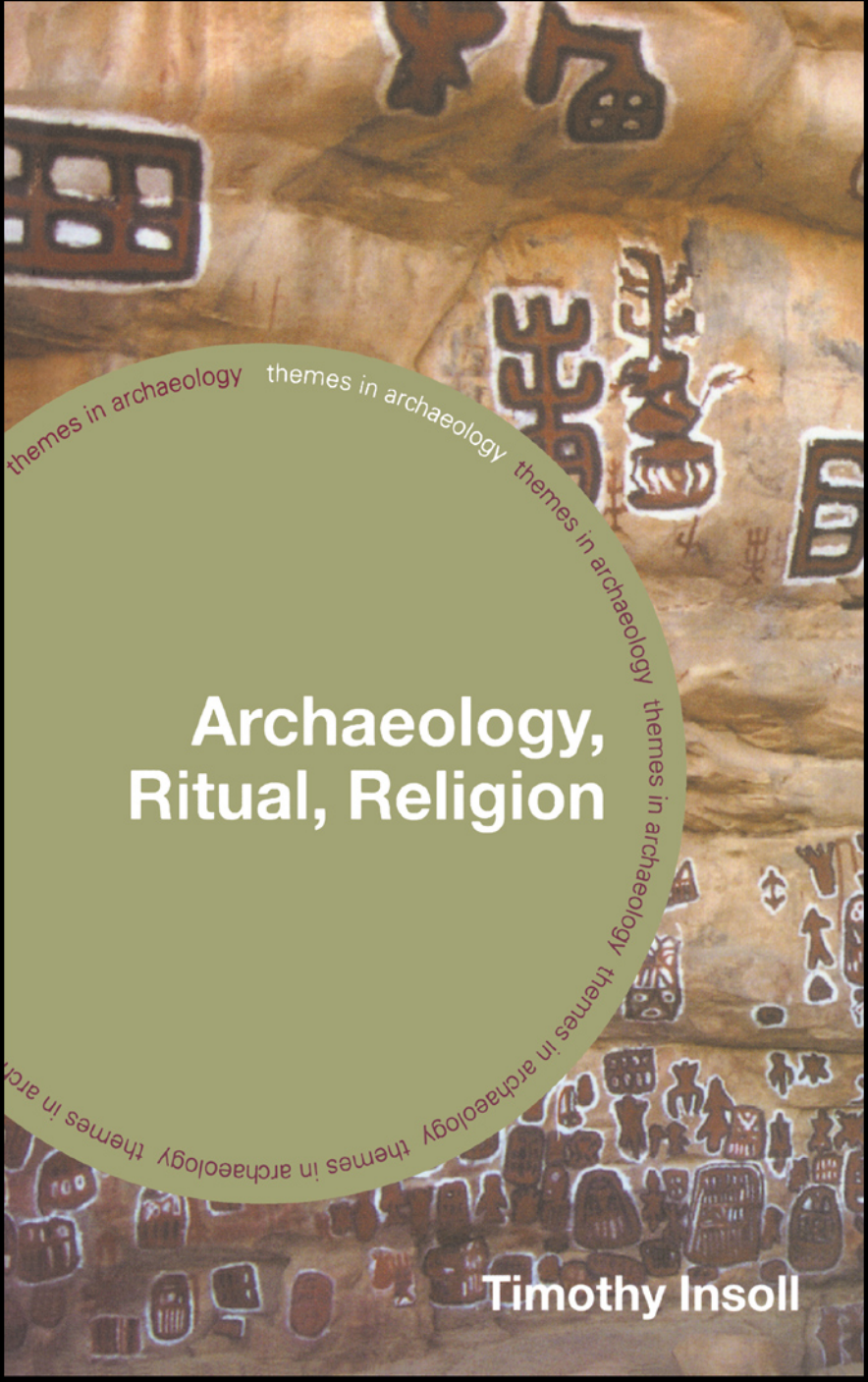

ARCHAEOLOGY, RITUAL, RELIGION

The archaeology of religion is a much neglected area, yet religious sites and artefacts constitute a major area of archaeological evidence. Timothy Insoll here presents an introductory statement on the archaeology of religion, examining what archaeology can tell us about religion, the problems of defining and theorising religion in archaeology, and the methodology, or how to 'do', the archaeology of religion.

This volume assesses religion and ritual through a range of examples from around the world and across time, including pre-historic religions, shamanism, African religions, death, landscape, and even food. Insoll also discusses the history of research and varying theories in this field before looking to future research directions. This book is a valuable guide for students and archaeologists, and initiate a major debate.

Timothy Insoll is Lecturer in Archaeology at the School of Art History and Archaeology of the University of Manchester. His previous publications include *The Archaeology of Islam* (1999), *Archaeology and World Religion* (2001) and *The Archaeology of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa* (2003).

THEMES IN ARCHAEOLOGY

Edited by Julian Thomas
University of Manchester

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF PERSONHOOD
An anthropological approach
Chris Fowler

ARCHAEOLOGY, RITUAL, RELIGION
Timothy Insoll

ARCHAEOLOGY, RITUAL, RELIGION

Timothy Insoll

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2004
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

RoutledgeFalmer is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005.

"To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge's collection of thousands of eBooks please go to www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk."

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN 0-203-49110-6 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-56966-0 (Adobe eReader Format)
ISBN 0-415-25312-8 (hbk)
ISBN 0-415-25313-6 (pbk)

In memory of David Turner (1966–2000)

CONTENTS

FIGURES

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to thank Rachel MacLean and Julian Thomas for commenting on the text. I would also like to thank Rachel and Freya for allowing me the time to write this book. Sekou Berthe and Modibo Diallo are likewise gratefully acknowledged for accompanying me from Bamako to Bobo and onto Dafra. Acknowledgement is also due to the peaceful surroundings of the K.R.Cama Oriental Research Institute Library in Bombay where in an afternoon during the monsoon, frameworks began to coalesce. The Gten Photographic Unit at the University of Manchester are also thanked for their usual exemplary standards of service.

I am also grateful to Professor Frank Willett for providing illustrations from his excavations at Ife, Nigeria, to Paul Bahn and Marek Zvelebil for supplying offprints, and to Mark White for answering a prehistory query. Acknowledgement is also due to Peter Mitchell, Chris Evans, and Eleanor Casella for providing references. Obviously, all the responsibility for the content, errors, and shortcomings of this volume remains my own. I would also like to thank Jan Dixon for supplying Inter-Library loan vouchers, and Chris Fowler for having an ever-interesting book-shelf. Finally, gratitude is also extended to the participants of the Manchester Conference on Archaeology and Religions for much interesting debate, and similarly to the various cohorts of students who have completed my MA option, The Archaeology of Religions.

Figure 1 View of Dafra (photo T.Insoll)

PROLOGUE

Our Malian assistant, Modibo, was told to remove his red shirt, this being a forbidden colour in the shrine, he did this and placed it on a specific rock indicated by the priest. The priest knocked three times on trees, twice to introduce us to the shrine as we descended into the gorge in which it is located. Clogged with tall trees interlaced with creepers, this gorge formed an anomalous feature in the otherwise arid landscape, a sense of difference reinforced by the striking contrast in light from the glare encountered in the plain above to that of the dappled shade of the sacred forest.

On entering the forest our attention was immediately drawn to a large hearth indicated by three blackened stones and a circle of ash surrounded for several metres by a mass of feathers (Figure 1). Here the priest halted and checked that everything required for the ritual was present—chickens, and a handful of ash. He and everyone else took off their shoes, and the party proceeded a further 60 metres to the shrine which itself does not become visible until about 10 metres distant. Then hidden under a mass of creepers and hanging vegetation the 'holy of holies' is seen: a large free-standing boulder, 2 metres in height and about a metre in width, smeared with blood and shea butter and close to, but not touching, one of the walls of the gorge. Some 5 metres from the shrine is a large pool fed by a stream entering the gorge and in turn feeding a further smaller pool downstream.

Each participant is either handed a live chicken or, if holding one already, upside down as instructed, is told to communicate

their desires to the god(s) silently whilst the chicken is in their hands. The chicken is then passed to the priest who plucks a single long feather from its wing and inserts it vertically into a mass of congealed blood which sits on top of the shrine. The chicken's throat is then cut by the priest, and the blood drained onto this feather. Whether the sacrifice has been accepted is also checked by the priest through throwing the chicken down to the left-hand side of the shrine. If it lies still it is inauspicious, if it flutters vigorously while dying this is a good sign. The priest next questions, in the presence of the shrine, each of the participants as to what they will sacrifice here as an act of gratitude should their desires be fulfilled (cattle, horses, camels, guinea fowl, sheep, goats, pig, but not dog or donkey, were all described as permissible sacrifices). The chickens were then collected from where they lay and the priest led the way back to the fireplace.

At the fireplace the priest gathered together a few handfuls of dry brushwood and leaves and started a fire. This done, he soaked the chicken briefly in the adjacent stream before lightly singeing the carcass to assist in burning off some of the feathers, others being plucked by hand. The ribcage was then broken open and the entrails removed and cleaned; the carcass minus the entrails was put to one side to be kept by the priest. Our group, led by the priest, then returned to the upper pool next to the shrine. Here, the priest summoned to the surface the sacred catfish which inhabit the pool with a repeated monotonous call which echoed off the surrounding rocks. Overhead a group of vultures watched the proceedings from the trees. The catfish, giants, broke the surface of the pool with their mouths and were rewarded by the priest with small pieces of the chicken entrails fed by hand. This achieved, a portion of entrails was reserved and the same ritual repeated at the second pool down-stream, where the catfish were noticeably smaller.

The feeding of the catfish complete, we returned to the shrine where the priest took some of the shea butter smeared on the shrine and rubbed it on each of the participant's hands. Each was advised not to wash their hands using hot water for the next 24 hours. The ritual was concluded.

This is an impressionistic description of a sacrificial ritual completed in January 2002 at Dafra, *c.* 8 km south-east of the town of Bobo-Dioulasso in Burkina Faso. How would we retrieve this as archaeologists? The issues which underlie this seemingly simple question are the focus of this book, and later we shall return to this problem in relation to Dafra itself.

1
INTRODUCTION TO THE THEME

The theme

Although potentially a vast topic, the archaeology of religion is in fact substantially neglected as regards the provision of a convenient and accessible introductory text, and this volume aims to redress this. Nevertheless, pretensions are not entertained here that what is provided is the definitive statement on the relationship between archaeology and religion, and that subsequently the archaeology of religion will be adequately theorised; it will not be. For in stating this it should be accordingly noted that archaeological approaches to religion have been remarkably naïve and it has frequently been thought of as a relatively simple area of investigation. It is not, as it is comprised of the residue associated almost wholly with people's beliefs, both individual and collective, and thus it is in fact remarkably complex.

However, this is not reflected in existing literature. Previous studies of archaeology and religion have tended to be very general (Renfrew 1994a; Fagan 1998), concerned with a single religion—Christianity or Islam for example (Frend 1996; Insoll 1999a), elements thereof (Rodwell 1989), world religions alone (Insoll 2001a)—or have appeared as conference proceedings with their usual eclectic focus (see, for example, Insoll 1999b, 2004; Garwood *et al.* 1991; Carmichael *et al.* 1994; Goldsmith *et al.* 1992). Otherwise, 'ritual', the archaeologists' favourite catch-all category for 'odd' or

otherwise not understood behaviour, has been focused on, as will be described.

The neglect of religion by archaeologists can be seen in many of the major textbooks. In Bogucki's (1999) *The Origins of Human Society* for instance, written from a self-stated 'Republican Party view of human prehistory' (p. 26), thus invoking 'self-interest' as the mediating rationale behind prehistory, 'religion' is sub-sumed within 'ideology' in the index whilst 'ritual' gets its own category. In contrast, social organisation, inequality, elites, and systems of authority are all well served, but religion is reduced to an apparently little-mattering element of ideology best served by archaeologists within a ritual domain. Similarly, Robert Wenke's (1990) *Patterns in Prehistory,* though acknowledging that we should consider 'the higher level of the social, economic, and political relationships of peoples and social entities' (p. 311), aside from a brief consideration of the implications of Darwinism for religion, does not really engage with religion, ideas, or even ideologies as factors shaping the past. Again technology, environment, demography and economy are given precedence.

The two examples just chosen are American, but a similar absence of religion can be detected within textbooks on the other side of the Atlantic. Greene's (2002) *Archaeology: An Introduction* again lacks 'ritual' or 'religion' within the index, an obvious starting point. In terms of theorising religion, the general lacuna evident in archaeology is again reflected. Hence within the discussion of archaeological theory, 'making sense of the past', there is a consideration under interpretive archaeology of agency, ethnicity and gender as crucial variables of identity, but religion is absent. This is not to deny that relevant material is not included—some is. Greene (2002: 255), for example, provides a useful summary of discussion surrounding interpretation of neolithic henge monuments framed within a constructivist outlook, and rightly poses the question about archaeologists employing a range of 'philosophical, anthropological and sociological approaches to explore 'otherness', and although we might not want to create neolithic 'religions' (see pp. 53–9), hence perhaps the caution

in using the label, an overall recognition that religion is also a key variable in the construction of identity/identities is required archaeologically.

A similar point can be made with regard to the second example chosen, Clive Gamble's (2001) *Archaeology. The Basics*. This is prefaced with the point that the book is not a textbook, and 'makes no attempt at comprehensive coverage' (p. xiii); but surely, it could be suggested, religion is a basic element which should be considered by archaeologists. For again Gamble provides an excellent introduction to all aspects of interpreting the past, but the absence of religion does seem like a basic omission within, for example, the useful consideration provided of archaeology and identity. Identity is well theorised and the point that it should be conceptualised 'as a set of overlapping fields' (2001:206) can be agreed with, though it can equally be suggested that one of these fields could be religion (or alternatively as is argued later, it can be the overarching framework into which the other identity variables can be fixed), alongside ethnicity, nationalism, or gender.

Yet not all examples of archaeology textbooks neglect religion, and again positive examples can be chosen from both sides of the Atlantic. D.H.Thomas's *Archaeology* (1998), includes religion within the archaeology of the human mind (i.e. under the aegis of cognitive approaches). Although the essential premise of cognitive processualism can be critiqued (see p. 92), and the emphasis upon the analysis of 'past ritual behaviour' as 'archaeology's major contribution to the study of religion' not necessarily concurred with (see p. 12), nor his definition of religion likewise agreed with, at least religion is recognised. Similarly, Renfrew and Bahn's *Archaeology. Theories, Methods, and Practice* (2000) also fully recognises religion as approachable within the archaeological record. This is again framed within a cognitive archaeological perspective, in this instance derived primarily from Renfrew's approach to the archaeology of cult and religion, which can likewise be critiqued (see p. 96), but once more religion is present.

At this juncture it should be noted that the criticisms just made are not personally aimed at Gamble, or indeed at Wenke, Bogucki or Greene, and perhaps their volumes are easy targets for criticism, being mainstream textbooks or introductory texts not able to consider all subject areas. However, the point can be extended away from individuals to the archaeological community as a whole for archaeology and religion, both in its theoretical and methodological consideration, has been almost completely neglected to date. Hence this volume aims to begin to rectify this previous neglect, and it is conceived of as serving as an introductory statement/opening dialogue on the theory and methodology of the archaeology of religions.

The focus is thus not upon providing a gazetteer of religious sites, or upon typology, or historical process (though obviously the relevant historical background is referred to where necessary). Equally, no claim is made that everything is included; much of relevance has had to be consciously omitted, partly for reasons of brevity. Rather, the emphasis will be upon considering how the archaeology of religion has been approached both theoretically and practically, through considering previous research and a variety of minor, and three major case studies, the latter focusing upon aspects of archaeology and religion in West Africa.

Neither does this volume provide a defence of religion or serve the purpose of promoting religion; it is not generated by theology, defined by Byrne (1988:3) as ‘an attempt to express or articulate a given religious faith’. But equally, contra sceptical viewpoints, it is undeniable that religion, even if only defined as the residue of the opium of the masses (not the view taken here), indisputably constitutes a major area of archaeological evidence—quite how much is discussed below. Furthermore, this volume deliberately does not seek to define in hard facts what religion is, for it is illusory to pretend that such definitive facts can be simply proffered. Rather, to adapt a point made by Needham (1972:223) in reference to paraphrasing Einstein on the laws of mathematics, ‘so far as our categories refer to reality, they are not certain; and so far as they are certain, they do not refer to reality’. This is relevant for

our purposes for, equally, statements which infer too much certainty with regard to interpreting the archaeology of religion are on the whole misleading and should be treated with suspicion, as will be described.

What then is this volume concerned with? It explores what are frequently defined as indigenous or traditional, prehistoric and world religions (for definitions, see pp. 8–9)—but predominantly with the former two as world religions; their material and approaches to their study have been extensively covered elsewhere (see, for example, Insoll 1999b, 2001a). This volume is both about what archaeology can tell us about religion, the definitional and theoretical problems inherent in approaching religion through archaeology, and also about the 'doing' of the archaeology of religion. It is both about the underpinning theory and the history of the archaeology of religion, and, through the case studies considered, the application of ideas to the archaeological study of religion. Finally, future research directions—again both methodological and theoretical—will be indicated with reference once again to Dafra, the Burkinabe shrine described in the Prologue.

Definitions

The relevance of the archaeological study of religion within our discipline is profound, for a 'spiritual' dimension would seem to have been important to humankind since at least the upper palaeolithic (but see p. 32). Yet 'spiritual' and 'spirituality' are unspecific terms, of little use in defining what we seek to explore, invoking notions of belief, or perhaps generating images of faith healers, rather than the profound depths of religion. 'Spirituality' might be a component of religion, but remains as such, and its use by archaeologists is frequently a reflection of misunderstanding and the lack of debate as concerns definitions relating to religion. Similarly 'cult' is also a weak term, having connotations of something marginal, 'freakish', and occasional (i.e. not quite religious practice), but it is a term which has been used by some archaeologists (see, for example, Renfrew 1985; Carver 1993).

Equally we are not concerned with magic—which in turn invokes superstition (see, for example, Merrifield 1987). Within this study there is a preference for the deliberate use of the term 'religion', and this needs defining, though in reality this is no easy task.

Religion

The origins of the term 'religion' can, according to Bowie (2000: 22), be derived from the Latin translation of the Bible from Hebrew and Greek and attributed to Saint Jerome in *c.* the late fourth century CE, whilst Saliba (1976) argues that it is an explicitly Christian term which is only widely used from the Reformation. This in itself has important connotations as it can be suggested that the very term 'religion', which we use to describe practices, actions, rituals, beliefs and material culture, could in reality be of only limited utility, and in fact inappropriate to much of the material we as archaeologists consider. This is because it immediately sets up an explicit dichotomisation between what is 'religious' and what is not, when such simple divisions might not actually exist. It raises the question, which will be returned to again later, as to where does secular life end and religious life begin? Is religion as a concept really only the result of a desire to classify what is in effect an unclassifiable and indivisible facet of life for much of the world's population today and in the past? One could, if one was so inclined, perhaps suggest that 'religion' has been created as a 'discursive formation' along the lines of those described by Foucault (1985). It has been tidied up and placed in its 'correct' place, and thus defined along with 'medicine' or 'law' or 'economies' (Insoll forthcoming a).

Nonetheless, this stated, we shall have to use the term 'religion' to describe the subject of investigation considered in this book, for alternatives are hard to suggest. Yet if we consider 'religion' is it really that easy to define? It is not, and what religion is, and what it is composed of, has been the subject of much debate. Existing definitions of religion cover a wide spectrum and range from simple definitions such as that

provided by Edward Tylor that religion is composed of 'the belief in spiritual beings' (1958:8, cited in Bowie 2000:15), or Émile Durkheim's sociological view that religion 'is a set of beliefs and practices by which society represents itself to itself' (Cladis 2001:xx), through to much more complex ones. An example of the latter is provided by Byrne (1988:7): 'a religion is an institution with a complex of theoretical, practical, sociological and experiential dimensions, which is distinguished by characteristic objects (gods or sacred things), goals (salvation or ultimate good) and functions (giving an overall meaning to life or providing the identity or cohesion of a social group)'. Whilst a mid-point between the two is provided by Durrans's (2000:59) definition that religion is 'a system of collective, public actions which conform to rules ("ritual") and usually express "beliefs" in the sense of a mixture of ideas and pre-dispositions'.

We can also define further elements frequently associated with religion, thought of either as subsumed within religion or operating in parallel with it, as in Paden's (1994:10) definition that religion is 'a system of language and practice that organises the world in terms of what is deemed "sacred"'. The notion of the 'sacred' being itself defined by Hinnells (1995: 437) as derived from the Latin *sacer* meaning 'consecrated to a divinity', and couched in more human terms by Geertz (1968: 98) with regard to religious beliefs as 'a light cast upon human life from somewhere outside it'. Whereas in contrast 'holy', another term frequently used in conjunction with religion, was derived from languages of North European origin and has its root in terms standing for 'health' or 'wholeness' (Hinnells 1995).

So what then is religion? In many respects it is indefinable, being concerned with thoughts, beliefs, actions and material, and how these are weighted will vary; but, in general terms, the simpler the definition the better. The important point to make is that regardless of all the complexities of definition which have been attempted—we have to recognise that religion also includes the intangible, the irrational, and the indefinable. Religion does not only function within a logical framework, it