (2005:40). In such a categoric way these kinds of bans—not to cut trees and bushes, pick berries or in any other way disturb the place—were not

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<sup>1</sup>According to some folklore texts the god or spirit of *hiis* has sometimes also been called *Hiis* or *Hi(i)e*.

for everyday compliance but showed how people *should* behave in a holy place. The fact that customary law does not derive from what people actually do, but reflects other issues, has been demonstrated also by historians of law (Watson 1995). In some ways it is similar to the whole process and aim of folklore—to present the ideal world (see Honko 1998). As defined by Lauri Honko, ideal culture does not present the collective only from inside out. It also works in the community as a control mechanism. The folklore process has an important role, among other things, in stressing central values as well as key symbols, mythologies and rituals, and in explaining the social value system. Ideal culture is one way to define group identity (Honko 1998:78).

So with these *hiis*-laws, people defined their relationship to the *hiis*-site every time, and thus the rules do not present how people actually behaved in a *hiis*.

### Is it Possible to Date *Hiis*? The Archaeology of Holy Sites

Despite the fact that almost all sources regarding Estonian holy sites come from nineteenth and twentieth century oral tradition, the use of Estonian folkloristic holy sites did not start only in the modern era. Although folklore reflects the modern age folk religion, it has formed on the basis of the former with elements of earlier religion(s) preserved within it. It is clear that holy sites were used in previous periods, and that this is to some extent reflected in the modern local lore. At the same time, several holy sites have lost their folklore with time and have thus become inaccessible to us. I believe that using different holy sites known from folklore as analogues enables us, on the basis of archaeological material, to identify the places which have been religiously important in the past but where the folklore has disappeared with time, leaving the site not traceable for us. The most notable examples of these are undoubtedly formed by deposits interpreted as ritual ones (see Oras 2010), which usually are not associated with oral tradition. However, oral tradition probably did accompany all former offerings and holy sites, providing a reason why a particular place was valued enough to start offering there. Since archaeological finds have rarely been found from Estonian folkloristic holy sites, they are difficult to date. However, some speculations are possible and necessary. The latter are, on one hand, supported by the obvious association of some sites with landscapes, indicative of a clear relationship. On the other hand, the chronological contextualization of holy sites enables better understanding of their meaning, considering the holy sites in a wider religious framework.

The majority of finds from folkloristic holy sites belong to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and are connected with modern folk religion. In this context, offered coins as well as glass shards, broken horseshoes, nails, and other materially valueless items which were often mentioned in folkloristic texts as offerings, should be considered (Fig. 8.3). Judging from the finds of coins and artifacts, this kind of offering tradition starts around the sixteenth century and can be followed everywhere in Estonia since the seventeenth century. The absence of medieval coin finds





**Fig. 8.3** An offering stone with shards of glass-bottles and horseshoes from 1936. *Source:* ERA f 262

seems to indicate that offerings of coins started only at the end of the Middle Ages. In addition to offering springs, which have yielded the majority of coins currently known, a similar picture is suggested by chapel sites where the offering of coins started in the second half of the sixteenth century and continued until the end of the nineteenth century. The absence of medieval coins probably does not mark the earliest date of offering sites, but rather a change in the Estonian monetary system, which is also reflected in offering practices. Coins became cheaper and more common after the Livonian War in the sixteenth century (Kiudsoo 2008:125) and were subsequently introduced into other, more symbolic, areas (Jonuks et al. 2010:277).

While only a few medieval finds predating the modern materially valueless offerings are known, the oldest artifacts from *hiis*-sites are the single finds of penannular brooches from the Late Iron Age (eleventh–twelfth century AD). All these brooches, found as stray finds, are characteristically simple and probably meant for everyday use. It might be suggested that these can be associated with items lost during festivities and not directly with “offerings”.

Considering the absence of cultural layers and the rare occurrence of single finds, it is impossible to note anything in the material of Late Iron Age or older periods which could be compared with the offerings of the modern era. The situation is made more difficult by the fact that the most dominant kind of offerings according to folklore—food—is preserved only in exceptional cases and, at the moment, traces of food in holy sites cannot be studied at all. On the other hand, one might suggest that the kind of transformation in artifacts—from the Late Iron Age brooches to the

modern and recent past pottery shards and pieces of iron—can reflect changes in religion, offering customs and rituals connected with holy sites. Some differences between various holy sites and rituals conducted there can be proposed as well—when single, worn, and in some cases damaged everyday jewelry is associated with the *hiis*-sites that enable more extensive gatherings, then these could be connected with a festivity that took place in the holy site. While looking at single finds from *hiis*, considering their location in the landscape and also references from oral tradition about activities there, it seems that *hiis* have mostly been meant for public gatherings and rituals. Most of the known *hiis*-sites are situated close to villages on easily accessible land that is well suited for public festivities. It certainly does not exclude personal visits and offerings but because of their general appearance they do differ from the smaller places discussed below.

However, finds identifiable as symbolic offerings from the modern era and recent past are almost exclusively concentrated on smaller and more local offering sites and trees, where they could be described with the word “offering”. Thus, the known finds from *hiis*-sites form an entity with the folk religion of the near past, although it is clear that both the general tradition of *hiis*-sites as well as some particular places can have a longer history. While dating the *hiis*-tradition their connection with the settlement sites from the end of prehistory or the Middle Ages has usually been emphasized (Koski 1967; Valk 1995). However, several imposing stone graves with above-ground structures with their location imply that the holy sites might have already been in use somewhat earlier.

In North Estonia, which can be considered a core region of *hiis*-tradition, the concentration of graves in the vicinity of traditional *hiis*-sites can be followed. It has been emphasized in several studies that there is no connection between graves and *hiis*-sites, taking into account the Late Iron Age or later graves (Valk 1995). These archaeological sites have really no connection and if the grave has been named *hiis*, as has been demonstrated in a few cases, the reason might lie in later developments when the term *hiis* has been used for places which have been continuously regarded as being important, but whose meaning has already been forgotten. While a connection between historical cemeteries and *hiis*-sites seems to be absent, the association between stone graves from the Bronze and the first half of the Iron Age (until the fifth century AD) and *hiis*-sites located in spectacular landscapes is much clearer. The general characteristic features of these graves include their concentration in areas which are visually prominent—they stand out from the surroundings by either powerful landforms (kling slopes, hillocks) or unusual surroundings (e.g., karst). It is obvious that we are not dealing with a conclusive rule, but the situation of sites in this manner is striking. It has mostly been associated either with the need for domination, emphasizing that the land belongs to the family buried in the grave (Ligi 1995:216), or it is possible that people chose emotionally powerful landscapes for the grave which stressed the sense of holiness, and with the building of the grave the connection of the inhabitants with the sanctity of the landscape was stressed (Lang 1999, 2000; Vedru 2011).

Following the location of graves, either on kling slopes or kling capes and separate hillocks, it is likely that the area was considered holy at the time of erecting the graves.





**Fig. 8.4** Kunda *hiis*-hill, viewed from one-time village site. The lower area in front of the hill is a dried lake. The *arrows* point to stone graves oriented towards the village

Considering the landscape in which they are found, the etymology of the word *hiis* in North-Germanic language—*hiid*—meaning stony or brushy hillock (Koski 1967) suits well. Thus a conclusion might be drawn that the beginning of the tradition of *hiis*-sites belongs to the end of the Bronze Age—pre-Roman Iron Age when the earliest outstanding sites in the landscape, marked with the building of graves, are used (Jonuks 2007).

A good example is offered by Kunda *hiis*-hill on the top of which four stone graves are known (Fig. 8.4). These are located in a row on the edge of a gentler hilltop and are directed towards the area where a settlement site contemporary with the graves has been found. To date, a part of the first grave has been studied and according to the dating evidence the grave was built some time in the eighth–fifth centuries BC (Lang 2007:174). The bed of the prehistoric lake of Kunda lies between the slope of the hill lined with graves and the settlement site. The lake apparently used to be a swamp during the time that the graves were built, forming also a boundary between the village and a holy site. Considering the landscape the bank of the swamped lake could be seen as the former trackway from the settlement to the *hiis*.

However, there are several (holy) sites with the name *hiis* that do not have, and probably have never had, any graves in their vicinity. These sites seem to have a close connection with the settlement sites of the last prehistoric centuries and historic times. The majority of indigenous villages that can be followed archaeologically began in the Viking Age (Lang 1996). Judging from the find material, several of these persisted until the end of the Middle Ages in the second half of the sixteenth century and often up until the present day. Many folkloristic *hiis*-sites are associated with these villages and graves are missing in their neighborhood.



**Fig. 8.5** Altja Varetnõmme—a natural boulder field deep in the woods where local people used to bring first fruits

For example, the *hiis*-site of Aburi 1–1.5 km from the initial village center is situated on completely flat ground and graves have not been found from its surroundings. Aburi and other similar examples show the apparent connection between *hiis*-sites and indigenous villages, whereas there are cases when several villages accept a single *hiis*-site as their own. In addition to the absence of graves close to the “late” *hiis*, several other changes have taken place in the second half of the Iron Age which refers to more extensive alterations generally in religion. Thus the above-ground grave structures disappeared and grave goods changed (Jonuks 2009a), which implies that changes had probably taken place in holy sites and also in their significance.

In addition to these two “groups” of holy places whose names contain the toponym *hiis*, there is a category of places which are connected neither with settlements and graves nor with spectacular natural landscapes, but which have clearly distinguished natural boundaries. This category includes holy places which are situated on bog islands and elsewhere off the beaten track, and which are separated from the common-place world because they are more difficult to access (Fig. 8.5). In Estonia, such holy sites, which may have the root *hiis* in their name, are situated in primeval river valleys (Kongla) on bog islands (*Suur Hiis* or “The Great Holy Grove” and *Väike Hiis* or “The Small Holy Grove” in Varudi), deep in forests and elsewhere outside populated areas. An important motive for selecting such places

has evidently been their isolated location. Another significant aspect was probably also the passage to the holy place through the unique bog landscape or by descending to a deep river valley. The sense of isolation and difficulty of access to the place was possibly also connected with a religious experience, which was quite different from the one gained from other types of landscape. One may speculate that going to a bog island through a thicket or descending to the deep valley along a riverbank studded with springs was connected with the rituals carried out in the holy place and that the pathway spiritually prepared the participants for the ritual. A good example here is the description of the *Iissaar* (Holy Grove Island) in Roostoja village, East Viru County (RKM II 61, 27/8 (12)). According to this text, there was a holy island in the bog and as a sign of veneration, people left their hats on the previous bog island, *Kübarsaar* (Hat Island). Taking off one's hat and entering the holy place with the head uncovered could be definitely viewed as a part of the ritual of the holy place, and the purpose of this was the spiritual preparation of the participants for entering the holy place. An aspect similar to the above example has been further discussed in connection with pilgrimages (Turner and Turner 1978); this discussion emphasizes that the journey of pilgrimage itself, which is highly ritualized and follows several established rules, is as important as the destination of the pilgrimage. Pilgrimages spiritually prepared people on their way to the holy place and it is possible that cognitive preparative processes also took place in natural holy places. True, such accounts are rather rare in the Estonian lore about holy groves, but it must be remembered that this type of lore rarely contains specific, detailed descriptions and most mentions of holy places refer to the conception of *hiis*-sites in general terms.

Since the holy places of this group are associated neither with graves nor settlement sites, their dating, as well as presenting further speculations about their function, is problematic. In overall Estonian folklore about *hiis*-sites, the oral heritage about these hidden and difficult-of-access holy places focuses on offering and curing magic. Such hidden holy places might have had a different function: in addition to the obvious isolation, they provide a more personal relationship with the place, and this, in turn, clearly makes people regard these places as different from the holy places near villages, where the focus is on gatherings and festivities held there. The interpretations of the so-called hidden holy sites often include an emphasis on the practice of the medieval and especially modern Christian fight against unofficial religious practices, which involved the destruction of corresponding holy sites. Therefore holy sites away from the settlement could have been used; places were hidden from the reformers and access to them was complicated (Kaasik 2007). This suggestion certainly has some validity and documentary proof can be found for the destruction of non-Christian holy sites since the thirteenth century (e.g., HCL, 1961, XXIV: 5; Gutsclaff 1644; Hupel 1774).

At the same time, the explaining of hidden holy sites solely in relation to the activity of Christian priests is a clear oversimplification. It is rather likely that these hidden and isolated holy sites were used in other contexts and that the reasons for this choice of location included different meanings and functions. Considering the known practices at such places, where offerings and curing rituals form a

considerable part, it seems more convincing to connect such places with “magic”. Mystery and hiding is an important aspect of magical practice, where usually the items used in rituals and also the places where rituals were performed were kept secret and away from other people’s eyes. Thus, this is most likely the reason why such places can be characterized as “hidden” and where concealment is not connected with the activity of Christian priests.

In addition, the destruction of non-Christian holy sites was not directed only against the so-called natural holy sites. Many reports of the destructive activity of priests derive from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and have, next to the destruction of folkloristic holy sites, been clearly directed towards the demolishing of Catholic crosses and chapels as well, where local peasants conducted popular-Catholic rituals (e.g., Jung 1898:220). Considering these descriptions, together with reports from the nineteenth century where priests were said to have had offering stones smashed, springs filled up and trees cut down (Sild 1937), one might see that for both the local country people and the Lutheran priests the concepts with the Iron Age background, medieval Catholicism and its popular interpretation formed a common modern age folk religion. Therefore it cannot be said that the activity of priests would have been solely a fight against natural holy sites. It was the struggle for the modern-era, official Lutheranism, where both medieval Catholicism and folkloristic religious habits had been declared enemies.

In addition to more general holy sites, numerous single objects are known from Estonia, like holy trees which have mostly been connected with offerings claiming happiness and general health; offering and curing stones whose functions are more associated with good luck and fertility, but also with more specific healing offerings; and more than 500 curing springs. Although offerings to request luck and fertility might have been brought to the latter as well, their dominant motif has included healing, primarily the treatment of eye diseases. The dating, and connecting with the wider religious framework of stones, trees, and springs, is often complicated and these should all primarily be treated in connection with the modern folk religion. This is also supported by the scarcity of finds from these sites, which have dominantly produced only modern age finds (Jonuks 2012a). The use of individual/particular springs during the Late Iron Age (eleventh-thirteenth centuries) is evidenced by the deposition of jewelry into these springs in the middle of former villages.

The majority of folkloristic holy springs seem to be located away from settlement sites as well; they are often situated in forests or near farmsteads, but still outside the everyday landscape, in its peripheral zone. This location fits well with several theoretical approaches according to which the places with holiness are situated in landscapes connected with everyday life, but specifically in their fringe area. In several traditional studies, the confrontation of the profane and sacred spheres has been emphasized as well as the concept that the sacral area remains on the periphery of the profane area (Anttonen 1996). Thus, according to the majority of concepts, holy sites are situated in areas connected with daily life, but still at some distance from them, separated from the everyday bustle. Also, the Estonian folkloristic springs and other holy sites from the historic period seem to

confirm this approach. These were visited mostly alone and predominantly with the purpose of seeking health, and seldom for more general phenomena like luck and well-being. In return, or as a part of the ritual, coins were thrown into the spring, silver was scraped or other things given to the water.

However, the confrontation of sacred and profane should not be overstressed; rather the intertwining of the two aspects can be seen, up to the level where they no longer can be differentiated. A good example is offered by the settlement site of Tranders in Denmark, where offerings were brought into the confines of the contemporary settlement site, inside the buildings as well as in between them, where the majority are not building offerings (Hansen 2006). Building offerings from the medieval and modern towns (Hukantaival 2007) and Stone Age tools apparently deposited for magical reasons (Johanson 2009) are better known. These very likely represent a one-time act and we are not dealing with an especially sacred settlement site. The springs in the middle of the Estonian Late Iron Age villages should probably be looked at in the same way. These springs used to be places for fetching the daily water as well as depositing female jewelry (Jonuks 2012b). The dating is remarkable, since the jewelry recovered from the springs in the middle of settlements belongs to a relatively short period in the Late Iron Age, the eleventh–twelfth centuries AD. Thus, the springs with finds of jewelry situated in the middle of the villages refer to some uniform religious concept which existed neither before nor after the Late Iron Age.

Nor is the confrontation of sacred and profane supported by the location of offering trees. The majority of offering trees are situated by roads, between different villages. According to sources of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, a clearly non-Christian tradition is visible where ribbons were tied to the trees, economically valueless offerings were put under the trees, or sometimes a stone picked by the road or a handful of sand or rubbish from the pocket was thrown to the trees. Although at first glance non-Christian, the tradition of considering these places holy and start making offerings there probably developed from the medieval Catholic crosses standing by the roads or at crossroads, and it should be interpreted as popular Catholicism that developed into modern age folk religion.

## **Diverse Purposes and Changing Meanings**

As the ahistorical approach has dominated in Estonia so far, the different dates of holy sites are important, as they help to contextualize sacred places through past religions. Different land use of holy sites and different sites attached to them refer to the diverse meanings ascribed to them. Most of the religions have used several and various holy sites, which have had different purposes. Different methods can be used to distinguish these ritual places—for example, one can divide them according to their function or social role. Places can be differentiated by the number of their users, for example, trees or stones were important for single individuals,



*hiis*-sites influential for the village, and holy sites significant for wider hinterland (see Vaitkevičius 2004:51ff). However, these sites were not static but changing according to the transforming wider context.

Apparently this aspect, different dates and functions circulating among researchers, could be the key to explaining the variability of Estonian *hiis*- and other sites in the landscape as well as the associated sites. Various *hiis*-sites, roadside holy trees, offering stones and springs offered a very heterogenous picture within Estonian folk religion by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This is indicated by the folk tradition of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries where several notes describe how the village community gathered together for festivities in *hiis*-sites but personal services were carried out in offering gardens located by each farmstead (e.g., Jung 1879:37).

Considering the connections presented above between sites, it can be suggested that the first *hiis*-sites came into use before the change of era, and in these cases the holy sites were regarded as important in the so-called spectacular landscapes, like separate hillocks or klint slopes (Jonuks 2007). The Late Bronze Age–Early Iron Age is the period when a common cultural space was formed around the northern part of the Baltic Sea, as indicated by the shared forms of the stone graves within the area (Lang 2007). The introduction of *hiis*-sites during the period is confirmed by the etymology of the word. If we regard the initial stem of the word *hiid* and its meaning “separate place, stony hill” likely, then the word semantically fits with the Estonian and Finnish *hiis*-hills. In this case the date of the word and the concept fits well too: the word has been taken over at the time when *h* at the beginning of the word was not yet used in the Estonian language (before the first centuries AD) and the initial form of the word in Estonia was *iis*. *Hiis* is a later phenomenon when, with the North-Estonian written language, the use of *h* spread at the beginning of the word and merged with the word. This date is further supported by the suggestion of Veikko Anttonen that the word *püha* (holy) spread during the Bronze Age (Anttonen 1992) and the terms *püha* and *hiis* were apparently a part of a common cultural complex. Thus, Anttonen’s proposal sounds likely, according to which the *hiis*-sites were considered important as holy areas, but had not yet been used for burials; rather, rituals connected with ancestors were conducted and stone graves were then erected in the areas for this reason. The fairly clear connection between graves and *hiis* implies that the function and meaning of these sites should be associated with dead ancestors. At this point the eye contact between the higher grave area and the lower settlement site, traceable in several cases, could be of importance too. Thus a picture could be visualized of daily relations where the activities of villagers were under the gaze of the souls of the ancestors buried on the higher hill where people came together at certain times for festivities and gatherings. True, arguments have been put forward against the connection between the graves and holy sites (see Anttonen 1992; Valk 1995), but in this case the *hiis*-named places in general have been taken into account and their relationship with the Final Prehistoric-Medieval cemeteries has been explored. Following the dates of the graves, it is apparent that the graves built since the second half of the first millennium AD seem to lack connections with the spectacular landscapes that could be considered “holy”. Instead,

the graves are situated in the middle of fields, in the quotidian landscape. So the material seems to imply that the *hiis*-sites connected with such imposing natural phenomena initially used to serve as holy sites associated with the cult of ancestors. Similar developments have been suggested on the basis of the Norwegian material—here the point that has been stressed is that the Bronze and Early Iron Age graves have been built in specific topographic locations, predominantly on the coast or on the shores of the fjords. From the Roman Iron Age the situation changed and the connection with settlement site was the primary consideration for choosing the location (Sognnes 2000).

A separate question might be raised about the size of the area where these *hiis*-sites were used. The Estonian flat landscape offers limited possibilities for such imposing places and the concentration of graves in these areas is spectacular. It can still be suggested that, as a rule, the holy site was situated in the vicinity of the everyday settlement site, which is illustrated by several examples. However, more specific places can be found, the best example of which is offered by the surroundings of Lake Kahala where the ca. 250 preserved stone graves make up the biggest concentrated area of stone-cist graves in Estonia (see Vedru 2002). It is highly unlikely that all these graves were founded by local people: one can rather suggest that the area was used by the inhabitants of the larger region. However, it is important to consider that people may not have used the area for burying, but rather to keep in touch with previous generations and to confirm their past and, through this, their identity (see also Vedru 2002). It is even more likely as it has been suggested that not all members of the one-time society were buried in stone graves. It is only a small part of the society and most people have been buried in some other way that leaves no traces for us (Lang 2011). Thus, it is possible that the fields of stone graves and *hiis*-sites connected with them were used for rituals by people coming from the wider hinterland, rather than just the groups living in the direct vicinity. In addition to the fact that the graves were built and used by people of the wider hinterland, the area considered holy might extend to a larger territory than the grave itself and its direct surroundings. The whole hill, klint slope, alvar, etc. could be considered as a *sacred landscape* (Sognnes 2000).

As I distinguished above, another bigger group is composed of the *hiis*-sites which are associated with the settlement sites starting at the end of the prehistoric period, mostly in the Viking Age. Graves are rarely to be found around these *hiis*-sites and it seems that the kind of interpretation proposed for the earlier sites is no longer valid. Considering the changes at the end of the Roman Iron Age, since the fifth century AD, when graves with above-ground stone-structures disappeared and the graves used subsequently were mostly burial areas covered by irregular stone layers, it is possible that the rituals taking place at the graves have partly lost their significance as well (Jonuks 2009a). Thus, it is likely that the rituals have started to change both in their content as well as in their location during the Migration Period and have rather been relocated to settlement sites and *hiis*-sites connected with them (see also Sundqvist 2002; Bågenholm 1999). Apparently, the rituals now included fewer features of the cult of ancestors (although these have not completely disappeared) and more abstract gods and phenomena associated with them have instead



become more important. This kind of *hiis*-tradition and -sites were most likely the ones that reached the first chronicles in the thirteenth century and whose reflections found their way into the folk tradition of the recent past and today. However, the images connected with ancestors were still preserved in this *hiis*-tradition. It is clear that this change did not mean the abandonment of “old” holy sites and the introduction of “new” ones, although sometimes it could be the case. The incorporation of the “old” holy sites within the framework of the new religion can sometimes be followed, where bigger breaks have not occurred; however, changes have probably taken place in their meaning. Yet, at the same time, it is likely that a number of former holy sites did lose their meaning and tradition and thus the places have disappeared for us.

An example of this process is offered by the protruding and outstanding klint cape in the village of Tõugu, covered with stone graves (see Lang 2000). A settlement layer contemporary with the graves has been detected under the klint slope. The location of sites and landscape use in this complex is similar to the examples described above, where graves are situated within a holy site. The only difference is that the *hiis*-lore is absent in Tõugu. However, the oral tradition of *Hiieväljad* (*Hiis*-fields) is known a few kilometers away. Considering the previous examples, parallels can be drawn between the cases and a suggestion can be put forward that initially, ca 500–200 BC when the graves were erected, the spectacular klint cape was regarded as holy and probably *hiis*-lore was present. With time, proceeding either from the changes in religion or discontinuity of settlement, the holy site was relocated a few kilometers away and to a different and completely flat landscape with no graves associated with it. Although we are largely dealing with an unverifiable speculation, the similar landscape, relationship of sites and folklore can be followed in several places in North-Estonia. But the two distributions of holy sites—spectacular places associated with above-ground graves and sites in the vicinity of settlement sites—could be observed as two extensive trends which formed the tradition of *hiis* in Estonian folk religion in the modern age.

A third and clearly distinguishable group of folkloristic holy sites is formed by sites situated in separated and often difficult-of-access places—on bog islands, river valleys, deep woods, etc. Unlike previous *hiis*-sites which are located in easily accessible landscapes and near villages, the approach to the sites of the third group is made difficult; in addition, these places cannot be associated with any known archaeological sites. Since many of these have offering or curing motifs attached, it is likely that in the case of these *hiis*-sites we are dealing with places for conducting personal rituals, enhanced by the exceptionality and isolation of the place. Also the landscape implies that these places could not have hosted bigger gatherings and were instead meant for rituals for single or very few participants. It is almost impossible to date these separated and isolated places and the known sites should be connected only with recent folk religion. However, several deposits of weapons and jewelry from bogs indicate that isolated sites away from the everyday landscape could have been used continuously and in parallel to the *hiis*-sites through the first millennium AD (Oras 2010). Thus, the offering sites and the places of festivities need not have overlapped, although they belonged to the same religion. However,

the different functions of the place conditioned different meaning and different choice of location.

Since the so-called hidden holy sites were probably not accompanied by regular and organized rituals, these places have been the most receptive to changes. It should be concluded that these places reflected in folklore belong to the folk religion of the recent past and represent a tradition of holy sites different from *hiis*-places for communal gatherings. The predominance of magical rituals at these sites could be considered as the major factor for why the sites are situated further away, separated from everyday villages, and why these have been kept secret. Naturally, considering the Christianization of Estonia, the hiding of holy places was connected with the practice of Christian priests as well. However, the medieval and modern *hiis*-tradition should not be oversimplified, i.e., the statement that since the land was officially Christianized, the honoring of holy places took place in secret. It is more likely that during the Middle Ages several holy sites were continuously considered important and similar rituals were still conducted there. A good example of the continuance of the tradition of *hiis*-sites is offered by several medieval burials in earlier graves and coins deposited in *hiis*-sites since the end of the Middle Ages and modern era. It is clear, however, that the situation could not have remained as it was before the official Christianization, which might have caused or fostered the introduction of hidden offering sites. But the main reason for hiding certain holy places should be considered to be the essence of these sites and the personal magical rituals conducted there.

Speaking of holy sites as wider areas, one cannot forget that holy single objects have apparently been used constantly. Chronologically, the oldest of these it is possible to identify are the springs where jewelry was offered in the Late Iron Age, but the picture that can be drawn on the basis of numerous modern sources indicates that the situation used to be relatively more varied in previous periods. Graves and burial sites can apparently also be treated as holy sites where offerings had been made since the fifth century (Oras 2010:131) and which can be traced systematically, especially in the modern era (Valk 2001:83). However, our knowledge of the find material is very uneven and the majority of finds interpreted as “offerings” derive only from the modern era. On one hand, this uneven representation could be the result of the preservation of material, and currently we are not able to follow probably the most common offering—food—from any period. At the same time, there are also distinctions between offerings and for instance we cannot see economically valueless items from the Later Iron Age or earlier periods which could be compared to the bottle shards, nails, or broken horseshoes offered during the modern age. It could be suggested that the change of artifacts from the Late Iron Age jewelry to the pottery shards and pieces of iron of the modern period and recent past could reflect changes in religion, offering customs and rituals connected to holy sites. Differences between various holy sites and the rituals conducted at them can also be suggested; if single, worn and in some cases deformed pieces of everyday jewelry are associated with the places suitable for more extensive festivities, then these could be considered in relation with some event that took place in the holy site. Almost all modern and recent finds concentrate around the smaller and

more local offering stones and trees, where these could be interpreted as offerings. It could also be assumed that these places were rather meant for individuals and not for larger gatherings and festivities. The latter is confirmed by folklore about offering sites where the main topics include curing motifs or compulsory offerings.

Thus, in the case of Estonian holy sites the tradition of their use can be traced back two to three millennia, but the meaning of the places as well as the places themselves have been constantly changing. There are holy *hiis*-sites that really have been used for almost two millennia, but there are also places which have been abandoned or re-introduced with the changes in religion or habitation. Although the whole variability of holy sites cannot be seen at a given moment, sources indicate that the phenomenon used to be present on a broader scale, always including larger sites for gatherings as well as smaller ones with more limited numbers of users.

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## Chapter 9

# Magical Signs in Prehistory: Near Eastern Celestial Symbols in the Ancient Carpathian Basin

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**Abstract** Among the Bronze Age jewelry of the Carpathian Basin, there are several pendants which bear significant symbols whose nearest analogies can be found among the Near Eastern emblems of celestial divinities. This study suggests that these symbols can be identified with the sign(s) of Ishtar/Astarte, the most popular goddess of the Near East, who must, by then, have been the personification of the bright planet Venus. These strong similarities support the idea of a particular connection, in this instance, with ancient Syria. Trade connections between the Baltic and ancient Syria are also evidenced by the prestige amber artifacts which were discovered in the kings' tombs dated to 1340 BC in Syria (Mukherjee et al. 2008). The raw material of Baltic amber used by local craftsmen may have been transported to the port of Ugarit, crossing the Carpathian Basin along the “Amber Route” and into ancient Greece. This Venus symbol might already have been known from earlier times as it is also sparsely represented on Neolithic finds. The motif seems to be strongly related to the Near Eastern belief system, in particular, to beliefs relating to fertility and protection. The crop protective role of this sign is proved by its application in plastic form on the inner side of the bottom of large vessels containing corn. This symbol has deeply permeated the beliefs of the people living in the Carpathian Basin. There is no period in history up until the present day when it has not been used.

## Introduction

When searching for analogies to interpret ancient archaeological artifacts, archaeologists always have to raise the question of whether it is possible to deduce the distant past from folklore and ethnography. I was once witness to how an ancient

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symbol might have retained its magical protective power and relation to fecundity up until the present day. In Transylvania I saw the symbol (depicted in Group 1) painted on the doors of a barn. When I asked a local farmer about its meaning, he replied reluctantly and with some embarrassment: “You know, it is like a magic sign. It is believed by the superstitious, foolish villagers that it protects the crops and animals and retains the evil and mischievous forces.”

Studying symbols is especially difficult in archaeology. Alongside archaeological methodology one cannot avoid using historical and/or ethnographic analogies. My personal experience of meeting a Bronze Age symbol on a contemporary structure further supports my argument that under certain conditions folklore and folk art can be employed to investigate ancient symbols. The reasons why I also feel justified in the use of ethnography in my study of the Carpathian Basin Bronze Age symbols are as follows:

- The belief system in the Bronze Age appears to be generally similar to folk beliefs (Pásztor, 2009, 2010).
- There were not only recognized trade connections between the Carpathian Basin and the Near East, but also migrations of south(east)ern people in different periods of prehistory who brought customs and beliefs with them.
- The symbols studied were in continuous use throughout history (see discussion below).
- Belief in magic and protective symbols is almost independent of religion. Although their own specific religious signs are also used as amulets, every era has its universal symbols spread over large neighboring territories. It even seems that timeless symbols may exist (Paine 2004).
- The folk art used as analogies comes from the same geographical area as the ancient spread of the symbols investigated. Although the particular use of the symbols must have changed with time, their general, positive meaning and essential structure remained.
- Tradition can survive a long time in isolated territories.
- An archaeologist of prehistory must take all opportunities, using every means, to help retrace the cognitive systems of ancient people.

## Symbols as Archetypes of Folk Art Motifs

The arguments concerning archetypes of folk art have inspired many scholarly debates for a long time. A book on Hungarian folk art published in 1922 says:

... In each Palots house in the left corner of the door there is a pot holder. In this holder rests the house were adorned with such signs as on the Bronze Age ceramics. The only difference is the technique. The ancient pots are engraved, the modern ones are painted (Malonyai 1922, *The folk art of the Palots* entry, my translation).

The French scholar Déchelette (1928:453) also argued that the stars, swastikas, crosses and circles are the continuation of sun symbols of Aegean origin and signal

a general sun cult, although this is no longer widely accepted. Deonna (1924:192) argues that the unbroken use of the rosette motif from the early medieval period is not a purely technical coincidence. Although they may simply be decorative, a religious, protective function cannot be excluded. At the same time, Van Gennep (1930:118) argues that the reason for applying circular motifs is purely technical, due to the general use of compasses in the eighteenth–nineteenth centuries. Cuisenier (1975:181–204) also thinks that both the technique and the raw material have a decisive influence on the choice of decorative motifs and the apparent similarities between them in different periods. He is also convinced that there is an essential difference between the prehistoric and the folk geometric art of the eighteenth–nineteenth centuries. In his view, the latter has no religious significance.

Decoration in art is a communication tool. The community invests the signs with meaning; however, it is their common formal and structural features that last for centuries rather than their meaning. Most of the abstract motifs belong to geometric adornment, which are generally the basic and widespread elements of traditional folk art. In his study of folk art, Dunăre classified the designs. His mythological group contains a high number of sun symbols which show remarkable universality (Dunăre 1979:158). The symbols can reveal different historical strata. Investigating Christian symbols in folk art, Gazda discovered that folk art and its terminology partly reflect Christian religious thinking. She has also noticed that size has no significance in the meaning of religious symbols (Gazda 2002). The terminology is kept intact where the motif is still in use. For example, the possible magical function of Hungarian shirt embroidery might be proved by the Moldovan Csángó (Hungarian speaking native of Moldavia) terminology of ornament (cross, water-flow, frog-eye, hen-eye, tooth, snake, etc.). Even if this terminology is not several thousand years old, the ornamentation is significantly archaic and the result of a very archaic way of thinking. It signals the common presence of a soil-cultivating culture and its close relation to nature. Thus, the magical function of certain motifs can be inferred (Gazda 1998).

Besides the style and structure of designs, scholars are mostly interested in the magical-symbolic meaning of the traditional motifs. The results achieved by Katona (2005) in the study of folk jewelry offer a fruitful model for archaeological investigations. Items of Hungarian folk jewelry—with their material, shape, ornaments, wearing style and the attached magical and/or informative meaning—reveal much more beyond their primary function of adornment. They can also mark age, family status, social rank, religious and national status, a special occasion or the yearly celebrations. Many kinds of beliefs in protective, auspicious and/or healing power are also attached to jewelry, therefore their magical functions should not be neglected. For example, lunulated metal hangings might have also served an amuletic wish for fertility on the headgear of young women in the neighborhood of Pécs town (South Hungary). The protective, amuletic role of jewelry has survived in various forms especially among Mediterranean peoples, who to this day wear such necklaces with amulet pendants. To avert the evil eye, the Hungarian as well as the North-, the Central and the South-European peoples considered the color red, symbolizing the life force, the most effective. The round shape is also of pagan origin as

the belief in the power of a magic circle holding off the evil charm is extremely ancient (Katona 2005:34).

Such jewels with magical power might be worn hidden on the body, used as a magical tool, kept as treasures separate from the body or clothing, or deposited by their owners in holy places in gratitude for help from the celestial ones. While they are formally pieces of jewelry, they are also separated from their role as items of adornment and as such are no longer “real” jewels (Katona 2005:36). The meaning of the jewels might differ from region to region and across historical periods. Their belief-background had faded by the twentieth century.

## **Is it Possible to Deduce the Distant Past from Folklore/ Ethnography?**

The process of cultural transmission and transformation has been argued to be fundamentally different in nonliterate and literate societies (Barth 1987). Without writing, this process cannot be controlled or guided as oral traditions can take dramatically different routes depending on the media and collective memory. Rowlands (1993:150), however, argues that: “Rather than following a literate/nonliterate distinction, it seems more interesting to show how these different modes of cultural transmission fit with different forms of legitimation and political strategies and with different forms of religious life.” In terms of the preservation of old Hungarian folk traditions and customs in the Carpathian Basin, the Transylvanian region is considered to be the most tradition-bound. The reasons for this are embedded in the endeavor to retain their national identity (Hungarian speaking territories became a part of Romania after the First World War) and in their geographical and social isolation.

Investigating the folk heritage of this region, Vas (1994) argues that the analysis of signs and their system in folk art can help us to understand the intellectual and artistic wealth of ancient people. The evaluation of the most ancient root symbols on the characteristic region-bound embroidery of “writing” named by its special technique and on the carvings with an almost completely identical range of motifs can convince many who are skeptical about the continuation of ancient pagan elements. The star motifs unintentionally became transformed into flowers as the pointed arms grew “tame” arcs in this specific stitchwork. The engraving technique supports the pointed ends; the similarity in the structure of the motifs can, however, clearly be recognized. The forceful propagation of Christianity yielded the withdrawal of pagan symbols among the richer and richer floral designs of later times. Creating the motifs, the women refreshed their knowledge by studying the designs of the stonework of churches, the panels of ceilings, the grave markers, the gates and the houses (Vas 1994:116–131). Hoppál (1978) argues that this folk adornment should be taken as the words of a visual sentence. The meaningful message can be regarded as a “graphical sentence” composed of visual marks. Even if Hoppál’s model does

not have universal validity, some cases of these “graphical sentences” should survive to the present day, and the consistent application of certain motif elements is suggestive of hidden symbolism. In this context, it is notable that the most frequently used motif favored in the regional “writing” style of embroidery is the winged sun. It is noticeable that it exists only in the folk art of the Transylvanian region. Elsewhere, there is hardly any sun-moon ensemble, motifs of horns, or the Venus sign, even in the folk art to the north and northwest beyond the Carpathian Basin (Valkay 1976; Vas 1994). As the traditions in the Carpathian Basin kept signs which share common structural features with ancient or even prehistoric European art, it is not surprising that the geometric, abstract ornaments of folk art were assumed by several anthropologists to originate in the Neolithic period with the Hungarians taking them over after the conquest (Valkay 1976; Vas 1994; Viski 1941–43, *Díszítőművészet* entry).

The academic attitude towards the archetypes of folk art motifs is still not explicit. Critical opinions have been expressed against continuity. Verebély, for example, argues that the elementary tools of artistic creation involve basic elements which cannot be regarded as specific to any particular era, ethnicity or culture. This is especially true for the works of folk art of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the forms and motifs were European public property. In the search for the origin of the symbols of folk art, their historical contexts are handled arbitrarily and the disciplines are confused (Verebély 2002:46). Vargyas, however, takes an opposing view. He states that questioning the archaic elements in folk traditions is to deny the legitimate existence of comparative ethnology as a discipline. As folklore deals with the present (the last 150 years or so), comparative methods can take us back “step-by-step” into ancient times as they can signal connections between cultures, provided that there are clear connections (and a lack of other connections or influences) and the possibility of genetic connection. Although in the Carpathian Basin we have no written accounts to support such a clear, continuous inherited tradition—such as Marcus and Flannery (1994) could present for the Zapotec people—there could still have been some degree of continuity or rather continuous renewal/recurring of intercultural relations and periodic southern immigrations to the Carpathian Basin during prehistory.

Thus, the intellectual culture of ancient people can increasingly take shape from the results of complex comparative research, each strengthening the other (Vargyas 1991:27–31). For example, the continuous existence of animal sacrifice in Eurasia demonstrates that certain cultural, ritual and folklore elements can survive in ritual practice and sacral narrative heritage for several centuries, or even thousands of years (Hoppál 2011:9–11, 48). There are rich opportunities for cooperation between archaeology and folklore. As Layton (1999:31) has argued:

...the mediating processes of folkloric representation determine which events are remembered or reconstructed, and how, which objects are considered significant and why. Anthropological techniques can be applied both to elucidating and translating folkloric conceptions, and to rendering a more reflexive outlook upon the alternative, academic vision.

**Table 9.1** Sites of Group 1

Site		Period	Reference
(Szeged)-Baks Levelény	Hoard	1600–1500 century BC B IIIb	Trogmayer (1966–1967:1, 2. kép. 7)
Dunaújváros-Kosziderpadlás	Hoard No I	1600–1500 century BC Vatya culture	Mozsolics (1967: Taf. 46.5–6)
Vörösmart (Baranya m)	Hoard	1800–1600 century BC	Mozsolics (1967:177. Taf. 29.1–2
Zmajevac (Yu)		Incrusted Ware culture (IWC)	Schumacher-Matthäus (1985: Tafel 42. 1)
Abda-Tamásgyöp (Győr-Sopron m)	Hoard	1800–1600 century BC IWC	Mozsolics (1967:127, taf. 29. 24–26
Szigliget	Hoard	1800–1600 century BC IWC	Honti and Kiss (2000: táblázat)
Esztergom-Ispitahegy	Hoard	1800–1600 century BC IWC	Mozsolics (1967: Taf. 28. 33)
Ócsa	Hoard	1600–1500 century BC Vatya culture	Topál (1973:3–18)

Circular bronze pendant with single or double concentric rim. Its surface is divided into four by a cross-rib with a dot in each quadrant

**Table 9.2** Sites of Group 2

Balatonboglár-Szölőkislak	Hoard	1800–1600 century BC IWC	Honti and Kiss (2000 Abb.1-1-2)
Bonyhad	Hoard	1800–1600 century BC IWC	Honti and Kiss (2000. Abb. 3. 4)

Circular bronze pendant with single or double concentric rim and eight concentrically arranged dots inside the circle

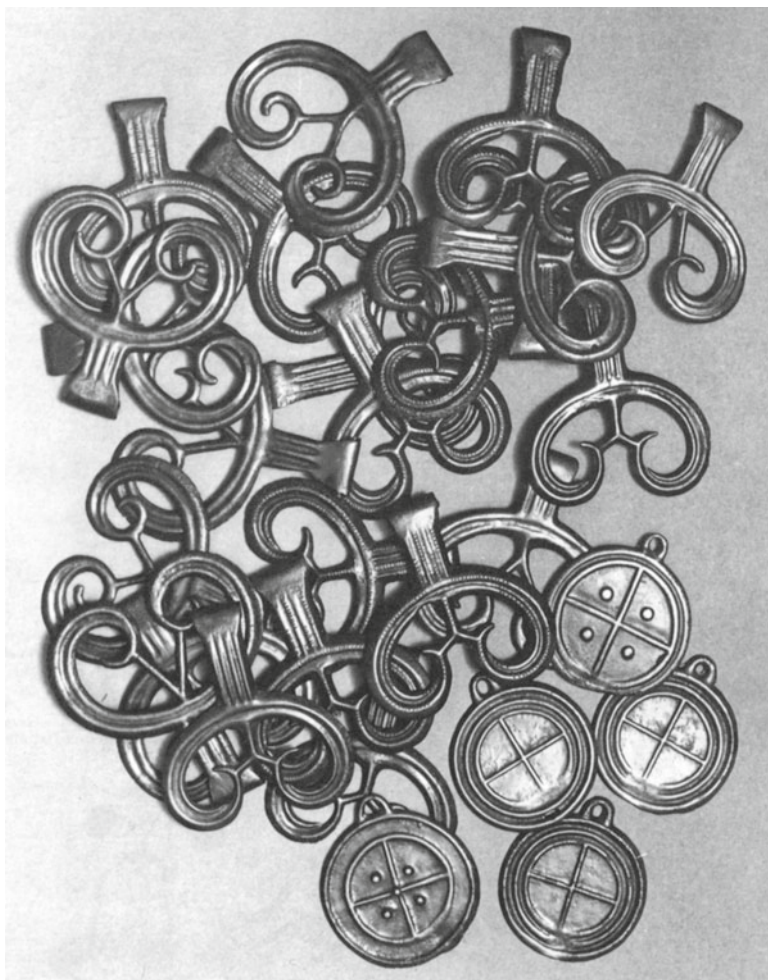
Archaeological Symbols: The Carpathian “Celestial” Pendants

The Bronze Age bronze pendants from the Carpathian Basin, which form the case study presented here, can be categorized into two distinct groups, referred to here as Group 1 and Group 2.

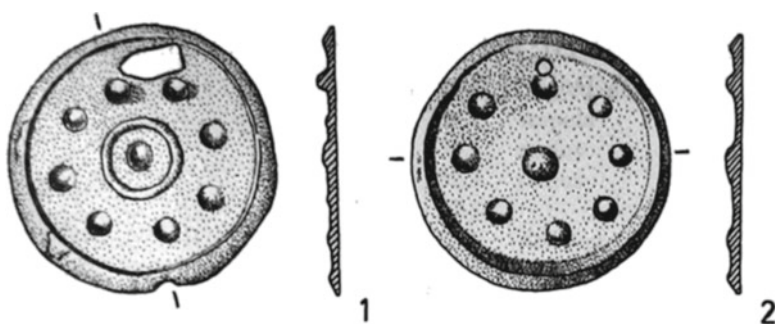
Group 1: Circular bronze pendant with single or double concentric rim. Its surface is divided into four by a cross-rib with a dot in each quadrant (Table 9.1).

Group 2. Circular bronze pendant with single or double concentric rim and eight concentrically arranged dots inside the circle (Table 9.2).

The Savaria Museum at Szombathely, Hungary, also exhibits a unique, round bronze artifact with eight circularly arranged bosses on its surface. It is argued to belong to one of the Bronze Age hoards from the Velemszentvid site (Miske 1908:xxxvi, Table 62) (Figs. 9.1–9.3).



**Fig. 9.1** Dunaújváros-Kosziderpadlás, hoard No I. (After Exhibition Catalogue 'Dombokká vált évszázadok' 1991:11)



**Fig. 9.2** Pendants, hoard of Balatonboglár-Szölőkislak, Hungary (after Honti and Kiss 2000, Abb. 1. 1–2)



**Fig. 9.3** Pendant, hoard of Bonyhád, Hungary (after Honti and Kiss 2000, Abb. 3.4)



## Analogies

The closest analogy for the Bronze Age pendants of the Carpathian Basin sites can be found among the somewhat later grave finds that accompanied the deceased of high rank to the afterlife in the cemetery of Minet el-Beida, Syria (Caubet 2000:218; Caquot and Szzymer 1980:pl. XVII.a). Minet el-Beida was an important international trade centre in the 15th–12th century BC. This busy port of the Ugaritic kingdom had strong connections with Egypt, Hittite Anatolia, the empires along the Euphrates River, Cyprus and other Aegean seaports (Reeder and Heim 1985:140–147). Ugaritic nobles took carnelian bead necklaces adorned with gold or silver pendants with them into the afterlife. These pendants have the form of a disc and of a triangular sheet. The golden discs are closely similar to the Carpathian Basin bronze pendants of Group 1 that also have a pronounced centre with only minor differences. The designs on the Ugarit golden discs have the concentric circle made from dots. The pendants in the shape of a triangle (or idol-like in other cases) represent a goddess who sometimes appeared in nude human form depicted with the heavy headdress of the Egyptian goddess Hathor, with curls winding round the neck. Other pieces show just her face, breasts, and a triangle representing her pudendum, with the rest of the body not shown at all (Caubet 2000:217–218; Caquot and Szzymer 1980:pls XVII.b, XIX.a).

Besides Ugarit (present-day Ras Shamra), these characteristic longish repoussé golden or silver pendants are also known from Tell el-'Ajjul, Megiddo (Platt 1976:Figs. 3–4), and from the Ulu Burun shipwreck (Bass et al. 1989:Fig. 3). The idol might represent one or several significant Ugarit goddesses: Anat, Baal's sister of temperament; Asherat, El's wife; or Astarte (Ishtar), the goddess of sexual love and war. Thus these golden disc pendants might symbolize the astral sign of the love goddess, the bright morning-evening star, the planet Venus (Caubet 2000; Reeder and Heim 1985:140–147).

This astral(?) motif can also be found on other jewels of earlier date. One of the most beautiful pieces also comes from a burial context. The row of small dots depicts the motif on the golden pendant from the Kinneret grave assemblage. The tomb can be dated to 2650–2600 BC which is the early Bronze Age of Ancient Israel. The gold is considered not to be of local origin, but an import from the more northern territories to the Canaan Beth-Yerah area. Its technique and design have analogies in contemporary Anatolia. Applying a range of motifs, the Canaanite craftsmen

created pendants and headbands for women. These were made from sheet gold decorated with repoussé work (Altman 1979:75). The double golden disc from the Alaca Hüyük or Alacahöyük (Turkey) royal tomb is also decorated with this symbol, although it is not a pendant but a fibula. The 13 royal tombs discovered in Alacahöyük contained rich finds which accompanied the contracted skeletons oriented North–South (2350–2150 BC Early Bronze Age II). The Kinneret disc might have been made in the same workshop circle as these other pendants (Amiran 1983:47–5 with pl.10).

The Carpathian Basin pendants are, however, not repoussé work but molded imitations of the granulation technique. This technique has a long history in the Near East. Granulation was applied by Western Asian goldsmiths in Ur from the third millennium, and was possibly invented by the Sumerians. The technique rapidly spread, becoming popular in Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Elam (Barnett 1980:170). Elaborate jewels dating to 2500 BC prove the early use of the granulation technique and style, while the Anatolian and Mesopotamian production culminated in the eighteenth–seventeenth centuries (Lilyquist 1993:51; Fig. 9.3). The goldsmith's work was widespread in Canaan from the second period of the Middle Bronze Age (1800–1500 BC) to the Late Bronze Age (1500–1200 BC). Thus the merchants from the Carpathian Basin, using different routes to either Anatolia or Near East, must have encountered jewels decorated with this technique in early times.

## Symbol of Venus or the Sun?

The motif of the four-arm-star with a crescent occurs occasionally on Near Eastern cylinder seals (Orthmann 1975:445, Fig. 141; Porada 1945:pl. XLV. 928, 996). A disc or an eight-arm-star in a crescent is much more significant. The arms of this star are, however, not equal; every second arm (generally to the sub-cardinal directions) is wavy (e.g., Bahadır 1968:84; Wainwright 1956). This symbol represents Šamaš, the Mesopotamian sun god, in an almost unaltered way from the Akkadian to the Neo-Babylonian period (2390–625 BC) (Black and Green 1992, *solar disc*; Bass et al. 1989; Alexander 1977).

The Sumerian gods and goddesses primarily stood for fertility and help with animal husbandry. The Akkadian divinities were mostly astral beings and represented the sun, the moon, and the stars. After the union the two pantheons merged and a standard iconography was developed, therefore the divinities became easy to recognize visually (Collon 1995). One of the most prominent examples where astral symbols are recognized is the necklace of the famous Dilbat golden hoard. This treasure hidden in a pot was discovered in the Dilbat tumulus, 30 km to the south from Babylon. It is argued that it was made in the Old Babylonian period, about the seventeenth century BC (Lilyquist 1994). The largest pendant is decorated with a 12-arm-star with a tiny ball between each arm. Every second arm is wavy, therefore it might be the symbol of Šamaš, the sun god, who was worshipped in Dilbat. The two smaller, but stylistically similar, pendants depict the eight-equal-arm star or

rosette, which was assumed to have a connection with Ištar. Terracotta figurines wearing such flowers around their neck and in their ears are assumed to represent a goddess in the Old Babylonian Period (Lilyquist 1994:34). Golden pendants decorated with an eight-equal-arm star, with a tiny ball between each arm, are also known from several sites such as Dinkha Tepe (Rubinson 1991: Fig. 24c), Susa (Museum Louvre, Sb 2772, Sb 5770, 1500/1200 BC). Even the small balls or boss are encircled by dots in order to convey more the brightness of the celestial body, which is likely not to be the symbol of the sun as every second arm is not wavy as it should be. Similar golden pendants, although with six or seven arms, are known from Ras Shamra (Museum Louvre, Acquisition: Fouilles Cl. Schaeffer – G. Chenet 1936, 1400/1300 BC), Alalakh (Tell Atchana, 1300 BC), Marlik (late second and early first millennia, North-Iran); and with eight arms from Tell el Ajjul (South-Palestine, eighteenth–sixteenth century BC), (Maxwell-Hyslop 1980:pl. V; Negahban and Ezat 1965:Fig. 13; Altman 1979:76). The other pendants of the Dilbat necklace are the symbols of the other main gods of the town. The wavy fork representing lightning belongs to Adad, the storm god, while Šin, the moon god has the crescent (Lilyquist 1994:19–22). The treasure might come from a temple store which was buried at the fall of the Babylonian Empire (Lilyquist 1994:29).

The use of the eight-arm-star goes far back in history; its beginning cannot be determined but it was still used during the Neo-Babylonian Period (625–539 BC). In early times it might have stood only for a star but from the Old Babylonian era it is likely to have represented the planet Venus, the astral symbol of the goddess of war and love, Inanna/Ištar; however, this cannot be taken as an exclusive association. It was usually depicted within a circle from the Old Babylonian period (c. 1950–1651). On the cylinder seals of the Middle and Neo-Assyrian periods, the upper body of the goddess is placed above a crescent and enclosed with a star garland (Black and Green 1992, *star* entry). On a cylinder seal excavated in Nuzi (part of the Hurrian kingdom of Mitanni; present-day Yorghān Tepe, Iraq) and datable to the second half of the fifteenth century, the four-arm-star with dots design can be seen on a standard beside the characteristic nude figure of the fertility goddess (Porada 1944–45:pl. LIII. 736). The British Museum also exhibits a Mitannian hematite cylinder seal with strong Assyrian influence (ME 89556, c. 1350–1250 BC), which also depicts this symbol but with a crescent (?). It may also represent the evening-morning star.

The six-arm-star is also a frequent motif and contemporary with the eight-arm examples. There is, however, no scholarly agreement in its belonging to a divine being (Black and Green 1992, *star* entry). Winged six-arm-stars with a dot between each arm can also be seen on the cylinder seals found at Nuzi from the second half of the fifteenth century BC (Porada 1944–45: pl. LIV. 813), where it may represent the sun god. Barnett (1964:73–80), however, considers the four-arm-star as the symbol of the sun god, whilst he argues that the six-arm-star stands for the planet Venus. A jewel decorated with inlaid lapis lazuli and granulation was found in the Tomb of Lord of the Goats excavated in Ebla, under the western palace of the Middle Bronze Age town. It dates to c.1750 BC. Beside the well-known sun symbol (the so-called Cappadocian symbol) (Wainwright 1956; Alexander 1977:200–201), the treasure

contains a necklace with three identical pendants which depict the significant Old Assyrian six-arm-star sign with a dot between each arm. An almost identical pendant is known from a geographically nearer area, Lefkandi (Euboia, Greece) dated to the first millennium BC (Lilyquist 1994:25, Figs. 30 and 32). The Lefkandi excavators consider their gold pendant to be very close to the Dilbat and other examples, and think it is an heirloom from that period, but is deposited in the tenth century burial within the Toumba building, so technically not from a cemetery exactly (Lemos 2002:131–132). The argument that the six-arm-star with dots represents a Venus symbol might be supported by another prominent artifact, a golden necklace with seven celestial sign pendants found at Amlash, Iran and belonging to the eastern-Caucasian Talish-Lenkoran culture of tenth century BC (Culican 1964:pls VIIIb, IX). The largest pendant clearly represents the sun god with its rays and dots symbolizing its bright light. The 2–2 symmetrically arranged pendants depicting six-arm-stars with dots might belong to the shining evening-morning star, while the one–one simple, flat disc might stand for the full moon. Thus comes together the well-known Near Eastern astral triad.

A winged goddess from the ninth–eighth century BC elaborately worked on an electrum sheet, bought by the Israel Museum, wears a cloak whose most eye-catching patterns are four- and six-arm-stars. The gesture of opening the cloak is ancient, but the astral decoration is new, thus the wearer is shifted from the fertility goddess to cosmic level. Comparison with neighboring cultures suggests that the goddess may be the Assyrian Ishtar or the Canaanite “Queen of Heaven” (in whose honor the women of Jerusalem baked cakes and burnt incense in the streets according to Jeremiah 7,18; 44,17), or she could play a similar role to the Phoenician Astar/Astarte (Barnett 1980:pl. VIII, 175). Therefore any or both of the astral symbols might have represented the love goddess.

## The Goddess of Sexual Love and War

The most respected and favored divine being of ancient Mesopotamia was Inanna in Sumerian and named Ištar by the Akkadians. Inanna first appears at the end of the fourth millennium BC as the patron goddess of Uruk and the goddess of the central stores of the town. The earliest elements of the name contain the words *morning* and *evening*, thus Inanna seems to have been identified with the planet Venus that shines as a bright star in the sky at dawn and dusk. The Akkadian name, Lady of Heaven (*šarrat šame*), may also refer to this. Her role was contradictory as she was worshipped both as a shy girl for the goddess of love and as a divine prostitute. At the same time, her task was to be the protector of fighting and war. Her role and sphere of activity had several alterations over time and space and local influences were also added. Therefore, her complex character cannot be described by such simple determination as “fertility” or “mother goddess.” She is a liminal goddess who symbolized the perpetual marriageable maiden ripe for sexual love. Her dual contradictory nature, and perhaps also her ambivalent sexual identity, may be interpreted by the

celestial behavior of the planet Venus (Westenholz 1998:72–74) as by its original designation Ištar meant the planet Venus who as morning star was a male god, and as evening star was a female one (Bienkowski and Millard 2000, *Ištar* entry). Inanna and Ištar had partly merged by the middle of the third millennium. The Akkadian pantheon was also strongly influenced from ancient Syria between 2250 and 2150 BC, therefore the divinities personifying natural phenomena, such as Adad, the god of storms, also became members of the pantheon.

Ištar and the Syrian Astarte had similar roles and their significant divine symbol is a star or star disc, sometimes perhaps a rosette (Bienkowski and Millard 2000, *Ištar*; Black and Green 1992, *Inanna* entries). The astral power of Astarte raised her to be the important goddess of navigation to the West of Mesopotamia (Stager 2005:439). From the second millennium BC on, the male deities' role strengthened to the disadvantage of the female ones. The word “ištar” meant simply a goddess and the sign on a standard which was carried in front of the leader of the army. In North Mesopotamia, on the Assyrian land, the only independent town goddess was Ištar, the protector of Nineveh. The archaeological finds attest that the city deities' most important activities were to protect the town and ensure the fertility of the land. Fecundity, sexuality and protection were essential features of all divinities irrespective of their sex in the Near East (Westenholz 1998:77).

The planet Venus as the astral personification of Inanna/Ištar/Astarte had a significant role in Mesopotamian astrology. This might be due to the fact that the planet is the brightest and fastest celestial body in the sky at dawn and dusk. It seems that Venus omens constitute the largest part of the existing Mesopotamian planet omen lists. The *Enuma Anu Enlil*, the well-known series of close to 70 cuneiform tables, is argued to have been compiled in canonical form during the Kassite Period (1651–1157). Some form of its prototype, however, seems to go back to the Old Babylonian Period (1950–1651). Its continuous use and significance is well-attested by the last known copy made in 194 BC (Reiner and Pingree 1975). Venus omens were primarily connected to agricultural vitality and to animal procreative capacity, especially cattle (and sometimes human). Thus the occasional weakening or scintillation of the light of the evening star signaled the decreasing crop or forecast famine (Taylor 2006:44–49).

## The Role of the Symbols

There is no doubt that it must have been a particularly important person who wore these precious necklaces from sites such as Ugarit, Dilbat, Ebla, and Susa. Old Babylonian temple texts (such as *Ishchali*) write about jewels which were transported monthly to the temples, probably as a present for the goddess. The jewels seem to be naturally decorated with the goddess's symbols. Neo-Babylonian texts from the first millennium BC talk about goldsmiths whose primary task was to maintain the golden objects which were meant to adorn divinities (Lilyquist 1994:5–36).

No remains of shrines or temples have yet been unearthed in the Carpathian Basin and the archaeological material reveals no evidence for anthropomorphic divinities in the belief system. The jewels are likely to have a connection with females of high rank. Although the pendants of the Carpathian Basin have their closest analogies from the Ugarit cemetery, they come exclusively from hoards, consisting mainly of women's jewelry. The disc pendants with such symbols are characteristic of the Carpathian Basin; thus they are locally made. These hoards generally consist of the same or similar type of items, therefore they might have served the same purpose and been hidden underground for the same reasons. They come from locations close to settlement centers, but uninhabited, natural places such as river banks, marshes or hill-tops. The treasures generally contain a high number of items and so may represent the personal possessions of a number of women. Their chronological data do not signify a short period at the end of the culture, thus the reason for hiding them may not have been for safety but as part of a rite such as an initiation or a marriage ceremony (Kiss 2009). The earlier type of disc pendants (holed) belongs exclusively to the Incrusted Ware culture of the early Middle Bronze Age, while the later type with a loop belongs to the late Middle Bronze Age. The symbol under investigation is never alone in the hoards; it is regularly associated with the cross-circle sign pendant. If they really represented the most prominent goddess of the Near East, involved in royal rituals including the "sacred marriage" (Westenholz 1998:73) or New Year ceremonies, the jewels might have played an important role in these communal ceremonies related to femininity and fertility during which girls became "officially" ripe for sexual love, marriage, and reproduction. After that, the ceremonial jewels might have been offered to the celestial ones including Venus/Ishtar.

The Ugaritic cuneiform archive, nearly contemporary with the necklaces, testifies to this use of divine symbols. A tablet, dated to the fourteenth century BC, refers to the order of a New Year festival, the Canaanite spring First Crop/Grain Festival (first fruits or *primitiae* offerings), in which Asherat and the virgin Anat, the two fertility goddesses, had significant roles (Gaster 1946:49–50). During the ritual dramatic play, the divine symbols were held on a standard or the actors wore them in the ritual pantomime (Gaster 1946:75).

The amuletic character of the pendants is also supported by later material. Southern Levantine sources 1200–586 BC tell how vulnerable the deceased were as well as the living. Therefore, they evoked protective forces in the form of amulets (where the color, raw material, and design had particular significance), such as the Egyptian scarab or Horus eye (Bloch-Smith 1992:218). The amulet, worn or placed where its influence should be exerted, serves as protection from evil and/or brings good luck. They were often put in Sumerian and Akkadian graves (Black and Green 1992, *amulets* entry). Thus the aim of the Ugarit necklaces discovered in the cemetery might have been the same. The Neo-Assyrian kings wore divine symbols in the form of necklaces. Assurnasirpal II, the Assyrian king (883–859 BC), not only wears them but points at the divine symbols—Sîn (moon god), Šamaš (sun god), Aššur or Adad (?) (weather/storm god), and Ištar (the evening star)—on the stone relief of the Northwest Palace, Kalhu (Nimrud) (British Museum, B hall, panel 23,



ANE 124531). The abstract signs on the Bronze Age pendants investigated here show close relations to the Near Eastern protective beliefs and refer to celestial spheres on the basis of an analogical argument.

The eight-arm-star with a prominent dot between each arm became the generally used emblem of the evening star identified with Ištar/Astarte. Great numbers of pendants are known with this symbol from the Near East. The Carpathian Basin pendants belonging to Group 2 with centrally arranged eight dots are argued to be the simplified bronze cast of it.

The abstract motif of the pendants belonging to Group 1 can be interpreted as the astral symbol of the goddess Ishtar, together with the planet Venus as her celestial representation. There is, however, no clear scholarly agreement on this issue. The four- and six-arm-stars are also on the list of the possible sun symbols. Whether sun or Venus signs, they attest the existence of important cultural interaction between the Carpathian Basin and the Near East.

Trade relations between the Baltic region and ancient Syria are attested by the prestige objects made from Baltic amber and unearthed in the Syrian royal tombs dated to 1340 BC (Mukherjee et al. 2008). The raw material which was used by the local craftsmen to create luxury items might have been transported on the route later known as the “Amber Route,” crossing the Aegean Sea and reaching the Near East through the port of Ugarit. On the basis of language, history and technical heritage Ugarit belongs to the Near East, but through its geographical location it has connections also with the East Mediterranean, although its written sources mention only Cyprus as a trading partner. The presence of Mycenaean ceramics in large quantities indicates trading links also with Mycenaean Greece. Of all Levantine sites the greatest quantity of imported ceramics were found in Ugarit, from the thirteenth century BC, signaling intense trade cooperation (Yon 2000:192–193). These wider trade contacts offer a context for understanding and interpreting the strong similarities between the pendants of the Ugarit necklaces and the pendants of the Carpathian Basin Group 1. The amber of the Southeast Baltic crossed the Carpathian Basin on its way to the South, following the well-known Amber Route which might also have been used already in the earlier Neolithic periods (Bánffy 1999). This route crossed Transdanubia (the western part of the Carpathian Basin) and led along the territory of the Incrusted Ware culture (Mukherjee et al. 2008: Fig. 1), and this might be the reason why the most pendants come from this area. As these pendants were produced in the Carpathian Basin, the reason for their use might have been also similar to the Canaanite artifacts. As astral signs they symbolized the transcendental/spiritual beings that as celestial bodies (Evening Star, Sun, Moon, etc.) shone in the sky and they might also have served as amulets.

Why then were only the pendants with abstract symbols taken over by the Carpathian Basin people, but not the plaque with the goddess? The transcendental powers might not have been personified in human form in the Bronze Age yet, as is also evidenced by the general lack of anthropomorphic depictions. As the eye-catching celestial phenomena and bodies were likely to have played an important role in the local belief system, it was therefore natural for them to take over the

**Table 9.3** Settlement sites where big earthenware bowls containing grains, with “Venus” design employed in a specific, plastic form on the interior base, were found

Site		2500–1900 bc		Reference
Diósd-Szidónia hegy	Settlement	Nagyrév culture EBA	Interior pot base, 2 crossing ribs, 4 quarters with a knob in each	Schreiber (1981:15, kép 12b)
Budafok	Settlement	Nagyrév Culture EBA	<i>Idem</i>	Schreiber (1963:10/5 kép 12/1-2)
Tabán	Settlement	Nagyrév culture EBA	<i>Idem</i>	Schreiber (1963, 10/5 kép 12/1-2)
Tószeg	Settlement	Nagyrév culture EBA	<i>Idem</i>	Banner et al. (1957):Abb. 9.9.
Gerjen	Settlement	Vatya culture	<i>Idem</i>	Wosinszky (1904: 415, 104.t.18)
Ószentiván	Settlement	Maros (Perjámos) culture	Vessel with narrow neck, inner bottom, 2 crossing ribs, 4 quarters with a knob in each	Banner (1928: Pictures 50.55)

symbol of the evening star (and/or the sun) which embodied/represented a celestial spirit/divinity and they might have employed it for the same, or a similar purpose.

The symbol itself with its general meaning was not a complete stranger to the people living here. This might also be the explanation for the time gap between the pendants of the Carpathian Basin and Ugarit. This assumption is supported by the few earlier depictions of the symbol which are primarily on the artifacts of archaeological cultures of southern origin, such as the inner decoration of a bowl unearthed at the site of Hódmezővásárhely-Gorzsa, a settlement of the Gorzsa-group of the Neolithic Tisza culture (Horváth 2005:277, 120). This design is employed in a specific, plastic form on the interior base of a big earthenware bowl containing grains, further testimony to the celestial protective power of the symbol. They might have been meant to keep mischievous forces away from the crops, as in Uruk this was Inanna’s responsibility in her role as the numen of the central storehouse during the late fourth millennium (Westenholz 1998:73) (Table 9.3).

The star Venus symbols are definitely rare outside the Carpathian Basin and South East Europe. Three similar signs to these Venus pendants are known among the circular designs of Scandinavian rock engravings (Malmer 1981: Fig. 22. A0b, B11b). In Scandinavia they are, however, not the only signs of Mediterranean connections (Kristiansen and Larsson 2005). Bronze disc headed pins (or fibulas) from Schnidejoch and Bex, Switzerland depict the symbol of Group 1 with overemphasized bosses. These might, however, represent something different. This spread of the symbols is in good accord with the trade route from the East Mediterranean to the Baltic region.

## Conclusion

The symbols permeated the belief system of the people living in the Carpathian Basin so deeply that there is almost no period in history during which they were not in use. Karoly Sági's elegant analysis of a bottom stamp equivalent to the Venus symbol on a medieval unused pot gathers a great number of archaeological analogies from all periods of history (Sági 1967). This vessel from the twelfth–thirteenth century AD, excavated at a settlement site Keszthely-Dobogó, Hungary, was placed upside-down in a pit of 80 cm depth. Under it there was a water bird egg (*Platalea leucorodia*) with an iron nail. The find assemblage is argued to have been intended to act as fertility charm, which was not uncommon even at the end of the eighteenth century AD, with the bottom seal serving as protective magical power (Sági 1967:56). The symbol as outer bottom seal was already used on the white incrustated ware of the late Copper Age Vu edol culture (Dimitrijevi 1979:T.XXXII. 5).

The existence of symbols of Near Eastern origin in the Carpathian Basin can be established by archaeology and also ethnography. Their presence is the result not only of trade activities but, from time to time, also of people migrating from the south (Oross and Bánffy 2009; Zofmann 2004), taking with them their customs and beliefs. Beside the later Amber Route in the western part of the Carpathian Basin, the Danube Valley also offered an easier way for these symbols to travel up to the north from Asia Minor, passing or infiltrating also into Transylvania. The migrated symbols might have become refreshed during the Ottoman occupation of the Carpathian Basin and Southeast Europe. Thus the pagan symbols embedded in several branches of folk art have remained in use until the present day. This might help to explain both the early appearance and the reinforced continuation of the Near Eastern symbols in this particular part of Europe.

The survival and continuation of certain symbols are also attested by archaeological artifacts; however, it is principally the form and structure which can last a long time. Without textual evidence, the original, specific meaning of symbols cannot be fully understood, as during the passing of time the rules of their application and the meaning attached to them may change and transform, but their survival can be attributed to their positive, protective–defensive power. These “pagan” symbols embedded within decorative motifs have survived until modern times. Syncretism should, however, also be taken into account. Specific interpretations or meanings of symbols always involve strata of different ages, therefore the signs are often polysemous and may also differ from each other at a local level, even within a village. The symbol of Ishtar/Astarte/Venus as the symbol of the nubile young woman, ripe for love, the archetypical bride on the verge of marriage, epitomized love and sexual attraction (Westenholz 1998:69). At the same time it has guarding, protective powers as well. Thus it is understandable that these symbols continued to appear on embroidered textiles or carvings up to now. What the ethnographic comparative method can offer by presenting the possibility of “unlimited” local variations and levels of meaning cannot be disregarded. It is vitally important for prehistoric archaeology to apply complementary approaches, the most useful of which is ethnography. Without this “background” information, the archaeological material would be only dead matter of the past.

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**Part IV**  
**Embodied Spiritualities:**  
**The Case of the Minoans**

## Chapter 10

# “Nature”, the Minoans and Embodied Spiritualities

Lucy Goodison

**Abstract** Recent emphasis on the concept of the body has so far failed to impact radically on old archaeologies of spirituality. This chapter suggests that such new work will remain marginalized unless we problematize three central features of the Judaeo-Christian religious heritage: monotheism, anthropomorphism and transcendence. These concepts shaped traditional archaeological models of religion, and continue explicitly or implicitly to inform contemporary formulations of the divine. It can be argued that monotheism tends towards abstraction and notions of centralized authority; personification towards narratives of anthropomorphism; and transcendence towards a devaluation of the physical world. I will explore how those themes can develop, suggest that we may be unaware how much they have influenced archaeologists in their study of prehistoric religions, and trace how they seem to have been reflected specifically in the study of early Minoan religion.

This chapter suggests that narratives of embodiment can be accommodated only within a new theoretical framework not predicated on those concepts. With reference to the Early and Middle Bronze Age period in Crete, it cites material evidence suggesting rather an immanent spirituality in which the “sacred” is diffused multifocally through the natural world (including, with the deconstruction of the West’s “man/nature” dichotomy, the human body). As a framework allowing such material—and current ideas on embodiment—to breathe, a new model is proposed, predicated on the physical and locating religious experience at the conjunction of three factors: special topography (including landscape, plants, animal and human bodies); special time (including seasonal and diurnal foci for ritual action); and, at the juncture of the two, transactions which may range beyond supplication, worship and other conventional hierarchical formulations.

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## Monotheism, Personification and Transcendence

Monotheism, by stipulating one divine entity responsible for the known universe, calls for the formulation of a spiritual essence beyond the diverse manifestations of the physical world. The Old Testament chronicles the struggle of Jehovah to establish himself as the one true God, a campaign for a unitarian vision which continued in the Christian era from the persecution of pagans in late antiquity to the Inquisition of heretics. There can be an insistence on the superiority of the one true view, which spawns fundamentalist sects, and fosters proselytizing. Breasted famously commented (1938 [1926]:105) that “Monotheism is but imperialism in religion”. This path leads to an emphasis on authority. The attribution of creative initiative and management of the vast body of material activity that composes our planet—let alone the universe—to one being requires a supreme act of abstraction. It also postulates the focusing of phenomenal power into one central site—the godhead. There is an asymmetry between that immense entity and the small fry who approach it in prayer or supplication. There is an unequal, vertical relationship of submission and worship on one side, power and control on the other.

There is not space here to enter the debate as to how such structures of religious thought relate to their economic and social context. Non-believers, often following Karl Marx’s emphasis on the economic base as a determining factor shaping superstructures, suggest that a society creates its religion in its own image. Some, further, debate whether certain elements of the superstructure such as religion, once established, develop a status which is to some extent autonomous (see discussion in Williams 1980:19, 20, 34). Durkheim also suggested that a society’s religion mirrors its own structure. Believers, conversely, may suggest that the structure of society is determined by religious vision or (following Jung) that both religions and societies are shaped by metaphysically pre-existent archetypes in the ether (1956:391, 228, 313, 308, 309). Here my intention is only to highlight the creation of, and preoccupation with, unequal vertical relationships as a feature of the dominant cultures in the contemporary western world. It is a pattern of behaviour and thought to which we are so accustomed that we perhaps take it for granted and are not always aware of its historical specificity and its implications.

We are accustomed to such relationships in religion. We are also accustomed to them in political life, where—despite a dominant western rhetoric of democracy—the past century has seen a succession of “strong leaders” sustained by the West, from brutally repressive dictators to celebrity/charismatic leaders whose authoritarianism has been celebrated under cover of words like “decisiveness”, “vision”, and “not for turning”.

We have also become accustomed to a focus on such vertical relationships in many areas of social and intellectual life. Authority, and particularly its parental aspect, was a central focus in the early twentieth century development of the theory of psychoanalysis with its strong emphasis on the relationship between child and parent. Consistent with a pattern familiar in imperialistic thought, certain theories developing within a historically specific local context, such as the “Oedipus

complex", were universalized. The unequal vertical relationships with parents were seen as an overwhelmingly formative influence on a child's life. Healing the effects was tackled through the re-visiting and transforming of the child-parent situation in the unequal relationship between patient and psychoanalyst. Now a well-established therapeutic method, this enterprise however addresses only one part of the child's experience.

Thus, writers have recently started to highlight the relative neglect of sibling relationships in psychoanalytic thought and practice. Juliet Mitchell has challenged the thinking that centralizes relationships with parent figures: "... what about this lateral love for siblings? In my studies over the years the Oedipus complex ... has shifted to one side ... How your siblings view you and externalise their feelings is hugely important to the way you form your own self-image and identity... But there hasn't been any real effort to turn these observations into what analysts call a 'metapsychology'" (cited in Thompson 2007:19). A renewed awareness of humans as social beings needing horizontal relationships can balance the emphasis on drives and the parent-child dynamic.

Another feature of the Judaeo-Christian religion is the personification of God. In the Old Testament, he is a personal and sometimes jealous or angry figure, non-iconic but present enough to talk to; in Christian medieval and Renaissance art, an enthroned bearded patriarch; in the narratives embedded in Christian services, a member of a divine family including the mother Mary and son Jesus. Mary follows human gender stereotypes in her role as the sympathetic and approachable female member of the family. Divinity has been envisaged in many different forms in different cultures, and this anthropomorphizing of the divine has specific implications. The choice to recreate God in our own image could be seen as symptomatic of a blinkered anthropocentrism whereby "Man" is the gauge of all things, the "anthropocracy" in our thought challenged by Gísli Pálsson (in Bird-David 1999:S84). It could, further, be seen as reductionist in the imposition of a familiar mould on aspects of the world which are not understood, a simplistic casting of the unknown into the shape of the known. Anthropomorphizing is such a familiar pattern of perception that sometimes we may barely notice it. "This is an example of competitive advertising at its most intense" said a TV presenter surveying a field of blossoms: only a figure of speech, but by drawing processes of plant reproduction into the orbit of human commercialism under late capitalism, does it extend or reduce our understanding of what we are watching?

Transcendence is another element which can by default be assumed as a necessary feature of spiritual belief. Plato articulated the process of looking beyond things of the physical world to grasp their essence in another, non-material, world; implicit is the belief that the physical world is inferior to that other world. Christian theology, building on Neo-Platonism, celebrated the soul as distinct from its mortal habitation/prison, the body. While the body is imperfect, ridden with distasteful appetites and ungovernable passions, the soul can aspire to grace and eventual reunion with the divine. Victorian hymns encouraged the Christian faithful to appreciate "All things bright and beautiful/All creatures great and small" (Alexander 1965 [1931]) as examples of God's handiwork, but the world transcending those mortal delights

was always believed to be superior. Since late antiquity the task of Christian saints has been summarized as “the strangling of the body” (Dawes and Baynes 1948:x); and early edicts of the Church typically declaimed against the worship of “trees, springs and rocks” and the “iniquitous calendar customs” which provided the occasion for such practices.<sup>1</sup>

## The Construction of “Nature”

It becomes clear that these patterns of thought have implications for western culture’s perception of physicality and the natural world. The latter is largely constructed as a monolithic and essentialized “Nature”, another example of abstraction at work, and one which Raymond Williams has problematized:

The central point of the analysis can be expressed at once in the singular formation of the term [Nature]. ... The association and then the fusion of a name for the quality with a name for the things observed has a precise history. It is a central formation of idealistic thought. ... Now I would not want to deny ... that this singular abstraction was a major advance in consciousness. But I think we have got so used to it, in a nominal continuity over more than two millennia, that we may not always realize quite all that it commits us to. A singular name for a real multiplicity of things and living processes may be held, with an effort, to be neutral, but I am sure it is very often the case that it offers, from the beginning, a dominant kind of interpretation: idealistic, metaphysical or religious (1980:68–69).

Williams relates the sense of the growing separation of “Man” from “Nature” in western culture to humans’ domination and exploitation of natural resources through industrialization and urbanization, as well as to the growing complexity of our interactions with the natural world.

This polarization has also played a major role in the way knowledge is created within the domain of science, where the concept of a female Nature has been prevalent. Discussing the gendering of images used in scientific discourse, Mary Midgley has commented that:

The literature of early modern science is a mine of highly-coloured passages that describe Nature, by no means as a neutral object, but as a seductive but troublesome female, to be unrelentingly pursued, sought out, fought against, chased into her innermost sanctuaries, prevented from escaping, persistently courted, wooed, harried, vexed, tormented, unveiled, unrobed, and “put to the question” (i.e. interrogated under torture), forced to confess “all that lay in her most intimate recesses”, her “beautiful bosom” must be laid bare, she must be held down and finally “penetrated”, “pierced” and “vanquished” (words which constantly recur) (1992:77).

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<sup>1</sup>See *Fragmenta ex Conciliis Bracarenisibus, Collectio conciliorum Hispaniae*. My two examples, from the Portuguese town of Braga, date from 1603 and 598 AD respectively. Similar ecclesiastical directives were issued in the UK and elsewhere in Europe.

Thus the personification of Nature as female has had implications, and such language reveals the intrusion of gender attitudes into what has purported to be an "objective" process, with an attendant demeaning of the natural world. Although there is now more acknowledgement that in scientific enquiry the "observer" is also "participant", this is a troubling legacy. It speaks of a pairing of female "known" with male "knower", and a lack, in the latter, of reflexivity. Self-awareness, responsiveness and the sense of co-operation are lacking in a construction of self vested in "knowing" through separation from, and superiority to, the "known". Such patterns, entrenched within the intellectual traditions of the West, have contributed to the development of archaeological models that may be ripe for interrogation.

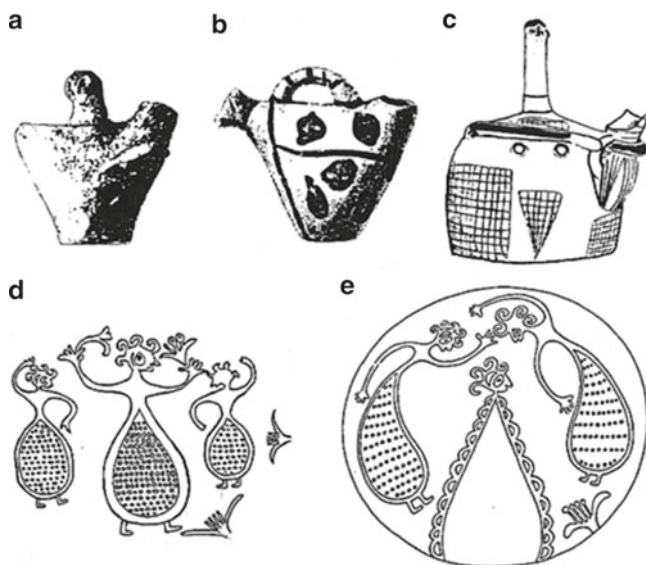
## Minoan Religion: The Deity Dilemma

To explore the implications of these patterns of thought in archaeology I turn to the prehistoric Aegean—specifically Minoan Crete in the Bronze Age, which ran very approximately between 3000 and 1200 BC. I shall not discuss here the Late Bronze Age, or "Late Minoan" (LM) period, the heyday of palaces such as Knossos and Phaistos. From that period there are representations of anthropomorphic figures variously seated in pride of place, being saluted, or miniaturized and flying, which suggest vertical relationships and have been interpreted by some as divinities. Moreover, from the end of that period, inscriptions in Linear B script tell us that there were a number of named male and female deities: so we find personification, but no monotheism. I shall not enter the debate about how and when in the Late Bronze Age these deities emerged. I shall discuss an earlier period more or less chronologically defined by the Early and Middle Bronze Age periods—termed "Early Minoan" (EM) and "Middle Minoan" (MM), a period before the Cretan palaces reached their prime and came under the influence of the mainland Mycenaeans. This earlier period has presented a dilemma to archaeologists who are oriented towards identifying deities. Some scholars have nonetheless variously identified monotheism, personification and transcendence in religion. I shall review their claims.

Attempts to identify deities in this period have been multiple. From the previous, Neolithic, period there are a number of female figurines found in Crete, as elsewhere in the Aegean. Some of them are steatopygous. These were at one time taken to represent an original Mother Goddess at the infancy of Aegean—even western—civilization, and this interpretation was supported by the pioneer archaeologist Sir Arthur Evans, who saw her life continuing into the Minoan era. Christine Morris (2006) has discussed how ideas current in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and specifically social ideologies of motherhood, served to encourage this view in Evans and others of his generation.

From 1968 onwards this view became discredited after an influential monograph by Peter Ucko drew attention to the few male and many animal figurines found in the same contexts as the female figurines. If the females were deities, why not the





**Fig. 10.1** (a) Anthropomorphic vessel from Koumasa tombs. EMIII. H:11 cm (In Heraklion Museum (HM) No.4993, Drawing by L. Goodison after Xanthoudides 1924, pl.19:4993). (b) Zoomorphic vessel from Koumasa tombs. EMIII. H:13 cm (In HM No.4141, Drawing by L. Goodison after Xanthoudides 1924, pl.2:4141). (c) Anthropomorphic vessel from settlement of Fournou Korifi. EMIIIB. H:21 cm (In Aghios Nikolaos Museum, Drawing by L. Goodison after Davaras n.d., pl.13). (d) Scene of dancing with plants on an offerings-table from Phaistos, as reconstructed. MMIB-II (In HM No.10576, Drawing by L. Goodison after a photograph by Louise London). (e) Scene of dancing near a plant on a plate from Phaistos. MMIB-II (In HM No.10583, Reproduced from Branigan 1970, fig. 29)

animals too? (1968:418). Most scholars accepted the deflation of what, with hindsight, could be seen as a Victorian anthropomorphic monotheistic construction.

In the early 1970s, however, archaeological thought turned towards identifying goddesses in the subsequent Early Minoan period. This time it was based upon a series of pottery vessels resembling the human body, mostly EM in date and deriving from funerary contexts or “special” domestic contexts. These were identified by some scholars as “goddesses” or “vessel-goddesses” and proposed as *the* divinity honoured by communities using Mesara-type circular tombs in south-central Crete. This interpretation too has since been challenged. I have pointed out (2009:235–236 and refs) that not only are some of these vessels unsexed or possibly male, but also there exist—again—very similar items from similar contexts made in the shape of animals (compare Fig. 10.1(a) and (b)). The question posed by Ucko recurs: why privilege the anthropomorphic examples as representing a divinity and the animal figurines not? Foundering alongside the personified deity is the attempt to establish any kind of generalization about the domain of such a deity: such vessels were found at only 2 out of 78 circular Mesara-type tombs and as such could not reflect an over-arching divinity for these communities. One of the finest examples of the

“vessel-goddesses” (Fig. 10.1c), from the EM settlement site of Fournou Korifi, has recently been re-interpreted by Cadogan as not a deity but as a guardian of the water supply of possible talismanic power and “special bestowed value as part of the household and small community” (2010:45 and refs). Driessen has further suggested that she may be an item of funerary paraphernalia retrieved and re-introduced into the settlement to stress the connection between living and dead members of the group (2010:114–115).

Another attempt to identify an anthropomorphic deity, this time during the Middle Minoan period, has been based on items from the MM “protopalace” at Phaistos: designs on a stand and on a dish show similar scenes of dancing in an outdoor setting (Fig. 10.1d, e). The nature of the objects, their find spot and details of the designs including gesture and costume suggest that the scenes represent ritual activity. However, some scholars’ identification of the central figure as a snake goddess is not supported by the designs. Although she is larger and looks more important (a priestess?), we see no gestures of worship, no altar and no other clear mark of divinity. Further, these two designs alone—from one site—would in any case be insufficient evidence to propose a generalized snake goddess for the whole region in this period (Branigan 1998:22–23; Goodison and Morris 1998:120–123 and refs.).

Thus, despite such claims, secure evidence for a goddess in this period has proved lacking. Evidence for a mother goddess is even less convincing: in this period it is hard confidently to identify any secular or religious representation of a pregnant female figure or a female with a child. The first such representations appear in Crete in the Late Bronze Age, and they are not numerous: the parent/child relationship never features prominently in the iconography of prehistoric Crete.

## Why the Old Models Won’t Work

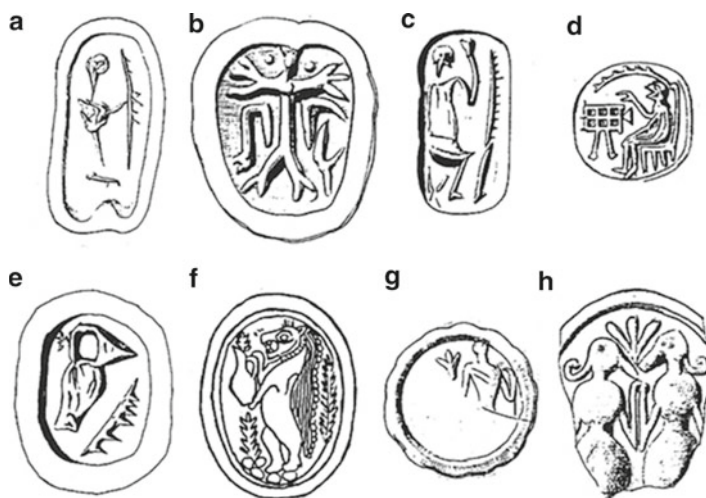
Acknowledging that material from this period gives us only questionable information about deities opens the way to asking what it can tell us about. What are prominent throughout the Bronze Age are representations of plants, animals and other elements of the natural world. However, when archaeologists have focused on the significance of such elements in Minoan religious scenes, their response has often been phrased in terms of vertical relationships as applicable to deities. In relation to trees and special stones or *baetyls*, the question is asked: “Are these the objects of cult?” “Were they worshipped?” “Did the Minoans worship nature spirits?” If not, then it is often assumed that these elements are merely background/setting for religious activity (e.g. Marinatos 1989:142). The implication is that humans’ relationship with them could only be worship or something relatively insignificant, as if these were the only two roles possible within religion. The issue of worship is posed with reference to past theories of “primitive Nature worship” or “Pantheism”, which fit monotheistic templates; or scholars have postulated an over-arching “animism” which is conceived in terms of worship of “spirits” of nature, which again introduces the principle of abstraction/transcendence. The presence of animals in what

appear to be ritual scenes is often explained in terms of propitiation/sacrifice to an invisible power. It has also been suggested that a tree represents “the Goddess”, or that “the deity” takes the form of an animal to approach humans (e.g. Schachermeyr 1964:153). Thus physical elements are not considered an appropriate part of ritual activity except in relation to something “beyond”. Again, thought patterns of abstraction, personification and transcendence have determined what forms are considered possible for humans’ interaction with the natural world in a ritual context.

The material record from these early phases of Bronze Age Crete suggests different narratives. Studying, in these periods, a culture without translated language, we rely on visual material: here I focus on the engraved sealstones which were in widespread use for practical and, it is thought, amuletic purposes. Creations of skill, the stones were apparently held close to the person and used for sealing with a distinctive mark. Apart from direct physical contact with the stone surface—hanging against the skin or held in the hand—the designs too were encrypted mnemonics for physical sensations and memories: the minute 2D motifs serving as a key, prompt or code for 3D embodied experiences in ordinary and non-ordinary life, evoking for the user sounds heard, smells inhaled, textures touched, movements made. Recent work on muscle responses to visual stimuli (e.g. Pruszyński *et al.* 2010) suggests that we cannot assume the users’ visual reaction to the scenes was disconnected from a whole-body response. Any language can be comprehended “as though from the inside as an organic entity” (Forbes 2007:46): allowing in ourselves such corporeal responses, rather than the disembodied Gaze, may—despite our different cultural baggage—bring us closer to Minoan practice. Each seal belongs in the context of the repertoire, and the collected images from any one area/era contribute—like different textual versions of a myth—to form a broader and multi-faceted picture of the shared/diverse ideas and interests of their time. Rather than an objective record of things the Minoans did, the seals show themes important to them, whether enacted, felt or imagined; by responding to the physicality of the scenes we start to attune to their world.

These seals show numerous scenes of humans involved in what appears to be ritual activity: indicators of this can include the presence of imaginary creatures, specific and repeated gestures, nakedness, animal or bird costume, non-literal juxtapositions and extreme physical behaviour. Animals and plants are often involved. I will start with the plants (Figs. 10.1d, e and 10.2a–h). What skills base does a contemporary westerner possess to equip them for reading such scenes?

Sitting in the doctor’s waiting room, I picked up a county magazine *Dorset*, and turned to an article about gardens. I saw photographs of flowers, bushes and trees in beautiful gardens, but noticed that they were all empty of human beings. I moved on to a feature on “Coast Lines”; it showed beaches, flowers and sea plants; again none of the pictures showed a single person. On other pages I found the social diary, covering a Dorchester charity fashion show and a hospital departmental ball. These photos were full of people: two, three, up to nine in a frame, all crammed together. I was struck by the formal separation of plants and people. This prompted me to look into the western genre of flower painting: water colour and oil still life portraits of blossoms, vases and bouquets. First developed in the late sixteenth century, with



**Fig. 10.2** (a) A figure holds a branch. Design on steatite three-sided prism seal of unknown provenance. EMIII/MMIA (Reproduced from *Corpus der Minoischen und Mykenischen Siegel (CMS)* XII No.18). (b) Anthropomorphic figure with branch-like limbs. Design on steatite three-sided prism seal from (?)Kalo Chorio Pediadas. EMIII/MMIA (Reproduced from *CMS* II, 1 No.453). (c) Seated figure holding (?)cup, branch-like motif in front. Design on steatite three-sided prism seal of unknown provenance. MMIB-II (Reproduced from *CMS* II, 2 No.304). (d) Man seated on chair with (?)branch above. Design on steatite three-sided prism seal, probably from central Crete. EMIII/MMIA. *CMS* VI, 1 No.4 (Reproduced from Evans 1921, 124, fig. 93A, a2). (e) Vessel juxtaposed with branch. Design on steatite three-sided prism seal of unknown provenance. EMIII/MMIA (Reproduced from *CMS* VIII No.19). (f) Mythological “daimon” figure carries jug from which a frond grows out of stones. Design on a clay sealing from Phaistos. MMIB-IIA. *CMS* II,5 No.322 (Drawing by L. Goodison after Boardman 1970, text Fig. 50). (g) Figure (?)dancing, with plant motif in the fill. Design on clay sealing from Phaistos. MMIB-IIA (Reproduced from *CMS* II, 5 No.325). (h) Two female figures with facial protuberances like muzzles or beaks holding hands (dancing?) with plant motif above. Design on clay sealing from Phaistos. MMIB-IIA (Reproduced from *CMS* II, 5 No.323)

painters like Jan Breughel and Balthasar van der Ast amongst its founding figures and several renowned French Impressionists among its later practitioners, the genre, it seems, has never included humans.

In a culture where “tree-hugging” is a target for ridicule, it becomes apparent that there is little visual or linguistic vocabulary to articulate relationship between humans and plants. It is hardly surprising that scholars of our culture have been at a loss to interpret these prehistoric visual representations from Crete which recurrently show: trees at the centre of scenes; branches in non-ordinary juxtapositions; human figures touching, dancing with, and dancing around, plants (sometimes in costume—witness the strange heads in Fig. 10.2h); and mythological creatures tending plants. (Figs. 10.1d, e, 10.2a–h, and 10.3f.) Without a vocabulary to discuss relationship, archaeologists have often regarded plants in Minoan ritual scenes as unimportant decorative features or props. Only recently have we found a shift in understanding—as when Olga Kzryckowska comments that in some cases landscapes



**Fig. 10.3** (a) Goat and vessel juxtaposed. Design on three-sided seal from Crete (In HM No.2209, Drawing by L. Goodison). (b) Human figure with (?)animal head reaches arms out to (on right) a leaping dog and (on left) a horned animal. Design on ivory seal from necropolis of Sphoungaras. EMII-III (Reproduced from *CMS* II,1 No.469). (c) Goat on its side juxtaposed with human figure with beak and wing-like arms. Design on steatite three-sided prism seal from Crete, Mirabello Eparchy. EMIII/MMIA. *CMS* VI,1 No.60 (Drawing by Lucy Goodison after Kenna 1960, No. K6). (d) Leaping figure with tail. Design on three-sided prism seal of unknown provenance. MMIA (Drawing by L. Goodison after *CMS* VIII No.111). (e) Bird-woman figure. Design on steatite three-sided prism seal from Kato Zakro. MMIB-II (Reproduced from *CMS* II,2 No. 264). (f) Trees on rocks. Design on pale agate disc from central Crete. *CMS* VI, 1 No.157 (Drawing by L. Goodison after Boardman 1970, B&W pl.16). (g) Female figure wearing cap and full skirt with arms raised towards whirl-shaped object low in sky. Behind her Hieroglyphic signs in shape of animal skull and (?)ear of corn. Design on green jasper three-sided prism seal from Heraklion area of Crete. MM II. *CMS* VI,1 No.92 (Reproduced from Evans 1921, 277 fig. 207k). (h) Squatting figure with one arm raised and circular “whirl” with radiating lines above. Design on ivory seal from Tholos A at Aghia Triadha. EMII-MMIB/MMII (Reproduced from *CMS* II,1 No. 55). (i) Two dancing female figures in formal dress gesture towards radiant object (?)sun low in sky between them. Design on grey-green steatite prism “from Kastelli Pediadas”. *CMS* VI,1 No.34 (Drawing reproduced from Evans 1921, 124, fig. 93A, b1). (j) Seated figure with bowed head extends arm to touch head of horned animal. Design on seal from Crete. In HM No.2391 (Drawing, after photograph, both by L. Goodison). (k) Central line of spirals from which leaves grow. On right a half-seated human figure with rib bones showing; on left two lions, one attacking the other. Design on ivory cylinder from Mesara-type tombs at Marathokephalo. Probably EMII-MMIB (Reproduced from *CMS* II, 1 No.222).

elements “do not merely provide an appropriate setting for ritual action; they are integral to the action itself” (2010:179).

Again, the Minoan material record from this period offers many representations of animals, birds and other creatures in a ritual context. Animals—alive, dead and imaginary—are shown in non-ordinary juxtapositions and in interaction and/or physical contact with humans (Fig. 10.3a–c, g, j, k). Scenes common in the Late Bronze Age (LM) of people man-handling creatures, and explicit depictions of sacrifice, are not typical of this earlier period. Since some of the creatures are imaginary (there is no firm evidence, for example, that the lion, Fig. 10.3k, was ever seen in Crete), it is unlikely that sacrifice is necessarily intended. Some scenes show human–animal hybrids, humans merging with birds and animals; whether this was through dressing up or in the imagination—perhaps in altered states of consciousness (ASC)—remains unclear (Fig. 10.3b–e). Our experience of affection for domesticated animals as pets and of the exploitation of animals in farming does not give us a vocabulary or an experiential framework for these kinds of relationship with other species. “Dumb” creatures are generally regarded as inferior species and it is rare to find comments like those of a Scottish fisherman whom I saw interviewed on TV. Asked about spiritual communion with dolphins, he replied noncommittally, but said that when dolphins come alongside he definitely got a buzz, adding: “When I was wee I wanted to own a dolphin. But you spend some time with a creature like that, you don’t want to own it any more. Hell, no, I want to be one”.<sup>2</sup>

The Minoan scenes of humans merged with animals might suggest that they felt the same way, and it is only recently that such horizontal relationships of kinship and respect for animals have been validated and supported by academic thinking and research. Thus some people were shocked to learn that humans share 98% of their DNA with chimpanzees, and to read Balcombe’s (2010a) authoritative account of animals as sentient beings. “Chickens recognise human beauty, starlings can be pessimistic and elephants grieve ... Animals don’t merely exist; they experience their lives richly” he points out (2010b); this may surprise us, but we cannot assume it would have surprised the Minoans. The evidence of ritual involvement with animals in EM and MM suggests that the Minoans did not hold the same prejudicial view of them as we do.

The need for archaeologists to problematize their culturally constructed attitudes has been addressed recently through a growing academic interest in animal studies, such as a September 2011 social anthropologists’ conference in Wales focusing on human interactions with living things and specifically human–horse connections, with horses figuring as subjectified, impactful others; and, in the same month, a conference in Lincoln, UK on beliefs and concepts relating to deer, including ritual and spiritual aspects of the human–deer relationship, and building on recent theoretical developments in animal biography, animism, shamanism and non-human agency.

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<sup>2</sup>Fisherman on west coast of Scotland interviewed on Video Nation ‘Nine Lives’ shown on BBC-2, 26.1.2000.



The ripples from such developments, when they reach the shores of Aegean archaeology, could transform understandings of Minoan religion.

In the EM and MM periods the fabric of the earth itself also apparently constituted what we might term “sacred” terrain, as suggested by the evidence for use of caves or rock fissures and high places for ritual during this period. Examples include the rock cleft at Skotomenou o Kharakas, the cave and chasm on Mount Juktas and the Late Neolithic pottery at Atsipadhes Korakies as well as the peak sanctuaries which developed in EMIII/MMI. Rocks/stones appear on seal engravings, sometimes centrally (Fig. 10.3f) or as part of cult scenes (Fig. 10.2f). Nor do we seem to find any replication of our culture’s familiar dichotomy between earth and air/sky. The latter may be constructed by us as the sphere of ethereality and abstraction, but we cannot assume the same for a pre-Christian people living from the land. I subscribe to the view that “For those who experience them from within, the sky can be an integral part of landscapes” (Forbes 2007:34). Forbes mentions sounds of wind and weather; one thinks also of light/dark, star movements and orientation for travel. Minoan representations from this period show elements of the sky in a context suggesting ritual, and—again—relationship between humans and those elements (Fig. 10.3g–i). The cardinal points were also apparently important, featuring as a consideration in the construction of funerary buildings (Goodison 2004:340–342).

Again, our own visual traditions emphasize our distance from such a mind-set. Salerno has pointed out that in our culture “landscape art is predicated on separation, and particularly isolation from nature” (2003:5). The privileging of a narrow definition of the “scientific” approach has led scholars to turn away from generalized writings on *participation mystique* (cf. Eliade 1959), and only recently have we seen the re-assertion that any aspect of human experience is a worthy topic for dispassionate investigation, even those that challenge our social norms. Thus Bird-David (1999) has used detailed study of traditional and non-western cultures to draw attention to relational attitudes to nature which, far from being “primitive” or “infantile”, constitute a functioning epistemology. Thus, she distinguishes between animation and anthropomorphization, discusses animism as a “conversation” with the environment, describes trance transactions, and proposes that “I–thou” relations can exist not only amongst humans but also including elements of the natural world (1999:S76, S83, S85, S87). For the Aegean, Forbes (2007:10–22) has charted the move away from predominantly “artefact-based, antiquarian or site-based perspectives”, and the rise of landscape archaeology; he notes, however, that branches of the latter have retained contemporary preoccupations, including the assumption of humans’ economic rationality as a prime cause, the construction of a gap between people and their landscapes, and post-Enlightenment subject–object dichotomies. His own work moves away from traditional “frame-and-tame” models of the natural world to discussion of the multivalent, engaged, sensory and visceral feeling landscapes that he found in his fieldwork on contemporary Methana.

As for human physicality, the western tradition of religious iconography has tended to show the body static and/or in the throes of pain and suffering. By contrast, in representations from the EM and MM periods the body is not shown hurt, and is not always static. It is often shown in movement: walking in procession, leaping,



**Fig. 10.4** Described by excavator as “seated skeleton”: jaw, fragment of a skull and long bones coming from more than one skeleton, found in niche of annexe room DD2 at Mesara-type tomb Vorou A. (?) EMIII, MMIA-MMIB-II) (Reproduced from Marinatos 1931, 151, pl.15)

kicking, touching things and dancing, as part of ritual activity (Figs. 10.1d–e, 10.2g, h, and 10.3d, i). Recent years have seen a new academic interest in the concept of the body; sadly—following traditions of transcendence—this has often remained theoretical and objectifying, maintaining “abstract, mentalist notions” (Hamilakis 2002:122 and refs) and Cartesian dualities. Other, more experiential, approaches have challenged those categories, suggesting that, for the Minoans, body gestures and movements—far from being a potential impediment in facing the divine—could apparently provide a pathway to the non-ordinary (Morris and Peatfield 2002; Goodison 2009:233–5, 238–240): the body as dynamic transformer rather than as static prison. Some scholars have stressed the relevance of asking about the subjective sensory experience of people shown participating in ritual activity (Morris 2004) and of studying Minoan religious corporealities more holistically and through more empathetic lenses (Simandiraki-Grimshaw 2009).

Moreover, interest in the body during the EM and MM periods is not limited to the living body. The users of the Mesara-type tombs revisited the bones of their dead, selecting items and re-arranging them in a variety of ways as outlined by Branigan (1987). Skulls were separated and often placed vessels, which may have also played a role in ritual (Goodison 2006:327–330). Figure 10.4 shows what the

excavator Spyridon Marinatos initially described as a “seated skeleton”, bones from more than one body placed in a niche in an annexe building of the Mesara-type tomb Vorou A. The nakedness and unusual rib-cage markings of the figure on Fig. 10.3k, combined with the imaginary (for prehistoric Cretans) lions and the leafy barrier, raises the question whether this shows one such seated skeleton in a mythological framework. Some of the seals also show ritual dealings with the bones of animals: Fig. 10.3j is one of a series showing a human touching a severed goat head.

The distaste that we might feel about such practices again indicates the distance that separates the Minoan world view from ours. In the past, this has been reflected in archaeologists’ terminology of “interference” with bones. A shift in attitude shows in recent discussion of, rather, the “curation” of bones, and the question of whether specific individuals or collective ancestors were the issue for the Minoans (Driessen 2010). Using evidence from all the Cretan Bronze Age, and ethnographic parallels, Soles (2010) has presented a strong case for Minoan interest in their ancestors, but following traditional templates formulates this as ancestor “worship” rather than considering other relational possibilities between living and dead.

## A Different Model: Topography, Time and Transaction

Different material calls for different models. Abandoning hierarchical notions of worship which are the template for religious activity in western culture, I propose a model based on three intersecting components: topography, time and transaction.

First, topography. I would suggest that in this period the whole natural world can be regarded as a sacred terrain which is the stuff of ritual activity. As part of the discipline of landscape archaeology, interest has grown recently in the concept of sacred geography and the use of structures in a landscape to represent religious beliefs and cosmologies (e.g. Richards 1996; Edmonds 1999). Here, however, I use the word topography rather than geography, because the numinous landscape that seems to be the focus of Minoan religion in this period includes not only land, buildings, plants and sky but also animals and the human body itself, as shown on the seals discussed above.

This, then, is the stuff of religion in this period in Crete: the land- and sky-scape of the physical world, approached not as a generalization or as an abstraction but in its specifics—a tree, a goat, a wind, a prescribed gesture, a rock, a special vessel, a skull. The very diversity of pathways speaks against any unitarian view of “Nature” as a monolithic entity. In a recent useful discussion based on Mesoamerican examples, Marcus lists eight components of ritual (2007:47–48). Her list includes: one or more performers; an audience (which can include non-humans or the dead); a location (“temple, field, patio, stairway, cave, top of an altar”); as well as foods and paraphernalia used in the performance of the rites. I feel, however, that the distinction between these four elements, while establishing an order congenial to the academic mind, may be anachronistic. Forbes has emphasized that those directly engaged with landscape can hold a vast, coherent, integrated and multi-faceted knowledge which is not, however, neatly structured or systematized

(2007:35, 405–407). Our automatic separation of the human performers (who come first in Marcus' list) can be problematized: Bird-David (1999:S83) has stressed that ideas of personhood in non-western cultures should not be confused with western concepts of individualism. She writes (1999:S78) of the environment as a site of "nested relatedness" and it is in acknowledgement of the required shift in awareness that I have included the site of human physicality in with the wider terrain of mountain, animal, plant and sky.

Holmes has recognized what a blow such inclusion represents for the narcissistic western sense of self, in its asking us to understand how "at a very fundamental level, our prized individuality arises out of our relationships with others". He suggests that such a shift in awareness opens doors as we realize "the extent to which we are linked with, rather than excluded from, nature; ... and that, rather than divided and isolated selves, we are inescapably interconnected" (2001:70). Since it is not possible to recognize in prehistoric material what we cannot ourselves experience, such a shift in self-awareness might enable archaeologists to make less anachronistic responses to Minoan religion.

I suggest that special or ritual activities take place where and when this sacred topography is intersected by the trajectory of time. It has long been thought that the primary religious events of these early Cretans were oriented around seasonal festivals; in particular the prominence of flowers in some scenes has suggested celebrations of spring (e.g., Branigan 1970:135–38; 1998:21–3). Archaeologists have also long observed that all but a handful of the known Mesara-type tombs have their doorways facing in an easterly direction—towards the rising sun (Xanthoudides 1924:134; Shaw 1973:57). However, it took embodied research, sitting in the tombs at dawn and witnessing what could not be calculated on paper, to confirm that not only time of year but also time of day may indeed have played an important role in the structure of rituals (Goodison 2004). It emerged that the alignments of these doors with sunrise could have created a dramatic effect in illuminating the tomb interior where the bones of the dead lay, on a smaller scale but similar to the well-known dawn alignment at Newgrange in Ireland. And, similarly, the orientation of each tomb would allow the alignment to occur only at particular time(s) of year. The conjunction of place and time provides a numinous moment of meeting which is specific and local. In the Mesara the largest group of tombs was aligned to dawn in late spring and early autumn, suggesting important times of year for ceremonies at the tombs, the communities' main religious buildings throughout much of this period. These times give some intimation of a Minoan religious calendar. Significant sunrise orientations can be identified at other important sites of this period such as peak sanctuaries, adumbrating dawn alignments in the Throne Room of the LM Knossos palace itself (Goodison 2004). Such building orientations, being literally set in stone, have survived, and show a principle in operation. There may also have been other markers of special times perhaps relating to—for example—weather, crops, or moon phases which have not survived. Unpredictable events such as earth tremors and birth or death in the community may additionally have created an ad hoc window of special time in which ritual activities were conducted (see also Renfrew 2007:116).

I have discussed topography and time but the question remains as to what was the nature of the process that occurred at their intersection. Marcus's other listed ritual

components include: a purpose (e.g., “to communicate with ancestors, to sanctify a new temple”); “meaning, subject matter, and content”; as well as actions (including chanting, singing, playing music, dancing, wearing masks and costumes, burning incense, making sacrifices and pilgrimages to caves or mountains) (2007:48). Again, my sense is that the separation of such elements of form and content, although useful for those who study such activities, would not necessarily be recognized by the (non-academic) participants in such heightened experiences/special events; I have therefore taken them as one holistic experience which I have here termed “transaction”.

Of what would the transaction consist? What is phrased for us as the interaction between human and divine, and familiarly articulated through words and body posture in modes of worship and supplication, apparently took a different form. There is no securely deciphered evidence of words used, but we have pictures showing body language. There is no kneeling or bending with head to the ground. There are indeed seated figures, including some with head bowed and hand reaching forward to touch a vessel or a severed animal head: perhaps a ritual rather than everyday scene (Goodison 2006:330). Otherwise, the pictures show figures who are on their feet, using arms and legs and sometimes leaping. The body postures cannot be read as submissive, or self-abasing in the face of a superior power. Whatever the nature of the interactions or processes shown, we can exclude a vertical relationship of worship or supplication. I have chosen the word “transaction” to allow for interaction of a more lateral or horizontal nature.

What transactions exactly, we can only speculate. From our cultural perspective we are not well placed to understand this dynamic discourse between humans and other creatures and elements of earth and sky, involving movement through space/place and intersection with special times. I shall refer to this religious activity as something “special” or “serious” being done—bearing in mind that ritual can also include an element of play—to avoid pre-emptive vocabulary and the implications of words like “divine”, “deep”, “supernatural” and “transcendent”. The transactions seem to have relied on humans participating in special contact with specific elements of the natural world. We have seen that there is no evidence those elements were approached as anthropomorphic divinities, or as abstract spirits. How they were perceived, and how the humans involved perceived themselves, is hard to grasp, as Fowler suggests for the similarly non-textual Neolithic:

Neolithic forms of entity could have been radically different, they seem to be concerned with creating connections across time and space and different types of being which are alien to us... Power relations between people, animals and plants ... could have been radically different to those of today because of the specific agencies which produced both those entities and those relations (2002:63).

Those connections could perhaps, from the evidence, be embodied in experiences such as the following: humans touching an animal alive or dead; entering a chasm or cave in the earth; facing a low sun with hands raised; going to a high place; holding flowers or branches; handling bones of the human dead; witnessing dawn sun as it enters a tomb; touching a pot or vessel; dancing outdoors; or donning animal costume. Such activities perhaps opened portals to particular states of consciousness and/or constellations of energies. In those contexts, libation, sacrifice or offerings may have been made or dialogue/communication entered into by participants in a state of

heightened attention, the zone of “liminality” which Colin Renfrew introduced into our thinking about Minoan religion (1985: 16–19, 22–23, 364), and which can be related to Morris and Peatfield’s discussions of ASC (2002). We can only speculate whether the something serious/special embodied in this transaction might have included some of the following: purification; initiation; oath-swearing; divination; healing; cursing; exorcism; obtaining protection; weather control; or negotiating success in a personal or collective venture (such as a journey, a desire, a harvest).

The model of transaction involves negotiation and enlisting help rather than appealing to higher authority: the relationship is fraternal rather than parental. If there is indeed a correlation between religious system and political structure, then this more lateral model of ritual communication could be consistent with the social structure in some places, for example among the Mesara-type tomb users. Similarities and differences between these tombs spread over a wide area suggest parallel communities in contact, without the imposition of top-down uniformity. Despite several attempts to identify it, the tomb finds (see Xanthoudides 1924) provide no firm evidence of social hierarchy. The practice of collective burial at the tombs, especially before the EMIII/MMI introduction at some sites of more individualized “pithos” and larnax burials, in itself suggests that the individual wealth/status of the dead was not a primary consideration in funerary practices (see also Driessen 2010:109–111, 115). These indications need not be taken to suggest “primitive communism” among communities steeped in “peace and love”, but perhaps collective groups geared towards—variously—struggle with, negotiation with and co-operation with disparate forces in the human and natural world.

An alternative model involving immanent and embodied spirituality cannot be essayed without challenging the old templates: instead of monotheism and transcendence we have multifocal attention to various elements of the physical universe; instead of hierarchy, lateral relationships; instead of personification of the divine, the human sense of personhood itself comes into question. I suggest that we need to allow for different ways of knowing in which the “objective”/rational/abstract does not exclude the engaged/energetic/experiential from the process of construction of knowledge. To find an alternative to colonizing the past with the schemata of the West’s prevailing religious tradition, embodied spiritualities call for embodied archaeologists.

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# Chapter 11

## Dynamic Spirituality on Minoan Peak Sanctuaries

Alan A.D. Peatfield and Christine Morris

**Abstract** Previous work by the authors has argued for a shamanic element to Cretan Bronze Age religion. Late Minoan gold rings with engraved ritual scenes show clear affinities with imagery expressive of ecstatic religious experience in other ancient and traditional societies. We interpret the clay figurines from Minoan peak sanctuaries as similarly expressive of the participants' spiritual experience, whereby the body was a medium to access altered states. The authors' excavation of the western Cretan peak sanctuary of Atsipadhes Korakies is presented as a case study. Our work has been firmly located within current archaeological interest in the body, and in experiential and experimental methodologies. We also argue for the importance of a fully sensory archaeology, which engages with the dynamics of ritual and spirituality on these mountain shrines. In this chapter we explicitly address the issues raised by our own encounters and experimentation with shamanic practices in a Cretan context, particularly the apparent tension between objective and subjective analysis, and how that may be resolved.

### Introduction

Religion or spirituality? The explicit purpose behind this volume is to draw the methodological debate about the archaeology of religion away from conventionalised definitions of religion towards a greater appreciation of the subtle and extraordinary variety of human spirituality, as it can be perceived through the archaeological record.

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The reason is that definitions of religion, as borrowed from other disciplines, such as anthropology and philosophy, tend to privilege the intellectualized processes of belief. Spiro's famous definition (1966), adopted by Renfrew (1985:12), that religion is "culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings", is the most famous of these. Although such a definition seems to be self-evidently correct, especially to scholars of Judaeo-Christian traditions, several problematic issues arise.

First, as already observed, this definition privileges the process of belief, which is essentially a mental, intellectual process. This further involves description and articulation, which in turn can become fixed as dogma. The actions of religion, ritual action, are therefore seen as subordinate to belief. This is an implicit acceptance of Cartesian ideas, which make the body subordinate to the mind.

The second problematic issue is the assumption that religion is about superhuman beings, deities in the broadest sense. By this limited perspective, Buddhism is not a religion, because it explicitly rejects belief in a supreme deity, in favour of direct spiritual engagement with the nature of being. By extension, this means that religions such as Buddhism would not be amenable to archaeological discourse, which is clearly not the case. Significantly too, even religion defined as belief in deities is not taken as self-evident in anthropology. Tambiah, for example, attributes the origin of these definitions to the nineteenth century social Darwinian scholar, Edmund Tylor (Tambiah 1985:129); he neatly critiques the resurgence of theistic assumptions about religion as "neo-Tylorian". Tambiah is from Sri Lanka, a Buddhist culture, and therefore brings a non-western perspective to the study of religion. He argues that religion is more about performative processes, not belief processes (Tambiah 1985). From a similar anthropological perspective, Keane observes that "religions may not always demand beliefs, but they always involve material forms" (2008:S124).

The third problematic issue is that the word "religion" is itself not neutral. "Religion" as a term, even if this is not explicitly articulated, elicits assumptions about organization and hierarchy. Beliefs and practices are assumed to be codified and organized, and controlled by ritual specialists. While such assumptions may be appropriate to the structures of complex societies or emergent states, it does not allow for the more fluid ways less complex societies use to express their spiritual impulses.

Therefore, in this volume, we argue that spirituality is a more appropriate concept and word for archaeology than is the concept of "religion". Spirituality allows for a more open perspective on the archaeological identification and understanding of the immense and subtle variety of ways in which human individuals and cultures have marked and celebrated their engagement with the indefinable world of the spirit.

## Spirituality and Minoan Peak Sanctuaries

It is one thing to advocate an archaeology of spirituality; it is quite another to define the parameters of its methodologies. In the context of Minoan religion, we have argued elsewhere that it is more important what people *do* in their rituals, than what

they may believe or say about them (Peatfield 2001). In that sense we focus on the performative aspects of spirituality. For the archaeologist, this neatly accords with the emphasis on the recovery and study of the material culture, the physical remains, the artifacts of spiritual performance—of ritual. We strongly agree with Renfrew (1985) that the archaeological recognition of ritual must lie in the identification of patterns of context and assemblage. Assemblage too is not just a matter of the simplistic identification of ritual “tool-kits”, but of placing assemblages with the broader context of sacred place and ritual landscape.

Performative aspects of spirituality intersect with spiritual experience. Contemporary neurophysical studies of spirituality explore the strong interweaving between mental and physical states—essentially the processes of spiritual feeling (D’Aquili and Newberg 1999; Newberg et al. 2002; Newberg 2010). Feeling/experience and performance interact in a circular fashion: feeling inspires performance (from a desire to perpetuate the experience), and performance elicits and enhances experience.

Performance and experience lie at the heart of our case study, the peak sanctuaries of Minoan Bronze Age Crete. These mountain shrines are of paramount importance for the understanding of Minoan religion in the broadest sense, because they express issues of spirituality that bind together all the layers of Minoan society, from the popular/vernacular to the elite. After briefly summarizing the background to Minoan peak sanctuary studies, we discuss the material from our own excavation of the Atsipadhes Korakias peak sanctuary in west Crete (Peatfield 1992). It was during this study that we realized the performative and experiential qualities of peak sanctuary ritual, and the implications of that for Minoan religion.

## Minoan Peak Sanctuaries: A Summary

Peak sanctuaries are the fundamental element of the religious landscape of the Minoan Crete. The prototype site was excavated by Myres in 1903 on the summit of Petsophas, rising above the coast of east Crete (Myres 1902–1903). Evans first used the term “peak sanctuary” for his investigation of mount Jouktas, south of Knossos (Evans 1921:151–159). Apart from the common location on a mountain peak, the characteristic finds from these sites are large numbers of clay figurines of three types: animals, human figurines arranged in a variety of postures, and detached human anatomical models, referred to as “votive limbs”. Two important issues about the figurines were evident from the start. The human figurines were representations of the worshippers, not deities (Myres 1902–1903:380). Secondly, the animal figurines and votive limbs represented the interests of the worshippers, respectively, the care of their domestic animals and their own health and welfare. This demonstrates the human experience of the peak sanctuary cult.

Following Myres’ and Evans’ finds, many other sites were identified as peak sanctuaries; thus Rutkowski produced a catalogue of more than 50 claimed peak sanctuaries (Rutkowski 1972, 1986). Following Rutkowski’s example, Peatfield

further refined the typological characteristics of peak sanctuaries so that, by the late 1980s, only 25 or so sites are recognized as having similar features of both topography and finds (Peatfield 1983, 1990). Other peak sanctuaries have since been identified, but the number still remains below 30 (Nowicki 1994, 2007). The shared characteristics of these peak sanctuaries suggest a commonality of practice over Minoan Crete (Peatfield, Morris and Karetsou [forthcoming](#)).

The new generation of topographic studies using GIS methods has supported the topographic field observations of Peatfield and of Rutkowski and Nowicki (Nowicki 1991, 1994, 2007; GIS: Soetens 2006, 2009; Megarry 2012).

Peak sanctuaries also have a shared chronology. They appeared during the period of the emergence of the Minoan palaces, in the transition of the Early to Middle Bronze Ages (c. 2200 to 1900 BC). Interpretations link the peak sanctuaries to the social and political processes involved in the development of the Minoan palace state. In the succeeding Protopalatial period, all the peak sanctuaries were in use. Given that they vary in size and wealth of finds, corresponding to the nearby settlements, the peak sanctuaries are a manifestation of popular cult.

This changes in the Neopalatial period, which is the cultural highpoint of Minoan civilization, the era of the famous frescoes, and other figured artifacts. Knossos was dominant culturally, and perhaps also economically and politically. The peak sanctuaries of this period are fewer, maybe only eight, but they are the peak sanctuaries associated with Knossos and other elite settlements and regional power centres. This suggests not a diminution in the importance of the peak sanctuary cult, but rather a process of elite appropriation, an ideological component of economic and political control. Significantly, images of mountains are incorporated into the elite symbolic iconography of power, especially at Knossos (Peatfield 1987, 1990; Karetsou [forthcoming](#)).

## Atsipadhes Korakias

Our excavation of Atsipadhes Korakias in 1989 was an opportunity to test both the topographic observations and the interpretations of the socio-historical development of peak sanctuaries, including insights into the nature of the cult and its practices (Peatfield 1992).

Of the 25-plus peak sanctuaries known until then, 18 had been variously excavated: mostly short investigations, or collections of material, with very limited information about the contexts and distribution of the artifacts. Since Petsophas in 1903, only Jouktas had been excavated on a large scale (Karetsou 1980; [forthcoming](#)). Therefore, part of the rationale of the Atsipadhes project was to attempt something new: the exhaustive recovery of all the finds, recorded in situ to reveal their precise distribution pattern. The purpose was to explore whether the distribution of the finds could reveal anything of the ritual use of the site.

This methodology was successful. Set on a northern spur of Mt Kouroupas, overlooking the Ayios Vasilios valley, the natural formation of the Atsipadhes Korakias





**Fig. 11.1** Atsipadhes peak sanctuary: view of the upper and lower terraces during the excavation

peak has two main terraces, the West Upper Terrace and the East Lower Terrace (Fig. 11.1). The material, comprising pottery and the familiar clay figurines, was concentrated in the centre of the peak, either side of the drop between the two terraces. The character of the material on the east edge of the Upper Terrace was different from that of the Lower Terrace. The Upper Terrace artifacts were mixed in with a dense scatter of water-worn pebbles, which were absent from the Lower Terrace. Most important was the identification of a small area empty of finds, around which the pebbles, potsherds, and figurines clustered densely (Fig. 11.2). It appears as though something stood in this Feature, as a focus for the ritual depositional activity. Immediately around the Feature, the pottery fragments included cups, bridge-spouted jars, and specialized libation vessels, called *rhyta*. The small finds included clay offering tables and fragments of animal *rhyta*, forms *not* found elsewhere on the site. Further away from the Feature, the pottery shapes change to include a number of open bowls. These resemble the bowl containing food offerings depicted on a stone vase fragment from Knossos portraying an offering ritual at a peak sanctuary (Warren 1969:85). The Upper Terrace was evidently the liturgical part of the site, the focus for a variety of rituals clustered around the Feature.

On the Lower Terrace, the area of the rock clefts immediately below the Upper Terrace contained more than 50% of our 5,000-plus figurine fragments. The density diminished further to the east and north of the Terrace. This concentration of material indicates how the ritual activity was focused within the spatial organisation of the site. Our methodology was also designed to try and elucidate deeper layers of the rituals on the site by analysing in detail the distribution patterns among the figurines. Technology has now caught up with our analytical vision, and by



**Fig. 11.2** Atsipadhes peak sanctuary: area of the feature and pebbles on the upper terrace

developing an intrasite GIS, which draws on the information in a digital database (Filemaker Pro), we are able to generate distribution maps of the figurines.<sup>1</sup> The GIS enables us easily to query distributions, densities, and spatial relationships between figurines across the site. This work is still in progress, but one distribution pattern that immediately excited our interest was the differential distribution within the site of human figurines performing different gestures. Identification of these gestures had resulted from the careful initial collection of figurine fragments from the

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<sup>1</sup> This research received an award from the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences 2008–2010. We gratefully acknowledge here the assistance of the IRCHSS. An earlier phase of the GIS work was undertaken with Eamonn Baldwin in 2002, and the current IRCHSS-funded work performed in collaboration with William Megarry.

excavation, and from intensive searching for joins during the study seasons. It was the growing realization that a wider and more complex range of gestures was represented within the Atsipadhes figurine assemblage that first prompted us to shift away from the conventional classification of these gestures as “worship gestures” and to engage with a more experiential and embodied approach to the material.

## Approaching the Peak Sanctuary

The clay figurines offer clues to the performative nature of the peak sanctuary ritual. Before this, however, there is another aspect deserving of consideration. That is the material tangibility, the physicality of the figurines, and the process of bringing them to the peak sanctuary.

The presence of the figurines and other offerings on the sites is often taken for granted. The processes involved in how they got there are rarely discussed. This is not a simple process of transportation, but rather is a performative and sensory prelude to the rituals on the peak sanctuaries. The obvious analogies are the traditional rituals associated with the picturesque mountain chapels of the modern Greek landscape. Psilakis’ study of Cretan folklore includes accounts of the pilgrimage festivals to the churches located on Jouktas and Kophinas, both peak sanctuaries (Psilakis 2005:278–279, 332–336; Peatfield 2007). These pilgrimages start with preparations involving the whole community, for special food, clothing, and offerings. All this has to be brought up to the sanctuary chapel, and involves the physical effort of the steep climb. The participants, including old ladies and children, start at first light. The whole process generates intense sensory and somatic input—the climb over rocks and along stony paths; changing light and spectacular vistas as one ascends to the summit; smells of the summer herbs and incense approaching the chapel; sounds of voices, wind and the birds, distant bells of sheep and goats; the texture and feel of the offerings carried in hand. All this further generates intense emotional excitement and expectation, together with the evocation of memories of past festivals, even before the rituals on site are engaged.

The insights here are clearly applicable to the peak sanctuaries. Survey of the Ayios Vasilios valley below Atsipadhes Korakias has identified the main Minoan settlements contemporary with the peak sanctuary (Moody, Peatfield and Markoulaki 2000). The GIS mapping of routes to Atsipadhes demonstrates that approaching the peak sanctuary involves a dynamic sense of the ritual landscape with which the “worshippers” engage (Peatfield 2009; Peatfield and Megarry 2008), not merely as a prelude, but as part of the whole performative nature of the peak sanctuary ritual, where the physical and emotional experiences enhance and integrate with the spiritual.

While there is not space in the present chapter to develop fully this idea of dynamic, embodied performance within the particular landscape of Atsipadhes, some further reflections on the specifically material dimension will help to give a taste of it. If we imagine the human participants climbing to the site, they make the



**Fig. 11.3** Holding a clay figurine from the peak sanctuary of Atsipadhes



**Fig. 11.4** Clay figurines in situ within the rocky crevices between the upper and lower terraces at Atsipadhes

upward journey carrying a variety of objects, but make the return journey down the mountain largely empty-handed. The pots, the figurines, and the river-worn pebbles have all played their roles in the activities on the site and are left behind, permanent reminders of the experiences of the day. Pebbles, gathered from a nearby river, are carried—perhaps turned in the hand, hard and smooth—and have been placed or dropped on the central area of the Upper Terrace, and, to judge from the associated concentration of vessels for liquids and pouring, may have glistened as if in a watery setting. The figurines can typically be grasped comfortably in the hand (Fig. 11.3) and at Atsipadhes the majority are placed into the rocky crevices which define the drop between the two terraces (Fig. 11.4). Though very fragmentary, pieces from larger figures and from models (both types which are better attested at other peak sanctuaries) also testify to the transport of larger and heavier, perhaps more fragile, items.

## Shamanic Models of Religion

This dynamic sense of human spiritual experience has informed the more embodied model of the religion of Bronze Age Crete for which we have argued elsewhere, and explore further in this chapter. This model accounts for a strong ecstatic dimension, wherein trances and visionary states were cultivated as part of Minoan spirituality, and were recorded in the religious art and material record. We have applied the term “shamanic” to that model (Morris 2002, 2004; Morris and Peatfield 2002, 2004).

It has long been recognized that Minoan religion included a strong ecstatic dimension, which is represented in elite art. Discussions of Minoan ritual talk of “ecstatic trance”, “orgiastic frenzy”, and “possession”, yet they show little interest in engaging with the question of the mechanics of ecstasy, the “how” of the cultivation of trances and altered states within Minoan spirituality. There is a vocabulary of ecstasy, yet there has been little exploration of the bodily mechanics or purposes of such deeply physical methods of engaging with the non-mundane Otherworld. Human societies have developed a range of ways for cultivating or entering into these altered states: ingesting psychoactive substances, fasting, sensory deprivation, use of rhythmic sound or movement.

In the context of this book’s purposes to explore and experiment with aspects of spirituality, we consciously push beyond the edges of conventional modes of study for insights into Minoan shamanistic practices. The term “shamanic” is controversial; there is profound disagreement among anthropologists and archaeologists regarding the meaning and usage of “shaman”. At one extreme are those who argue that “shaman” should be used only of the “classic” shamanic complex of the Siberian–Arctic region (the source of the word, *saman*) (Kehoe 2000). On the other side are those who use the term to describe all ritual trance and ecstatic states in any culture and period, including usage within contemporary, New Age spiritualities. Taussig argues that the term “shamanic” has now become a western category, “an artful reification of disparate practices” (cited by Atkinson 1992:307). Similarly,

VanPool acknowledges the “analytic utility of shamanism” as a polythetic class (VanPool 2009:179). We use “shamanic” here to refer to the active use of the body to enter an altered state of consciousness (ASC). Sensation, perception, emotion, and cognition are modified, in order to access the non-mundane or spirit world. Rather than be drawn into arguments about definitions—e.g. the differences between “trance” and “possession”—we take ASC to be descriptive of a wide spectrum of related trance and meditational behaviours. Scientists working in neurotheology are now able to observe these behaviours as a distinctive spectrum of activity within the brain, which facilitates feelings of “bliss”, “ecstasy”, “oneness with the divine”, depending on the individual’s religious or spiritual orientation. As these researchers have argued, human beings seem to be hard-wired for spiritual experiences (D’Aquili and Newberg 1999; Newberg et al. 2002; Newberg 2010).

Intriguingly, there has been some negative reaction to the term “shamanic” with reference to the Minoans. While “ecstatic trance” or “visionary experience” are widely used terms, calling the Minoans “shamanic” has been met with some discord. This is despite the fact that, already in the early days of Minoan scholarship, Evans drew comparisons between Minoan religion and other embodied practices, ranging from prophecy and whirling dervishes. In particular, he describes the trance state of a Saami (Lapp) “shamanistic soothsayer” to support his point (Evans 1930:315; Morris and Peatfield 2004:38 with Fig. 1). While there may be many factors in this discord (including an unacknowledged, scholarly discomfort with “New Age” connotations), the Minoans have tended to be treated differently from other early complex societies, because of the perception that they represent the “origins” of Europe. At the particular time that Cretan Bronze Age remains were being uncovered (from the early twentieth century), there was already a scholarly discourse, framed around the idea of the “mirage orientale”, about the degree of Eastern influence on ancient European cultures. In addition, the emergence of modern nation states, the status of Crete itself as only recently liberated from Ottoman rule (1898), and wider debate on the nature of European identity all coalesced to privilege a “European” reading of these Cretan remains (Hamilakis and Momigliano 2006; Morris 2010). In a world constructed as representing the origins of Europe, shamanic practices—associated with traditional and non-western societies—had no place. Yet, as Kingsley has eloquently argued, shamanic elements *are* present in later Greek philosophical traditions and ritual practice, but they have been overlooked and undervalued (Kingsley 1999, 2004, 2010). To ignore this possibility is to set the Minoans (and the later Greeks) apart from other cultures, and to lose the opportunity to explore an important aspect of their ritual action and experiences.

We have followed, therefore, the broader scholarly usage of “shamanic” as an expression of the cross-cultural phenomenon of ASC. Our concern here is to offer our own experience of developing the Minoan shamanic model, through our personal engagement with contemporary shamanic practices. We are conscious of the issues raised by applying our own experiences to the study of the past, risking the dangers or accusations of subjectivity. The tension between objectivity and subjectivity does, however, lie at the heart of the debate within archaeology about experiential modes of analysis. This interests us, because how else can we try to develop



new perspectives, to gain insights for discussion about bodily practices, if we are not aware of the experiential dimensions? Absence of this dimension results in only partial engagement with the embodied aspects of Minoan ritual. It intellectualizes ritual action, and falsely prioritizes and isolates (as much work on “the body” has indeed done) the visual from the other senses.

## Experimenting

Our archaeological narrative, the excavation reportage and interpretation, now moves into the more experimental, as we return to the aforementioned issue of the human figurine gestures. Human figurines from all peak sanctuaries portray a variety of gestures. The Petsophas figurines are still the most familiar examples, especially the oft-illustrated male figurine, with hands held to the chest (Fig. 11.5). Now iconic, this hands-to-chest gesture is assumed to be the archetypal peak sanctuary ritual gesture.

Nevertheless, it has long been known that there were other gestures among the peak sanctuary figurines. Despite this, all the gestures were lumped together under the monolithic term—“worship gestures” (sometimes “prayer gestures”). Such terms, however, collapse the distinction between description and interpretation. It also presupposes a model of religion familiar from Christian practice, and from other early cultures. Mesopotamian figurines and statues, for example, all stand or sit with arms folded to chest and some are inscribed: “it offers prayers” (Bertman 2003:217, with Fig. 7.1). They are thus perpetual worshippers.

The semantics of this “worship” terminology are interesting, because contained within is an assumption about the nature of the peak sanctuary cult. It assumes that the Minoan peak sanctuary cult and its ritual activity were focused on the adoration and supplication of a deity. This is, of course, a theistic model of religion, that is one which defines religion as ritual interaction with superhuman beings. Theistic models of religion dominate archaeological discourse primarily through Renfrew’s re-iterated espousal of theistic definitions of religion taken from anthropology, as observed above, and the continuing dismissal or undervaluing of performative or symbolic definitions of religion.

Theistic models of religion privilege intellectual processes of belief and explanation. Not all cultures accord with modern western obsessions with neat, consistent, scientific structures of explanation. Indeed cultural informants may be observed to be creating explanations within the process of interview—meaning, not fixed, but as a continual process of becoming (Toren 1993). This is not to say that beliefs are not present within ancient or non-western religions, it is just that the *doing* of religion may be a lot more important than the *believing* of religion (Peatfield 2001). That may be culturally validated through a continuity of action, a tradition. Moreover, the impetus behind the action may be not the expression of thought, neat and rational, but rather is the expression of emotion, the non-rational that is difficult to pin down. If we persist in defining religion only through the limitations of theistic definitions,

**Fig. 11.5** Male figurine with the well-known hands-to-chest gesture from the peak sanctuary of Petsofas in eastern Crete



and further limit ourselves by asking analytical questions that only elicit the evidence which proves these definitions, we shall continue to miss, overlook, undervalue, denigrate, the immense varieties of human spiritual experience. Admittedly, many expressions of spirituality (e.g., meditation) may not leave for us the essential meat of our discipline, the material, cultural artifacts we rely on for evidence. But if we continue to limit ourselves, we shall never push the boundaries of the methodologies we apply to the interpretation of the cultures we study.

It is for this reason that we have preferred to use the term archaeology of spiritualities, rather than archaeology of religion, for this volume. Spirituality accounts for the non-rational elements of the human cognitive processes involved in religion, the emotional, the intuitive, the psychic, the visionary. It also allows for how those processes are given expression through the body, ritual action, and furthermore, how the embodied feeling of the action itself may reflect back into the spiritual process.

Returning to the issue of the collective terming of the figurines' gestures as "worship gestures": this arose from Myres' recognition that the figurines represented the worshippers themselves, and were not the images of any deity. This pattern of human representation is consistent at all peak sanctuaries, indeed there is

*no* artifact from any peak sanctuary (apart perhaps on Jouktas) that can be convincingly identified as a deity image. Therefore, the material evidence clearly privileges the human spiritual cares and experience of the peak sanctuary cult, not religious beliefs. The question is *not* therefore, “what were their beliefs?”, but rather, “what does the material expression, the figurines, reveal of the process of their spiritual experience?”

It was quickly apparent in our study of the figurines that there were many more varieties of ritual gestures. Nevertheless, we classified them into two main groups: gestures with hands touching the body (closed gestures) and gestures with hands held away from the torso (open gestures). Within those parameters there is variety. Closed gestures include hands held symmetrical to the chest or belly, or non-symmetrical with one hand higher than the other, across the body, etc. Open gestures may also be symmetrical, with hands held forward, or up, or out to the side, at various heights; non-symmetrical with hands at various heights. There is more variation in the open gestures, than in the closed. But these open gestures are less obvious, because they break more easily than do the closed gestures, which have two points of contact between the arm and the torso. Given this embodied quality, more properly these are bodily postures, rather than hand gestures.

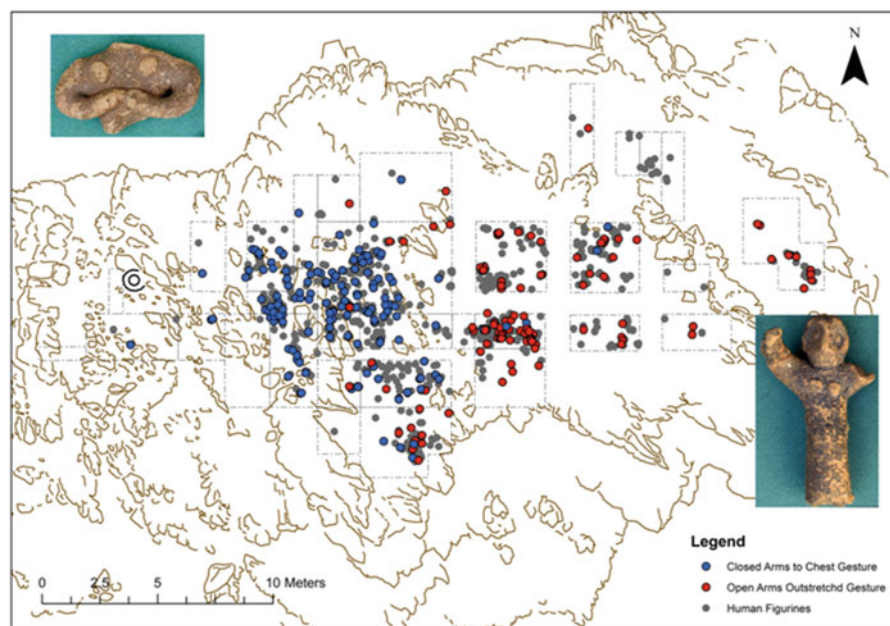
This wider range of gestures led us to question assumptions about what they were and meant, and we began to question the received wisdom that they were simply prayer or worship gestures. We looked for other models or explanations, which might make better sense of the strong physicality of the gestures/postures.

That the difference between the open and closed postures is ritually meaningful was revealed by the GIS-generated distribution plan mentioned earlier in the chapter. The closed postures cluster close to the liturgical area and immediately below it. The open postures, by contrast, form a periphery (Fig. 11.6). This distribution is not gender-related, nor is it chronological. Could this distribution of artifacts translate to the ritual dynamics on the site, and what do the postures mean?

The other figurines, animals, and votive limbs already demonstrate the concerns of a human community of farmers and pastoralists. The votive limbs, by comparison with other cultures that use anatomical models, including later Greek manifestations (Greco-Roman Asklepios temples and modern Greek Orthodox *tamata*), are prayers or thanks for healing. The link between the votive limbs and the more fully modelled human figurines is, importantly, provided by a figurine from the Traostalos peak sanctuary, which portrays a woman with a leg grotesquely swollen from elephantiasis (Morris and Peatfield 2012).

That the human figurines may also have some link to the ritual aspects of healing is attractive. Elsewhere, we have drawn analogies with other cultural forms of esoteric healing using body posture, notably the chi-kung methods of China, and the yogic methods of India (Morris and Peatfield 2002, 2004). Precisely how the Minoans might have developed similar methods of healing is impossible to ascertain, but the Minoans had a reputation among Egyptians as esoteric healing specialists, and Greek sources also hint at such skills among later Cretans.

The widespread diffusion of esoteric healing methods at the interface of bodily experience and spirituality was brought home to us through our encounter with



**Fig. 11.6** Human figurines at Atsipadhes, showing the distribution of the open and closed gestures

Felicitas Goodman’s anthropological research on ecstatic body postures (Goodman 1986, 1988). “Encounter” is the appropriate word, because it was at this point that our research moved decisively into the experimental. Her exploration of a possible relationship between ecstatic states and bodily postures was initially triggered by her learning that Eastern meditation practices correlated belief with specific postures of the body. This led her to collect multi-cultural evidence of different body postures, evidence that was as much archaeological as anthropological, and included figurines from different cultures. Particularly among American cultures, these figurines were recognized as portrayals of ritual specialists, who engaged the supernatural through ecstatic experience—in other words, shamans. Conducting experiments with her students and colleagues, she concluded that specific postures were conduits to altered states and to specific facets of healing (Goodman 1986, 1988).

For us, Goodman’s work engaged an intriguing possibility: could the peak sanctuary postures be ecstatic body postures, and was it possible that the Minoans were engaged in shamanic-type rituals? But before we could answer that more overt objective academic question of: “was it so?”, we had to ask and answer the more subtle and fluid question of: “was it possible?”, and, like all arts of the possible, that required subjective investigation, even experimentation. Through a series of coincidences, we encountered in 1998 an anthropologist who had collaborated with Goodman and gone on to conduct her own research on the poses of prehistoric Crete. This clinical anthropologist, Robinette Kennedy, had done her more

conventional doctoral thesis in a Cretan village, and later in life, returned to Crete to study whether or not certain figurines and images of Minoan religion embody poses that generate shamanic states of consciousness. Experimenting with the Minoan postures to access altered states, Kennedy's data, based on the reported experiences of hundreds of participants, clearly shows that each posture has distinct and consistent visionary qualities.

Meeting with her over a number of years, we engaged a dialogue on her discoveries about the postures and their relevance to the peak sanctuary postures. A significant part of this dialogue was our willingness to engage with the experimental process. Thus, under Kennedy's guidance, we also used the postures combined with certain elements common to shamanic rituals throughout history (including respectful intent and specific percussion using rattling) to enter an ASC. A high point in this process was when we did the two main peak sanctuary postures on Atsipadhes Korakias itself. We crossed the boundary between objective and subjective research.

It is not the purpose here to describe the details of our own experiences, which were multisensory, involving, for example, visions and sensations of bodily transformation. Kennedy herself is working on a book about the Minoan ecstatic postures. Rather we address some of the insights and implications of this experiential method of research from an archaeological viewpoint. We are *not* suggesting that "doing" or "performing" the gestures in any way gives us access to Minoan experiences, but it does make us think very actively about how bodily action shapes and creates experience—it is the interface between the more universal physical responses of the body to particular stimuli and the more specific cultural expectations and knowledge which shapes the experience.

## Insights

We therefore suggest several things: first, the question of whether it was possible that the peak sanctuary postures could be shamanic postures is answered with an emphatic "yes". The possible becomes the probable. The fundamental point is that posture was a constituent in accessing altered states. Elsewhere we have argued that such states are also portrayed on Minoan gold rings (Morris 2001, 2004; Morris and Peatfield 2004). This builds on a long tradition of scholarship recognizing that the rings portray divine epiphany, but we do not treat the imagery as merely a symbolic device. Rather the rings try to "make visible" what is visible only to the person experiencing the altered state. It is an artistic attempt to represent a highly valued experience—an artist needs to create a language or iconography of something that is sensed or experienced outside the normal everyday world. Indeed placing some of the Minoan ring imageries within the broader context of "shamanic" imagery renders many of the more enigmatic details, such as the strangely shaped human heads and the floating elements, more comprehensible, not less.

Our experience of the postures further reveals that the different postures could indeed be used to induce or make available different kinds of access to the non-mundane, supernatural world. This actually reinforces traditional interpretations of the peak sanctuaries. Over the world, consistently in other shamanic cultural paradigms, the hands-to-torso, closed posture, is associated with healing. This dovetails nicely with the votive limbs as evidence for a healing dimension to the peak sanctuaries. Alongside healing, shamanic rituals typically engage a second great spiritual process, divination. The open posture with which we experimented revealed a strong sense of transformative motion, spiritual journeying, which often coincides with divinatory experiences.

A further question arises: were these altered states accessible to a restricted group or more generally to the Minoan population? At least in relation to the ubiquity of the human figurines of the Protopalatial period, the weight of the evidence suggests that participation in these embodied rituals was part of popular, vernacular religion. The centralization of the peak sanctuary cult in the later Neopalatial period may have been prompted by the elite desire to monopolize these rituals, their experiences, and thus make them symbols of status and powers.

Central to this chapter is the notion of the body as a medium of analysis, which raises the issue of subjectivity in relation to the use of experiential methodology. Experimentation is not new in archaeology, but we argue that experimentation goes beyond flint-knapping and pretending to live like an Iron Age farmer. The experience of the body gives substantiality to insights even of human spirituality and religion, subjects whose interpretation is normally restricted to the constructs of the intellectual domain. One of the most interesting processes to emerge recently in the study of the anthropology of religion is the idea of “sensuous anthropology” (Stoller 1989; Howes 1991, 2005; Seremetakis 1994). What we argue here is that within the archaeology of religion and spirituality, and especially as it involves landscape and place, there is room for, even need for, a “sensuous archaeology”; one which is open to experimentation and to a fully sensory approach to ritual actions and experiences.

## Conclusions

Shamanic models of religion are essentially more about spiritual experiences rather than defined religious beliefs. Religious beliefs are circumscribed by cultural particularities, whereas shamanic experiences transcend cultural specifics. Through the example of the peak sanctuaries it is possible to discern that Minoan spirituality was a far more complex process than religious belief in one or more deities, moderated by hierarchies of elite “threskiocrats”. It involved a profound dynamic and transformative spiritual engagement between the populace and their ritual landscape.

Within this model, how then do we understand the role of the artifacts which inspired this insight—the clay figurines? At the simplest, the figurines may be no more than the passive memorialization of the shamanic rituals. But this undervalues



the fact that at all stages of the peak sanctuary ritual the figurines were involved. They were made as part of the preparations. They expressed the expectation of the ritual and its results. As they were carried to the sanctuary, their tactile qualities were a sensorial stimulus, a reminder of the rituals to come. On site, they imaged the dynamic actions of their owners. Once offered, they were broken, and left on the sanctuary. These layers of involvement with the ritual process suggest that for the Minoan these humble clay objects became imbued with an expressive power through which the ordinary Minoan people manifested their spiritual concerns and aspirations.

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## Chapter 12

# Dusk at the Palace: Exploring Minoan Spiritualities

Anna Simandiraki-Grimshaw

**Abstract** “Minoan” Crete (Greece, third to second millennia BC) was an important part of Aegean prehistory and its archaeology forms a cornerstone of Cretan identity. Substantial work has sought to codify Minoan religion and ritual, especially with reference to the identification of deities, the use of religion in economy and politics, and the reconstruction of cult actions and locales. The issue of spirituality, especially its embodied dimension, has been almost completely avoided. Understandably, the two main reasons are: (a) the non-quantifiable nature of any such investigation, and (b) the Judeo-Christian, gender-biased, Eurocentric perspective of most approaches.

This paper explores three interrelated aspects of Minoan spirituality. The first regards ways of approaching Minoan spirituality in the Bronze Age, drawing upon relevant somatic data. The second regards the complex and palimpsestic experiences by archaeologists of Minoan material culture. The third regards the veneration of Minoan antiquities by the Greek public and some followers of the broader Goddess movement, as physically, emotionally and intellectually played out in modern Crete. In essence, the paper adopts reflexive approaches which seek to not necessarily explain away, but perhaps to understand Minoan spirituality diachronically. Several important issues thus emerge and are discussed: embodiment, gender, epistemology, intolerance, institutionalization and, ultimately, personal, cultural and religious identities.

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## Introduction

The Minoan civilization dominated the Bronze Age of the island of Crete (Greece, third to second millennia BC). It played a pivotal social, economic, artistic and religious role in the prehistoric Aegean, impacting not only contemporary but also subsequent developments in the area. Although numerous post-Medieval travellers took an interest in Cretan myths (cf. Warren 1972), systematic multinational archaeological expeditions began to examine Cretan prehistory at the end of the nineteenth century CE (Sakellarakis 1998; Warren 2000; McEnroe 2002). These investigations, greatly influential to this day, were deeply embedded in a complex political and ideological milieu, as Crete's status changed from an Ottoman prefecture (17th c. CE to 1898) to an Independent State (1898–1913) and then, finally, to a Greek prefecture (1913). The Minoans were cast as “the first European civilization”, the theoretical and practical foundations of Minoan Archaeology as a discipline were laid and standardized notions of ancient Cretan ethnicity, ritual, religion and gender emerged.

The study of Minoan religion and ritual assumed a central role within this political and intellectual tradition. From A. Evans (1901, 1921–1935) and his contemporaries to M. Nilsson (1950) and beyond, understandings of Minoan religion and ritual supported a continuity of religious beliefs and practices between Minoan Crete and Classical Greece. Substantial contributions have thereafter developed these topics into clear and stratified accounts on Minoan religion and ritual.<sup>1</sup> Of course, any brief list does not do justice to the extensive and valuable “religious” scholarship for Minoan Crete and the Bronze Age Aegean more generally. The works of researchers of Minoan religion and ritual are indicative of varied approaches, viewpoints and paradigms. They therefore offer vital gateways to Minoan religion and ritual as socio-cultural phenomena reflecting diverse milieux (both in antiquity and now).

A substantial shortcoming of the discipline and the public domain, however, has been the failure to take account of Minoan spirituality. Of course, “spirituality” in itself is very difficult to entrap in a definition. For the purposes of this paper, I take human “spirituality” to denote the state of being whereby a person may transcend his/her biological and social restrictions and reach different levels of (material) consciousness. The latter is often perceived as wider, wiser, all-encompassing, sometimes mystical. If one accepts this working definition, it becomes obvious that religion and ritual may or may not be conduits of spirituality, and are not necessarily containers. In other words, spirituality may be sought, and indeed found, within and

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Alexiou 1958; Warren 1981; Hägg and Marinatos 1981; Gesell 1983; Marinatos 1986; Rutkowski 1986; Marinatos 1987; Warren 1988; Rutkowski 1991; Marinatos 1993; Dickinson 1994; Rutkowski and Nowicki 1996; Alberti 1997; Hamilakis 1998; Goodison and Morris 1998b; Laffineur and Hägg 2001; Goodison 2001; Alberti 2001; 2002; Morris and Peatfield 2001; Fitton 2002; Goodison 2004; Morris and Peatfield 2004; Nowicki 2007; Vasilakis and Branigan 2010.

beyond prescribed or institutionalized physical and mental stimuli. I would therefore like to differentiate religion and ritual from spirituality.

I believe the notion of spirituality is vitally important for approaching the prehistoric and current human condition. People are not simply constituted by the artifacts or monuments they use(d); and artifacts or monuments are not necessarily stripped of their spiritual significance after their original stakeholders have perished. As a step towards addressing this sizeable gap, this paper explores Minoan spirituality. Firstly, I give a brief overview of the current academic understandings of Minoan religion and ritual and discuss possible reasons for the lack of studies on Minoan spirituality. Secondly, I turn to certain examples of how Minoan spirituality is currently (re)constructed. I use a reflexive approach, not necessarily to explain away, but to help us understand Minoan spirituality. Thirdly, I highlight the variable significance of archaeological material culture for ancient and modern spiritualities, and I explore their dialectic possibilities.

In the process, I do not write myself out of the discourses. Indeed, the title of my paper refers to the summer sunset hour at the Minoan Palace of Zakros. This seems to be a common denominator between my and one of Carol Christ's spiritual experiences (see below). The whole bay, where the palace and city lie, incorporates distinct sensations, textures and spaces: scrubland, salty sea winds, stony gorge paths, sheep bells, human echoes, dusty roads, rolling pebbles and waves, wild herbs and warm ruins. These create for me an inexplicably compelling synaesthesia of "past" and "present", "rough" and "tame", "grand" and "humble", "lived" and "abandoned" (cf. Lillios and Tsamis 2010). I have often found myself sitting or walking in solitude among the ruins at dusk (with the excavator's permission). My resulting spiritual experience, even before I had ever read similar accounts, would emerge from the physicality of all the aforementioned sensations, textures and spaces and, at the same time, from the hope of connecting with the people I study, not only the Bronze Age inhabitants of the site, but also the villagers and excavation teams who imprinted part of their lives there and whom I never had the chance to encounter. It is this type of experience which has led me to the realization that my layered engagements with Minoan materiality are parallel to those I examine in this paper. For me, the kind of embodied experiences that sites like Zakros enable is paramount for understanding past people as something other than typologically categorized finds.

## Minoan Religion and Ritual: Multiple Perspectives

In order to explore Minoan spirituality, we need to first consider Minoan religion and ritual, which have been popular topics since the beginnings of Minoan archaeology as a discipline. One relevant thread permeating current archaeological understandings of Minoan religion and ritual is the question of *monotheism* vs. *polytheism*. This is clearly and concisely outlined by Peatfield (2000) and Goodison and Morris (1998b). Briefly, early researchers, primarily Evans (1921–1935; cf. MacGillivray 2000), strongly supported theories of a monotheistic Minoan religion, whereby



there was one “Minoan Goddess” of several versions, which included the snake charmer, the huntress/mistress of animals, the lady on the mountain, etc. (for the best critical review on this see Goodison and Morris 1998b:113–132). She was thought to be supported by a minor male/boy god. However, reassuring theories of a peace-loving, monotheistic, unchanging, primordial matriarchal belief system (still persistent in Minoan academia) tell us nothing about Minoan cosmologies and the pragmatic status of women in Minoan societies. Such theories have also been subverted by strong evidence for a Minoan pantheon of both female and male divinities (e.g., Goodison and Morris 1998b; Peatfield 2000).

Another thread concerns *gender*. The reflexive writing of gender into Minoan archaeology is still in its infancy (e.g., Kopaka 2009), but there has been a long tradition of sometimes prescriptively gendered interpretations of religious practices. As a result, Minoan sex has often been stereotyped as gender; a deceptive iconographic (and bibliographic) preponderance of women has been interpreted as gynaeocracy; and femininity is invariably restricted to fertility. But biologically determined sex does not equal socially constructed gender. The latter can be explicit or ambiguous in Minoan depictions through conventions of body colour, the way sexual organs are or are not prominent, through renditions of specific hair manipulations (locks, braiding, shaving). In addition, not all prominent women were necessarily goddesses or priestesses. What we perceive as femininity might have implied sexuality and sensuality, instead of—or in addition to—fertility (cf. Morris 2009a). Although traditional renderings of female divinities have connected them to ideals of love and nature, females are often also portrayed in connection to human-made environments, aggressive contexts and conspicuously non-maternal iconography (cf. Dougherty 2004:200 on this latter point).

Yet another thread in the study of Minoan religion and ritual concerns the *reconstruction of cult actions and locales*, and the *use of religion in economy and politics* (e.g., Peatfield 1987; Warren 1988). For instance, archaeological interpretations of the religious expansion of Knossos in the Neopalatial era or the Postpalatial (re)use of the double axe for political purposes have plausible Marxist undertones. According to them, religion can become a tool for manipulating socio-economic dynamics. Some synthetic approaches have also produced intriguing accounts of ritual. Combining iconographic and site data, detailed archaeological interpretations have tackled epiphany, animal and human sacrifice, libations and solid offerings, trance and rites of passage; as well as possible cannibalism (e.g., Warren 1981) and the ritual demarcation of time (e.g., Goodison 2001, 2004). However, the most important cumulative contribution is the progressively emerging account that differentiates between distinct eras, classes, locales and agendas.

In contemporary Crete, several artifacts and ideas have been communicated through archaeological narratives into non-archaeological domains. There, they have very often been decontextualized, have assumed iconic status or even acquired new meanings (Simandiraki 2004). Often, the most photogenic or potentially political Minoan elements become the focus of public interest (Simandiraki 2005; cf. Hamilakis and Yalouri 1999). Among the most persistent “public” Minoan artifacts are the two “Snake Goddess” figurines (especially the smaller of the two) from the

Palace of Knossos. Representations of such artifacts abound not only in the commercial domain, but also in local administration and education (cf. Hamilakis 2003; 2004; Simandiraki 2004; 2006; Simandiraki and Grimshaw 2009). They are often inextricably linked to Classical mythology and brand almost all female Minoan depictions as divine. From a very early age, Cretans, including myself, are told of the Minoans as having been deeply religious, and of Minoan women as examples of high aesthetics, fertility and female power (from a single, liberal and progressive society) (Hamilakis and Momigliano 2006). Furthermore, the archaeologically derived theory of a female Knossian ruler systematically colonizes Minoan societies with notions of democracy, anticipating Classical ideals. The latter became reified in the 20th and 21st c. CE Greek national narrative.

Such approaches reveal a lack of a nuanced understanding of both the Minoan and the Classical civilization and perpetuate an archaeological discourse whose *terminus ante quem* is ca. the 1970s/1980s. Thus, the dominant perception of Minoan religion and ritual that emerges from official events, educational curricula, political rhetoric and everyday interactions follows predictable trajectories. The monotheism of the Minoan Goddess is taken for granted. Femininity is reduced to fertility and motherhood. Marxist readings of Minoan religion are almost completely eschewed, while preference is shown to monarchic-religious models. Finally, Minoan ritual is largely avoided, unless it complies with Classical or Byzantine concepts, such as offerings and epiphany. But why is Minoan spirituality so elusive?

## Elusive Minoan Spirituality

The origins of Minoan archaeology were steeped in a circular argument: some (elite) everyday items became “religious” because of their ambiguity of use in a modernist interpretative frame. Their findspots became defined as places of ritual. Thus ritual became closely interwoven with everyday life. This was and is exacerbated by the uneven academic representation of Minoan material culture, and by the tendency to project (better attested) Classical Greek religion onto Minoan societies. This practice started with Evans and has survived in tandem with the “Greek continuum”: the public narrative which links Prehistory, Classical Antiquity, Byzantium and the modern Greek state, (un)interrupted by Roman, Arab, Venetian and Ottoman occupations (Simandiraki 2006; Kokkinidou and Nikolaidou 2009). From this viewpoint, it thus becomes possible to explain the public fossilization of specific Minoan iconographies and ideas, such as female divinity, democracy and Neopalatial aesthetics. Minoan religion is, therefore, a key connector between Greece, particularly Crete, and a primordial, continuous, European and über-Christian religious paradigm. Minoan spirituality, on the other hand, with all its embodied, person-specific subjectivity and elusive definition does not sit well with this process of identity construction. Furthermore, many discourses of Minoan religion are firmly rooted in modernist and processual methodologies. Meanwhile, most studies choose to avoid anthropological, psychological and other non-quantifiable approaches.

Another subtext within Minoan religious studies is the overwhelmingly white, Western and frequently Judeo-Christian background of their academic and non-academic audiences during the last century or so. This has had a conscious or subconscious influence on religious interpretations. For example, the interpretation of a religious depiction as *representative of* rather than *being a* personage may be the result of a subconscious Judeo-Christian reservation about idolatry (cf. relevant reservations in Morris and Peatfield 2004:37, also the discussion about suppositions made by interpreting gestures as “supplicatory”, *idem*:46). A fat figurine is, in today’s world, more easily accepted as a symbol of fertility, rather than an actual woman or Goddess (cf. Goodison and Morris 1998a, b). Similarly, a bare-breasted, snake-wielding figurine is more easily interpreted as a symbol of female political, biological and divine power, rather than as a portrait of an actual woman flaunting her female sexuality.

In addition, the elusiveness of Minoan spirituality should be contextualized within a Greek (including Cretan) religious framework. Nowadays overwhelmingly Christian, but conflictingly Christian and Muslim during the emergence of Minoan archaeology, Cretan spiritual complexities are enmeshed in gender imbalances. In a patriarchal religious context, women are completely excluded from official positions of priesthood and almost never allowed to access certain sacred spaces. Nevertheless, they are afforded equal treatment with men in terms of communal activities, can run their own nunneries, organize religious feasts, provide spiritual guidance as nuns or as “presvyteres” (wives of priests). The supposed female dominance in the Minoan religion of the “Greek Continuum” may perhaps be the compensation for the current marginalization of women in Christian Orthodox cult and priesthood. It is also not surprising that Minoan spirituality is ignored beyond simplistic notions of piety, fertility or motherhood. This may be because: (a) it jars with dominant institutionalized spiritualities; (b) it refers to physicality and embodied experiences alien to Christian philosophy; (c) it opens highly threatening possibilities for inspiration from pre-Christian spirituality. This is perhaps why other progressively spreading conduits of contemporary spirituality (e.g., Greek neo-paganism, such as Olympian God worship) are often ignored, derided or followed largely because of nationalist interests in Greece and Crete (cf. Hamilakis and Yalouri 1999). The public narrative is therefore also almost completely unaware of the contemporary Goddess movement’s interest in the Minoans (cf. Meskell 1995; Rountree 2001:18–19; also see below).

Along with national and religious reasons, we should also consider philosophical/ontological hindrances to the study of spirituality. The *modus operandi* of most research into and engagement with Minoan religion renders it an objectified field of research, where bodies are predominantly technological tools (e.g., for digging, writing, teaching), not cognitive mediators or potential spiritual conduits. There is no room for the researcher’s body (gendered, sexual, sensual, spiritual). This is partly because of the persistence of a quasi-scientific positivism which renders bodily experience as a methodological hindrance in the study of, ironically, a *par excellence* corporeal subject. But the persistent epistemological Cartesianism of body vs. mind is redundant in the 21st c. CE (cf. Meskell 1998a, 2000; Morris and

Peatfield 2004, esp. 39,42; Simandiraki-Grimshaw 2010, esp. 323,fn.23; Lillios and Tsamis 2010). The researched and the researcher were/are not disembodied minds. Past subjects did not necessarily experience the world in typologically distinct categories of predominantly visual material culture. Non-archaeologists also often engage with artifacts and, to a lesser extent, with monuments, from a distance: through a book, behind a glass case, a barrier, a predetermined walkway. They are therefore deprived of important dimensions of artifacts and monuments beyond the visual, such as their varied textures, temperatures and smells, their soundscapes, how they shape-shift in differential lighting.

## Seeking Minoan Spirituality

Despite the multiple hindrances, instances of Minoan spirituality can nevertheless be found and explored. Let us start with what I will term *philosophical Minoan spirituality*. This, I feel, is exemplified by two works: *Minoan Religion: the Secret Dimension* (1998, in Greek) by Aimilios Bouratinos, and *Taste of a Prehistoric Olive* (2005, in Greek) by Yiannis Sakellarakis.

First, let us consider Bouratinos's *Minoan Religion*. Bouratinos is a non-archaeologist and casts researchers of Minoan religion as "others" (e.g., Bouratinos 1998:13). He nevertheless displays substantial knowledge of academic archaeological discourses of Minoan religion and ritual, from his intellectual engagement with relevant bibliography, to his alternative readings of several Minoan "religious" sites, monuments and artifacts. The main purpose of Bouratinos's book is to build on such previous scholarship and, through his explorations, to "stir an interest as to what is actually behind Minoan religion" (*idem*:14, my translation).

Bouratinos starts his book with the premise that, despite extensive studies on Minoan religion, researchers do not always really relate to the esoteric meanings of Minoan materiality. He follows a thematic approach, building towards a mystical experience step-by-step, through chapters which feel (and are sometimes worded) as initiation stages. He synthesizes theories of religion and religious experience citing sites as diverse as the Lascaux caves and Minoan labyrinthine palaces, then connects Minoan to Ancient Greek religion. This is a recurring theme in the book. He proceeds to cast the Minoans as an egalitarian society, evidenced by the lack of figurehead iconography as in Egypt, which, he purports, points to the self-denial and therefore humility of their leader (e.g., *idem*:33). He subsequently maintains the social, spiritual and ecological equilibrium of Minoan society, in the process drawing on parallels from Taoist worldviews, directly contradicting archaeological readings of Minoan social stratification and purporting the use of Minoan religion as a mechanism of social cohesion. Bouratinos's exploration continues with a discussion of possible Minoan shamanic practices, drawing primarily on (later) Classical Greek attestations of trance and near-death experiences, before offering the/his interpretations of certain recurrent religious symbols. He then delves more deeply into what he has set out to explore and present: the mystical dimension of Minoan religion.

He differentiates between mysticism and magic, covers ecstatic practices and then addresses a series of phenomena which he perceives support the earlier thread of self-denial. It is noteworthy that he maintains there were no sacrifices. In the case of the mutilated child human remains from the Knossos Stratigraphic Museum excavations (Warren 1981; Wall et al. 1986), he dismisses their “butcher” as “alien” or “dissident” (Bouratinos 1998:86), despite archaeological indications for possible cannibalism. He is also silent about the human remains from the temple of Anemospilia (Sakellarakis and Sapouna-Sakellarakis 1997, also see below), where one of four skeletons found belonged in all likelihood to a priest and one almost certainly to a sacrificial victim.

The last section of the book explores how structures, caves and bodies may have led to introspection and self-initiation. Within this discourse, the Palace of Knossos is cast as “a building incarnation of the human being” (Bouratinos 1998:102, my translation), where the wandering Minoans would: (a) encounter a range of symbols, disguised priests and (bodily) experiences, and (b) delve deeper into how human nature is structured and expressed. Bouratinos concludes that Minoan religion offers an alternative to the current Western dichotomy between objective reality and its observer, highlighting, among others, the ambiguity of borders between Minoan religion and everyday life, between human and nature. Finally, he explains that “we, as cultural descendants of the ancient Greeks, have so much to gain by delving into Cretan wisdom” (*idem*:109, my translation). He urges readers to use this wisdom to avoid being swamped by information without knowledge, to structure societies and the environment meaningfully, and therefore be in touch with the Earth.

*Taste of a Prehistoric Olive* is one of a series of books where Sakellarakis, an established authority in Aegean archaeology, sets out to explore archaeological themes from a reflexive point of view. The aim of the book is to explore the author’s professional–personal interface through six narratives. These blend his experiences, feelings, archaeological remembrances, artifacts, monuments, sites, people (archaeologists and non-archaeologists), philosophy, introspection, Western literature and thought, academic references, spirituality and corporeality. In the opening chapter, he describes his multisensory encounter with a famous cup of Minoan olives that was excavated in a well at the Palace of Zakros in the 1960s. In “Sea voyage inland”, he recounts highly corporeal experiences of his excavation, perception and spiritual closeness to one of his and Efi Sakellarakis’s most famous finds: the Anemospilia temple sacrifice (see above). In “The gold diggers”, he focuses on his experiences of gold artifacts, especially rings. In “Detective stories”, Sakellarakis tackles archaeological investigation and looting in Archanes; while in “The blissful anonymity of prehistory” he explores identity and reflexive approaches to artifacts. He exclaims: “If my archaeological ego dominates in a description, how can I convey the magic of Minoan art?” Later on, he ponders: “How (...) can I delve into Minoan theology, since I have not been initiated to the apocryphal mysteries of Minoan religion?” (both Sakellarakis 2005:158, my translation). Finally, the last narrative, “To Othello”, constitutes a deep, emotional, diachronic exploration of the dynamics between humans and dogs.

“Sea voyage inland” deserves special attention due to its (sub)conscious exploration of Minoan spirituality. Here Sakellarakis begins with his fascination for the interaction between artifacts and people (*idem*:18), explaining his frustration at not being professionally able to break through archaeological specialization towards a human(ist) dimension (*idem*:24). After emphasizing his obligation to publish in “the dry, then politically imposed katharevousa”<sup>2</sup> (*idem*:23), he reaches his main focus: the “priest” skeleton from the Minoan temple of Anemospilia. Sakellarakis explains his relationship with his find in a multitude of embodied, emotional, introspective ways, which, in essence, constitute the reflexive approach missing from the relevant sections of its official publication (Sakellarakis and Sakellarakis 1997). He describes the physical sensations of excavating at Anemospilia, in solitude, under the beating sun, halfway up mount Juktas, at the notional crossroads between the Knossos-Archanes valley and the multicoloured sea that is directly visible to the north, beyond Herakleion. He tries to understand the “priest” through the physicality of their engagement (as find and archaeologist, as two human beings across time) and using/wearing the man’s jewellery (ring, wrist seal, Sakellarakis 2005:40). He therefore provides a somatic substitute for the human condition of this particular individual, whose artifactual body parts have outlived his physical ones (cf. *idem*:41).

This brings us to *experiential Minoan spirituality*. This is exemplified by two further works: “Experiencing Ritual: Shamanic elements in Minoan Religion”, by Christine Morris and Alan A.D. Peatfield (2004, see also McGowan 2006) and *Odyssey with the Goddess: a Spiritual Quest in Crete* (1995) by Carol P. Christ. Morris and Peatfield (2004) is one of a series of papers on Minoan peak sanctuaries and Minoan corporeality more generally.<sup>3</sup> As Aegean archaeologists, they focus on scenes from Minoan gold rings<sup>4</sup> and on the finds from the peak sanctuary site of Atsipadhes Korakias, i.e. they compare elite and non-elite representations. They make a case for the systematic introduction of the notions of shamanism and embodiment in Aegean/Minoan religious studies, drawing especially upon anthropology and (neuro)biology. They thus combat one of the aforementioned pitfalls: the absence of the archaeologist’s *feeling/lived* body, beyond its uses as a professional tool (cf. *idem*:54. See also Goodison (2001, 2004); Goodison 2012; Peatfield and Morris 2012; Hamilakis (2002)). Furthermore, building on the importance of embodiment, they also advance an argument for “the performative nature of religion” (*idem*:36), including the understanding of ecstasy and the variety of altered states of consciousness (ASC), hitherto sidelined. As they put it, “the holistic interaction of body, mind, and spirit creates a conduit to mystical experience” (*idem*:36). They go on to discuss how religious ASC, which seem to play a more prominent role in Minoan iconography

<sup>2</sup>This was the official written version of Greek until the early 1980s, an archaic, partly artificial version of the language.

<sup>3</sup>See Peatfield (1992); Peatfield (2001); Morris and Peatfield (2002). See also Morris (2001, 2009b).

<sup>4</sup>See also Morris (2004).



than has to date been acknowledged, can be induced. They acknowledge not only plant entheogens, but also rhythmic movement (e.g., swaying) and drumming (e.g., *idem*:38, 43), manipulation of blood and energy flow (*idem*:51), pain, fasting and concentration. These conditions may result in changes in the brainwaves or in the relationship between the two brain hemispheres (e.g., *idem*:40). Such changes may, in turn, skew the balance of sensory experiences, induce visions, cause a warping of time and bodily boundaries (including perceptions of shape-shifting, flying or exploding, cf. Csordas 1993). The authors conclude that, although used in now extinct Minoan socio-cultural circumstances, such phenomena can be investigated empirically by people in the present day (e.g., *idem*:43, 53–54). By charting specific gestures and representations through space and per Minoan phase (e.g., *idem*: 49–50, 54), Morris and Peatfield's performative insights (e.g., their experience, *idem*:53) may help us to understand ritual and religious experience beyond notions of offering, supplication and symbolism.

Let us now turn to Christ (1995).<sup>5</sup> Christ is not an archaeologist, but her academic expertise in divinity and theology informs and shapes her identity as a Goddess theologian. In this deeply intimate work, she first outlines her academic and personal background, simultaneously affirming authority and explaining the reasons for her life-changing decisions. They include bereavement, a desire for embodied feminism and the awe that is inspired in her by the nature and archaeology of Greece. She then offers a reflexive account of how she came to search for, and find, Minoan spirituality in Crete: through her own explorations and subsequently through a pilgrimage, the first *Minoan Goddess tour*, during which she led other women in search of empowerment along similar geographical and spiritual paths. This pilgrimage is further elucidated by essays of the Ariadne Institute (n.d.a; n.d.b), which Christ co-founded. Cretans associated with Christ and the other pilgrims are also briefly described, with a view to situating contemporary Goddess spirituality within a specific, inhabited land. The explicit aim of the book, the pilgrimage and Christ's work more generally is to change women's lives: to empower them in personal, social, psychological and other ways by spiritually connecting them to "Crete, a land where the Goddess once reigned in peace and harmony" (Christ 1995:2; also see Meskell 1998b). As Christ herself acknowledges (1995:1), "the *Odyssey*... can be considered a mixture of different genres: self-help, female empowerment, spiritual guidance, travel, archaeology, tradition".<sup>6</sup>

The central and east Cretan ideoscape of the pilgrimage includes predominantly Minoan archaeological areas: the four major Palaces (Knossos, Phaestos, Mallia and Zakros), caves (e.g., Skoteino and Eilithyia), small villages (e.g., Zaros, Mochlos, Myrtos), the peak sanctuary of Mount Juktas, the sanctuary of Kato Symi, the town of Gournia and the Zakros Gorge of the Dead. Chasms or caves are

<sup>5</sup>Although this is taken as my focus here, my analysis is also based on other accounts of the Minoan Goddess theology (e.g., Christ n.d.a–g; Harrison 1999; Beavis 2005; Rountree 2001, 2006; da Costa 2006; Holt 2007).

<sup>6</sup>Also consider the discussion in Hobsbawm (1983) regarding the invention of tradition.

perceived by the pilgrims as physical manifestations of Goddess wombs (dark, moist, mysterious, deep and enveloping), a point specifically made for the cave of Eilithyia, which, in historic times, was dedicated to the divinity of birth. Descending into such places is taken as a sign of not only physical courage, but also of materialized introspection. The darkness is conquered externally and internally, lighting conditions create notions of liminality. The sea, with its cleansing and enveloping properties, is also considered a manifestation of the feminine and a symbolic renewer of virginity (e.g., *idem*:141). Certain Minoan archaeological artifacts are also employed: the replica of a steatopygous Neolithic figurine (named a “Snake Goddess” by Christ, following M. Gimbutas, Christ 1995:91; cf. discussion in Meskell 1995), kernoi (Minoan offering tables) and built structures (e.g., altars/benches in Gournia and Myrtos).

The ritual actions of the group include prayer, meditation, immersion, trance, song, dance, kissing, embracing, climbing (up a tree or down a cave). The offerings at open air archaeological sites include flowers, personal tokens (e.g., rings), libations of sweet and sour milk (the latter accidental at first, then deliberate), honey, wine and water. Tree rituals manifest not only in the offerings and singing performed at, on and around the giant myrtle tree of the Panagia Paliani Byzantine nunnery churchyard (cf. Warren 1994, esp. 265–266; also Goodison 2010, esp. 164–165), but also in the attachment of ribbons to the trees adjacent to the Kato Symi sanctuary. Embodiment, a central notion of Goddess tours and pilgrimages (cf. Rountree 2006), is expressed not only in synaesthetic descriptions (e.g., food, drink, coldness, wetness), but also corporeal renderings (e.g., facial characteristics, body shapes, menstruation, virginity, illness). A particularly noteworthy ritual incident, a vision, occurs at the Palace of Zakros (Christ 1995:125–128). Some pilgrims are described as jumping over the site’s modern fence at dusk, then taking positions at the cardinal points of the Central Court, each ceremonially greeting and kissing each other. This induces a shared group trance: Christ has visions of Minoan women in long white dresses coming down from the town towards the Palace. She and several other women then enact a ritual similar to the female processions depicted in the Knossos Sacred Grove and Dance fresco on what seem (on the fresco) like diagonal walkways (which do not exist in the Palace Central Courts, but in their West Courts). The women eventually interpret this as a symbol of initiation and divine sisterhood.

## Finding Minoan Spirituality

As my aim is to explore diverse approaches to Minoan spirituality, two things are in order here. First, I reiterate that the archaeologists and non-archaeologists are physical and spiritual sites which incorporate a variety of states and identities, preoccupations and agendas. Second, I acknowledge my own overlapping professional, religious, spiritual, national, biological and historical circumstances. To this effect, I shall situate myself within the discourses.

I am a white woman. I was born, raised and trained as an archaeologist to degree level in Crete, Greece, before relocating to the United Kingdom for my postgraduate studies and subsequent professional life. As a result of this biological, geographical and cultural background, I was exposed from a very early age to differential but permeating constructs of Minoan societies and religion, as distilled in the public domain and academia. As a Cretan, I was taught to feel proud of “my” Minoan past, the beginning of an illustrious “Greek continuum” (see above) culminating in my current Greek milieu. Mainly seeking to systematically engage with and understand Crete’s past people, I chose to specialize in Minoan archaeology quite early in my career. In parallel, my religious background has been that of the majority of Cretans and other Greeks: Christian Orthodoxy. Nevertheless, a distinction should be made between my official creed and the sources of my own spirituality, which can extend beyond this. As a result of this background, I have been conditioned into a variety of overlapping and sometimes conflicting “selves”: personal, professional, national, educational, religious, gendered, spiritual and somatic.

My Minoan ideoscape has also been influenced by specific people and places, their interaction and experience with me and one another. Excavators, workers, lecturers, museum guards, villagers, administrators, tourist agents, tourists, students, biological and represented Minoan bodies all inform my choice of how (not) to understand Minoan material culture and spirituality. So, although I am interested in Minoan spirituality from an archaeological and ethnographic point of view, I am also drawn to it because of personal reasons: some aforementioned experiences are consonant with my own. There is a tension, therefore, between my professional, archaeological, educational selves, trained to explore the topic from a distance, and my spiritual, national, somatic selves, wanting to live it. Reflexive examination is useful here.

First and foremost, the issue of *embodiment* is more or less inherent in the examples of the previous section. In Bouratinos’s work, embodiment does exist as a prerequisite of knowledge, e.g., when spaces and artifacts afford particular meditational impact on the reader/initiate. But I feel that the philosophical (less somatic) side of his argument prevails. His esotericism seems to derive more from bibliographic research and cognition than outright somatic spirituality. Sakellarakis, drawing on very different experiences and knowledge, is also concerned with embodiment. His archaeological body starts as a tool for excavation and knowledge creation. But it goes beyond the mere handling and description of the find as thing: it becomes an interlocutor with a body from another time, thus enabling the excavator to ask questions regarding society, religion, humanity and the corporeal experience of the site. The sea, the emotional and bodily moods, the shifting colours of the priest’s seal, the mixing of knowledge and feeling add a completely new dimension to the Anemospilia finds and their religious significance. As Sakellarakis puts it: “I was face to face with the skeleton of a soul” (Sakellarakis 2005:35, my translation). Morris and Peatfield situate their cognitive knowledge and somatic experience within the framework of a robust bibliographic background, while at the same time allow their bodies to act as disciplined biological informants. From disembodied tools for digging, handling and reading, their bodies become conduits for the

physicality of the site. They eventually become the site (cf. Turnbull 2002). But the range of embodied Minoan spirituality finds its most intense expression in Christ's multimodal work. The latter, also drawing upon bibliographic and ethnographic research, is not necessarily concerned with recreating Minoan experiences, but with understanding how Minoan materiality might (again) become a source for a contemporary women's spirituality that blends embodiment with feeling, ASC and theological philosophy (cf. Morgan 2010).

Nevertheless, a rift remains: how do we bridge the bibliographic with the somatic? In other words, how are we to be informed but not confined by bibliographic research? And how are we to approach embodied spirituality without skewing or eschewing bibliographic data? All authors attempt to bridge this gap. For Bouratinos, it seems that the bibliographic enables the somatic, i.e. that cognition leads to eventual embodied revelation. For Christ, I think the tables are reversed: the body is primarily a road to cognition and bibliographic research is meant to make sense of embodied spiritual experiences in a specific context. For me, and I suspect for Sakellarakis, Morris and Peatfield, the rift is actually between the professional (bibliographic) vs. the personal (somatic) self. One solution, as in the case of Bouratinos, is to depart from the bibliographic and frame one's own experiences as research examples (cf. Morris and Peatfield), another is to almost divorce the bibliographic from the somatic as incompatible: Sakellarakis's account is completely distinct from the official, professional Anemospilia publication.

A related issue is that of *ontology*. In all the aforementioned works, there is an unarticulated connection between spirituality and a priori knowledge (cf. Azari and Birnbacher 2004). A pilgrim/initiate traces or even physically experiences spirituality, including ASC and other psychosomatic effects (see also discussions in Csordas 1993; Hay 2001; Turnbull 2002; Rountree 2006). But would s/he still be able to do so without the ever-present discursive baggage of artifacts and spaces? Drawing on a different pool of data, I interpret the original situation differently from Christ and Bouratinos, away from Minoan monotheism (cf. Meskell 1995; 1998b), social egalitarianism and absence of conflict. All these suppositions are currently contradicted, in my opinion, by the archaeological record. On the other hand, I subscribe to the idea that current archaeological approaches to spirituality are inefficient in understanding the prehistoric human condition. While exceptions such as Morris and Peatfield (e.g., 2002; 2004), Hamilakis (1998) and Goodison (e.g., 2001; 2004) have advanced our thinking of the embodied dimension of Minoan religion, more experiential work is needed, in order to explore what makes Minoan materiality spiritual; and how it may be spiritually meaningful today.

Ultimately, all authors (myself included) are concerned with *a quest for (past/present) spirituality*. Indeed, the crux here is whether we are necessarily dealing with Minoan spirituality or our own, in the process making decisions about what evidence to choose and how to interpret it. Bouratinos and Christ use the notion of Minoan spirituality prospectively: they want to provide spiritual alternatives to current dominant systems of belief through the employment of Minoan materiality as they see it. They therefore choose to practice and present what serves their quest, making assertions that may or may not be based on Minoan data as currently

understood by archaeologists. To paraphrase Goodison (2010:205, originally referring to trees), the Minoans “cannot answer back, it is easy to use them to symbolize whatever we wish or need”. For instance, Bouratinos’s comparison between the Lascaux caves and the Palace of Knossos is a *non sequitur* if seen through an archaeological lens. In addition, Christ’s description of the steatopygous Neolithic figurine from Ierapetra as a Snake Goddess and its connection to the Middle Minoan “Snake Goddesses”, Classical Aphrodite and Byzantine Panagia (Virgin Mary) may be perceived from an archaeological viewpoint as a conflation of prehistoric and historic spiritual diversity (cf. da Costa 2006:325; also Meskell 1995; Goodison 2010:232). But, then, Bouratinos and Christ employ material culture through a spiritual (not necessarily or predominantly archaeological) interest, and so they follow practices, discourses and agendas different from archaeological ones.

In contrast, Sakellarakis, Morris and Peatfield use the notion of Minoan spirituality retrospectively: they seek to explore ways in which the original schemes of Minoan spirituality may be archaeologically recoverable. They want to understand the people they study and their own archaeological selves while studying them, with a view to providing professional alternatives to current systems of *archaeological* belief (but not necessarily of *spiritual* belief). My professional self identifies more with the latter group and the promotion of past exploration through tangible, disciplined and substantiated avenues of research, without the “colonization” of Minoan people with postmodernist juxtapositions of data. At the same time, my spiritual self is intrigued by how Minoan alternatives would work in the here and now, especially because of my embodied spiritual experiences at some of the same sites, notably Zakros Palace at dusk. It seems to me that, despite the different approaches and agendas, the common denominator between all these embodied accounts is a quest to understand our (diachronic) humanity as the interplay of our somatic, professional, spiritual, emotional and philosophical selves.

This precipitates discussion of two other issues: *intolerance* and *institutionalization*. In all discussions, there is, to varying degrees, the idea of the “other”. In Bouratinos’s and Christ’s work, “the other” are the non-initiates, overlooking meaningful artifacts and sites, being satisfied with “given”, imposed spiritualities. In Sakellarakis’s, Morris’s and Peatfield’s work, “the other” is the antiquated, sometimes monolithic archaeological establishment of Minoan studies, which stifles its own epistemic potential. Despite these obviously diverse viewpoints, the “other” is not actually so different. “The other” is the intolerance toward new and unorthodox readings of available data. This can be the intolerance of archaeologists against spiritual readings of Minoan material culture (Bouratinos). It can be the intolerance of patriarchal Abrahamic religious systems against female spiritual empowerment through Minoan materiality (Christ). It can be the intolerance of processual archaeological approaches against postprocessual explorations (Morris and Peatfield). Or it can be the intolerance of site publication standards against the embodied connection with archaeological finds as human beings (Sakellarakis). All these forms of intolerance stem, in my opinion, from institutionalization. As mentioned above, current Minoan spiritualities jar with prevalent religious systems in Greece, despite their potential to fit well within nationalist schemata. Their practitioners therefore

risk marginalization. Similarly, archaeological explorations of (original, Bronze Age) Minoan spiritualities, unless substantiated, can jar with institutionalized academic practices in Aegean archaeology in particular. I, however, see no conflict in combining the data on Minoan materiality with one's embodied engagements in the field. Nor do I see a conflict in finding spirituality and awe in archaeological artifacts and monuments, as well as in institutionalized debates and rituals.

Minoan spirituality is, finally, inextricably enmeshed with the construction and constant negotiation of multiple personal and collective *identities*. Bouratinos's, and especially Christ's, versions of Minoan spirituality belong to 20th–21st c. CE anti-war, anti-capitalist, gender-empowerment and environmental movements. They cater for postmodern spiritual anxieties by drawing on idealized pasts (of wisdom, peace and harmony). They promote certain types of meditative corporeal discipline and notions of rootedness that create communities of thought and practice, collective spiritual, rather than religious or ritual, identities. Sakellarakis endeavours to (re)construct the identity of his find and his archaeological self as fully-fledged interlocutors across time. Similarly, when Morris and Peatfield (re)instate a shamanic identity to Minoan spirituality, they also reinvent their own professional identity through their interdisciplinary approach. The archaeologists' versions of Minoan spirituality, therefore, belong to a postprocessual, embodied, 20th–21st c. CE archaeological paradigm, not dissimilar to, but more cautious than, the postmodernism that gave rise to the aforementioned non-archaeological movements. As such, these versions create communities which promote a more profoundly humanist approach, whereby Minoan spiritual identities are seen as nuanced and fluctuating, researchable phenomena.

## Initiation

I have endeavoured to explore understandings and practices of Minoan spirituality. I have done so by first examining selected examples and then discussing them, while acknowledging my own palimpsestic interaction with them. I feel that the picture which emerges is one of diversity: of practitioners, approaches, purposes, engagements with and interpretations of Minoan material culture. Despite this diversity, there is scope for fruitful cooperation across these versions of Minoan spirituality, because all are working towards the same goal: a diachronic exploration of embodied belief.

For the purposes of this paper, my archaeological self should have the final say. Following Morris, Peatfield and Goodison, I believe that wider contemporary archaeological approaches to past spirituality can and should cause a paradigm shift in Minoan archaeology. It is neither feasible nor ethical to treat Minoan religion and ritual as artifactual domains devoid of embodied spiritual experiences. The misapprehension of the subjective archaeological body can also be resolved if we accept that we cannot replicate Minoan corporeal experiences. Instead, we can use our bodies as tools in a wider sense than hitherto accepted; draw upon postprocessual



methodologies and non-Western anthropological paradigms; combine these with robust interpretations of the existent material culture. At the same time, current expressions of Minoan spirituality can and should undergo a paradigmatic shift in the way they interpret or silence the archaeological record. By adopting a different reading of the data, such philosophies could impact more on current, spiritually open and epistemologically informed audiences. In this way, the Palace at dusk can host meaningful archaeological, spiritual, ultimately humanist dialogues.

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