

## BOOK REVIEW

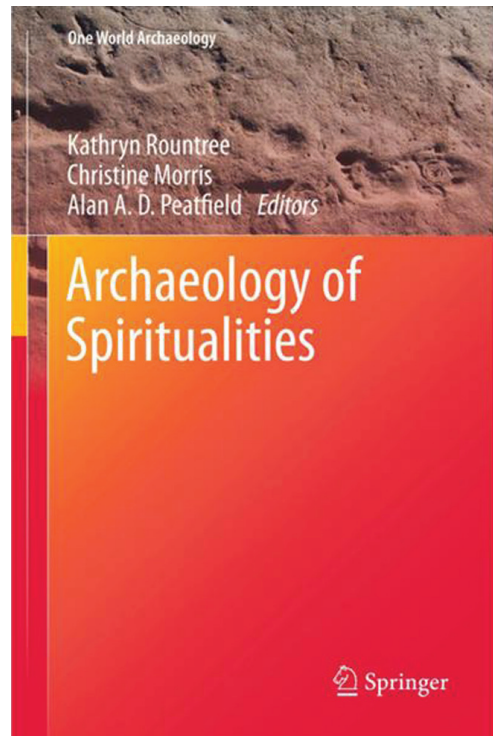
# Archaeology of Spiritualities

*Archaeology of Spiritualities*, Rountree, K., Morris, C., & Peatfield, A. A. D. (eds.), New York, Heidelberg, Dordrecht, London: Springer, 2012.

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Academic anthologies devoted to the archaeology of religion, ritual, and the sacred are nothing new. Since the 1991 publication of *Sacred and Profane*, we have seen such volumes as *Archaeology and World Religion* (2001), *The Archaeology of Ritual* (2007), and *Cult in Context* (2007) shine light on the various ways in which archaeologists can interpret the cosmological world views and ritual praxes of past societies. *Archaeology of Spiritualities* represents the latest foray into this fascinating topic, edited by three scholars with differing expertise; Rountree is a social anthropologist at New Zealand's Massey University, while Christine Morris is a classical archaeologist at Ireland's Trinity College, Dublin, and Alan A.D. Peatfield is a Minoan archaeologist at University College Dublin (UCD). Published in Springer's "One World Archaeology" series, the book has its origins in a session of the Sixth World Archaeological Congress (WAC), held at UCD in 2008, which was organised by the trio alongside the University of Tanna's Tönno Junuks. Although a product of WAC, it cannot be said that the tome truly reflects the Congress's global outlook, only covering four continents, thereby completely neglecting Australasia and South America. This is accompanied by an underly-



ing Eurocentric bias, with eight of the twelve papers devoted to European archaeology, while sixteen of the nineteen contributors are based in developed western nations. Although not inherently detrimental, this is an important caveat to bear in mind.

The choice of the term "Spiritualities" in the title is pioneering, chosen to reflect "the plurality of ways humans in diverse cultural

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contexts construct and relate to what they deem sacred" (vii), thereby trying to get away from both the perceived institutionalised, dogmatic connotations of "religion" and the problematic western dichotomy between the "sacral" and the "profane". Unfortunately, no definition of what the editors mean by "spirituality" is supplied (undoubtedly intentionally), leaving the volume's contributors – and readers – to deal with the problem of determining what exactly can be considered "spiritual" and what can't. Terminology is a very tricky problem when it comes to the archaeology of religion, framing our discourse in ways that past societies might be very unfamiliar with, but this issue might have been dealt with more effectively had the editors explicitly recognised "spirituality" as a western concept rooted in post-Enlightenment rationalism. It could also be argued that there was no need to use "spirituality" here at all, with "religion" doing just fine, particularly if we bear in mind the non-institutionalised world views present in "indigenous religions."

An innovative, timely, and sophisticated collection, the quality of the papers does vary, but they all share an approach that owes much to the post-processual ethos; this provides an interesting contrast to 2007's processual-driven volume on *The Archaeology of Ritual*. The editors express their hopes that the anthology provides a platform for "innovative analytical approaches and experimental methodologies" while "critically and reflexively" exploring the manner in which archaeology interacts with the spiritual beliefs of the past (xii). In this it admirably succeeds, offering a plethora of fresh theoretical and methodological approaches. Furthermore, by intersecting with other fields – such as the archaeology of death and burial, public archaeology, and landscape archaeology – this volume bears a broader appeal than tomes on the archaeology of religion usually attract.

Divided thematically into four parts, each containing three chapters, the first is titled

"Life, Death and Ancestors", a broad topic opening with Muiris O'Sullivan's exploration of Irish megalithic architecture. Focusing on Early Neolithic portal and court tombs, it explores elements of their design which might potentially shed light on their symbolism, but notably makes no reference to theories pertaining to shamanistic practices influencing the sites' petroglyphs. This is followed by Timothy Insoll, Benjamin W. Kankpeyeng and Samuel N. Nkumbaan's discussion of the Ghanaian Koma Mound, at which 251 figurines or figurine fragments have been excavated. Utilising ethnographic analogies from various parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, they suggest that this had once been a shrine with healing associations, arguing that the figurines constitute material ancestors; although a fascinating and plausible idea, the paper might have been improved with the inclusion of alternate interpretations. Part One is rounded off with Robert J. Wallis and Jenny Blain's study of how contemporary British Pagans interact with the nation's prehistoric past, utilising data collected from their *Sacred Sites, Contested Rites/Rights* project. From their unique vantage point as scholar-practitioners sympathetic to both Pagan and archaeological communities, they discuss Pagan understandings of "sacred sites" and the "ancestors", looking at ways in which a constructive dialogue can be encouraged. Though they offer little new information here, their work is of real importance and deserves a wider readership in British archaeology.

Part Two, "Relational Ontologies and Engagements with Landscape," opens with Vesa-Pekka Herva's exploration of the relationship between spirituality and the material world in post-Medieval Europe. The first paper to actually define "spirituality," he adopts the approach of "relational thinking", arguing that entities should be defined not by an inner essence but by their relation to other things. Bringing in scholarship from the burgeoning field of western esoteric studies, he discusses Renaissance ideas of

urban planning before turning to Finnish folk culture and briefly discussing the benefits of such an approach to the archaeology of the seventeenth-century town of Tornio. This is a theoretically exciting approach, but the paper stretches itself, fitting too much information into too short a space. In their contribution, Christine S. VanPool and Todd L. VanPool search for an animistic understanding of everyday objects at the Medio-period site of Paquimé in Chihuahua, Mexico. Their interpretation relies largely on later ethnographic records from the region, and it remains unclear as to how such an approach would be useful for societies with no direct cultural descendants. Following on, John E. Kelly and James A. Brown examine the evidence for vision quest pilgrimages through sacred landscapes in the St. Francois Mountains of the eastern Ozarks, United States. Identifying Cahokia as a ceremonial centre, the interpretation again relies heavily on ethno-history, with the archaeological evidence probably unsuitable to stand alone in this instance.

Opening Part Three, "Playing the Field: Archaeology, Ethnography, and Oral Traditions," Victor Paz takes us to Palawan Island in the Philippines, where he argues that caves and rock shelters reflected understandings of cosmology, offering a chronological analyses of artefacts excavated from two such sites in order to argue for continual votive usage from prehistory to the present; unfortunately it proves very difficult to convincingly show how votive items reflect cosmologies. The eighth chapter is provided by Tönno Junuks, and delves into those holy sites of Estonia referred to as *hiis*, suggesting that the term was first associated with grave sites from the Late Bronze and pre-Roman Iron Ages, before delving into folklore and suggesting ways that archaeologists could investigate such sites. In chapter nine, Emília Pásztor examines symbols on the Bronze Age jewellery of the Carpathian Basin, drawing comparisons with both later folklore and archaeological evidence from

the Near East to suggest that these motifs might be associated with the Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar/Astarte.

The final quarter, "Embodied Spiritualities: The Case of the Minoans," opens with Lucy Goodison's study of embodiment in Early and Middle Bronze Age Crete, criticising the influence that Judeo-Christian concepts regarding monotheism, anthropomorphism, and transcendence have had over the archaeological study of Minoan spirituality. Critiquing prior interpretations of floral and faunal motifs in Cretan art, she proposes a new model for understanding such issues based on topography, time, and transaction. The increasingly popular topic of shamanism is brought to bear on Minoan archaeology by Alan A.D. Peatfield and Christine Morris in their chapter, in which they examine the clay figurines from the peak sanctuary of Atsiphades Korakias, arguing that the different postures found among the figurines reflect poses adopted in the path to altered states of consciousness. In the final chapter, Anna Simandiraki-Grimshaw discusses contemporary discourses around "Minoan spirituality," examining various books on the subject and critiquing the Christian, androcentric bias that has pervaded both archaeological and popular Cretan understandings of the issue. Although personally unfamiliar with Minoan archaeology, to my mind these approaches appear significant, and undoubtedly could be applied to the spiritualities of many other past societies too.

Although an expensive volume, this is indispensable reading for anyone with a particular interest in the latest approaches to the archaeology of religion, spirituality, and ritual, and undoubtedly will inspire and inform future research in these interrelated fields. It might not be flawless, but it is highly recommended.

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