

**Title: Can we achieve an adequate
archaeology of religion ? If so,
what can we learn from it ?**

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MA in Archaeology theory essay

Introduction

Religion is a difficult construct which pervades aspects of human thoughts, actions and material culture. How to define and approach the subject has long been a concern of scholars and this is reflected in concerns regarding what kinds and forms of literature are the most appropriate. Although there were religious studies prior to the 1980s using the nominative and processual approaches, for example Binford (1971) and Frankfort (1948), they did not contain a systematic hypothetical framework of how to determine religious artifacts and settings from the archaeological record (Whitehouse 1996). Processualism, being materialist and functionalist, considered religion as relatively unimportant, when compared with the investigation of societal adaptations internally and externally to their environments, on account of the belief that religion was hardest to get at through artifact remains. This belief was heavily influenced by the prevailing “ladder of inference” (Hawkes 1954)

Such systematic studies really began with Renfrew’s 1985 attempt to develop an appropriate processual methodological approach, termed cognitive archaeology, and post-processual archaeology in the 1980s (Whitehouse 1996). Therefore the challenge today is to develop appropriate methodologies that permit breaking through the barriers of silence surrounding the symbolism and ritualism inherent within prehistoric occupational sites and artifacts. Belief and ritual practices vary enormously over time and space, which compounds the problem and requires a myriad of approaches to be brought to bear.

Theories have been arrived at as to what constitute the indicators for religion and ritual action, and how to interpret these symbols, whilst at the same time recognising that ritual can act as a negotiator of stability and change within and between societies. All theories also have weaknesses and these need to be highlighted to determine what investigative paths are likely to be most applicable to particular situations and the conditions under which they are operable to their optimum. Archaeologists can arrive at archaeologies of religion through such studies and be able to further understanding the limitations of the archaeological record through positing innovative ways to extract increasing amounts of information from the existing data.

Defining and theorising religion and ritual

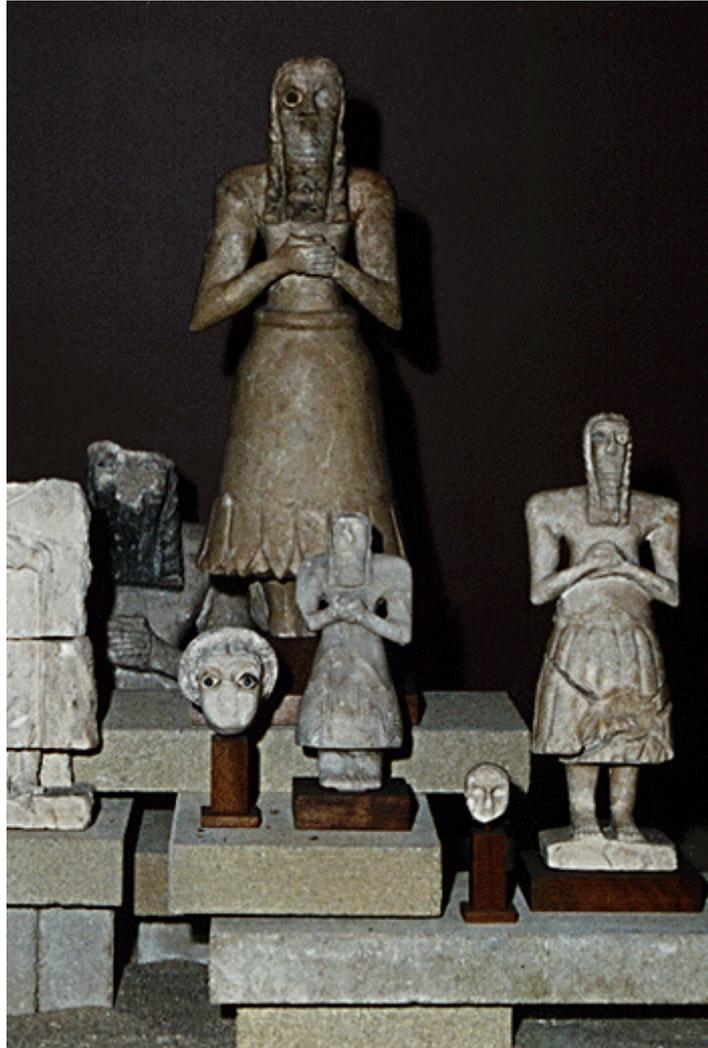
Without delineations, the personification of religion can be taken to the extreme, like the metaphorical worship of a “god of money”. Durkheim (1995) defines religion as a system of beliefs and practices relative to the sacred. Communities of people are inseparable from the notion of belief in worship of the supernatural and religion is collective force which binds the society. Within this model, religion is a human creation whose function it is to create an external force to serve as a regulatory framework for the structure of the living society.

Renfrew provides a more comprehensive definition by seeing religious belief and cult as asserting the existence of a form of supernatural essence which has powers to be respected. He believes that archaeology has to confront the real probability that the participants in the belief systems accepted the “cult [and its purpose of bringing] the participating humans, and sometimes those whom they represent, into more direct relation with these transcendental realities” (Renfrew 1985, 16). The application of the term “cult” is not used in its normal anthropological sense where it is applied to minority religions or sects, but instead is interchangeable with “religion”. This view goes a step beyond Durkheim by recognising the participation of individuals not just as part of the community, but in relation to individual capacities which are impacted upon by the experiences and influences encountered through observation of or direct participation in the ceremonies.

A natural temptation exists for archaeologists to immediately proceed from defining religion as the recognition and belief in the supernatural to defining ritual. However, this approach carries the inherent risk of, whilst situating the phenomenon with the circle of wider social production, appearing to be tautological: that of knowing what will be found and how to interpret it before the remains and artifacts are unearthed (Barrett 1991).

These acts of worship and obedience, through sets of defined rules and actions, to a supernatural power can be determined through the ritual’s historical background and setting, and on account of its repetitive nature encompassing formality in chosen locations. The rituals have to be done in a precise manner, compared with everyday

life where there are expedients and substitutes, otherwise the action expressed through words and items would be invalid. Artifacts in isolation, like anthropomorphic figurines from Egypt (Ucko 1962) as well Sumerian votive statues taking the physical place of people paying respects to the dead (Figure 1), are insufficient indicators for formalised religious practices. The context of the finds and of the site itself is crucial (Renfrew 1985, 1994).



Sumerian votive statues. *From (Sumner 1996)*

Ritual objects are not constitutive of fixed histories - an object may be conceived as utilitarian and end up being used for ritual (Whitehouse 1996). Predynastic Egypt has shown us that utilitarian objects such as pottery were also placed with the dead, in accordance with their belief in a continued existence in the afterlife. Like Renfrew, Whitehouse (1996: 12) stresses the importance of context and further points out that

“what is being reconstructed is at best the meaning of the object at the time of deposition and may not apply to an earlier stage of the object’s ‘biography’ ”.

Ritual actions are not necessarily religious. The secular form of ritual has often been glossed over at best or not mentioned at worst. However, secular ritual is hard to detect even in the ethnographic record as it is often very similar to religious ritual. If it is argued that ritual is characterised by formality and repetition, the idea that what is interpreted as ritual may actually be play cannot be excluded. Unless a specific context can be deduced, ideally from available texts, the acknowledgement should be that the potential exists for confusing ritual with play. Thus woven into arriving at working models for investigation religion and ritual is the question of how can archaeologists separate out the ordinary social beliefs from ritual ?

There is also the added issue of ritual as theatre. The concepts of ritual and theatre involve a structure, action and symbolic meaning. Turner argues that ritual is essentially a performance not only rules and rubrics. He states that rules are the framework of the “ritual process, but that the ritual process transcends its frame” (Turner 1982, 79). Religion, like theatre, can sometimes involve the use of visual media and the creation of a spectacle such as the Good Friday processions in Malta or the Passion Plays. The performative aspect of both is hard to distinguish archaeologically, unless texts are accessible such as in ancient Greece and Rome. For Turner (1982, 80), “[T]he experience of subjective and inter-subjective flow in ritual performance... often convinces the performers that the ritual situation *is* indeed informed with powers both transcendental and immanent.” (original emphasis)

Ritual does not necessarily have to be theatrical, but the prospect cannot be dismissed. For example, are the Phoenician masks purely apotropaic in nature or can they be interpreted as part of ritual theatre when found within sanctuaries ? Also, some rituals dealing with fertility or linked to mythological stories may well have incorporated a theatrical aspect within them. Turner (1982) observes that rites of passage can involve a degree of theatricality and the liminal motions coupled with them are both influenced by and influence ritual. Discrepancies arise between what occurred and what is archaeologically visible as the sights, sounds and gestures accompanying ritual are impossible to infer and understand if one does not possess relevant textual

evidence. On the other hand, if religion needs to be performed in order to survive and have the desired impact, it can reasonable be inferred that some form of ritual action occurred.

The performance of ritual is central to Rappaport's (1999) definition in which an action cannot merely be transcribed, memorised or be experienced second-hand. The notion of an action of performance is where the performance is interconnected with its effect as well as being its cause and thus signals the acceptance of the obligations imposed by the conventions demanded by the ritual (Robbins 2001). These performances provide both initiates and onlookers with the acquired knowledge of the conventions and impose an obligation to follow and obey the rules (Rappaport 1999). Thus, it may be appropriate to adopt the term "ideologies of communication" as reference to "a culture's whole set of ideas about how information flows between people and the natural and supernatural worlds" (Robbins 2001, 599).

Archaeological indicators for religion and ritual action

Societal and political spheres are integrated with religion. In other words, religion is culturally entwined and there exist negotiated rules which have no counterpart within the society which the participants can compare it to. The religion and the religious rites are taken at their word, combining human action and thought.

These differences between everyday life and ritual, with its rigidity, assertions and mutual reinforcement through the spheres of songs, chants, artifacts and linguistic devices, help illustrate and define the levels of complexity with different interest groups. Should archaeologists separate ritual from past social behaviour in searching for its determinants in the archaeological record and how should complex societies be approached with their specialist functionaries? The requirement is clearly evident for frameworks which incorporate circumstances under which religion emerges in the archaeological record.

Small-scale societies exhibit the whole range of religious behavioural patterns from elaborate to seemingly disinterest and, at first appearance, non-ritualised expressions.

The expression of religious informality exhibited by hunter-gatherers like the Kalahari Bushmen, with their non-exclusive access to and participation in the trance healing dances (Barnard 1992), and religious formality from settled communities also need to be considered within the proposed hypotheses of archaeologies of religion (Jolly 2002).

Colin Renfrew has provided a list of possible indicators for ritual to search for in the archaeological record (Table 1). These are based on the premise that religious ritualised activities occur in a hypothesised liminal zone, which is the boundary between the physical and the spiritual worlds. However, in neither his 1985 or 1994 studies does Renfrew deliberate upon ritual objects in detail. Further problems exist in Renfrew's model with regards to its implicit result of a loss of agency and a loss of what the ritual meant to the participants involved. The basis of his model incorporates residual categories which an object or monument is lumped into because the excavator could not arrive at an alternative plausible explanation. He thereby limits the investigation of underlying assumptions and runs the risk of misapplication with a prominent functional structure being mistaken as an attention focusing device. The model is reductionist and mechanistic, and its application potential is variable. It cannot be applied to small-scale societies such as the Bushmen, but has been applied with a great deal of success to the late Neolithic structures of the Mediterranean (Renfrew 1985).

Attention focusing devices	Natural settings with special associations; sacred building; special architectural features; emphasised and numerous symbols
Boundary zones	Division between public display and exclusivity
Deities	Representational images, iconography, initiation rites of passage
Participation and offerings	Prayer; sacrifices and offerings; votives; construction of the temples and monuments

Table 1. Renfrew's "archaeological indicators of ritual". *After (Renfrew 1994, 51-52)*

Whitehouse (1996, 10) has sort to use the insights generated by Renfrew and post-processual studies. By using a typological approach, she has defined six sub-types of ritual assemblages: sacra, votaries, offerings, objects used in rites, grave goods and

amulets. In this model, it is not the category “ritual object” which should be the focus of archaeologists, but the better defined focal points standing out in the archaeological record through their repetition and context specific relationships. The model suffers from the same defect as Renfrew’s in that it cannot be readily applied to small-scale hunter-gatherer societies who practice varying degrees and forms of ritual performances.

Barrett (1991) offers a post-processual model of how to approach the search for religious symbolism and artifacts in the past. His model differs conceptually from Renfrew’s in its emphasis, although it utilises the same classes of emphasis. It seeks to search for agency by broadening symbolism to be inclusive of cosmological understandings and symbolic structures. Symbolism is the primary motive for what occurred rather than an add-on. The archaeological record is read as a narrative in which patterns have to be recognised through approaching ritual as text written within the layout and classes of structures and artifacts. There is no prospect of progress or progressive evolution inherent within this model and its strength lies in its offer of providing different ways of thinking about societies. It does not seek to provide us with a definite list or account, but the insights provided can prove to be enlightening particularly in terms of power and control over the production of the belief systems.

Although Marcus and Flannery (1994) prefer to speak of a “holistic archaeology” in preference to a “cognitive archaeology, as a way of emphasising the incorporation of environmental, socio-economic and political ideologies within the inquiries into cognition, their emphasis is on examining how ancient Zapotec ideological and cosmological expressions came into being and re-adapted to suit the prevailing requirements of the time. The methodological frameworks used were the Direct Historical Approach, the analysing of architecture and how the layout and usage of public space was formulated, and the context in which religious items appeared temporally and in what form (Marcus and Flannery 1994).

The Direct Historical Method is “a North American term, referring to the project of delineating culture groups in prehistory by working from ‘known’ groups in ethnography and ethnohistory back into the protohistoric and prehistoric past” (Johnson 1999, 190). Its application though is not and has not been limited to the

Zapotec (Marcus and Flannery 1994) and other ancient cultures such as the Aztecs and Incas in the Americas, despite its requirements of direct continuity to be demonstrated and an examination of continuity in forms and of packages that could have been reinterpreted over time. It is equally applicable to the research of rock art studies in southern Africa, which draw heavily upon the Bushmen ethnography to try and match patterns observed in both the ethnographic and archaeological records.

The ethnography of the southern African Bushmen is encapsulated within the Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd (Bleek 1924) accounts of nineteenth-century /Xam mythology, and by the late twentieth century ethnology undertaken in the Kalahari (Bieseke 1993, Lee 1979, Silberbauer 1981). Using a Marxist perspective, which is generally regarded as deluding the study of religion of spiritual logic, Lewis-Williams ended the era of regarding Bushmen rock art as art for art's sake. He proposed a shamanistic alternative, drawing upon the ethnographic sources mentioned, which proposed that the Bushmen mythology was informed by the visions experienced in trance dances and which were then encapsulated on the walls of caves in the form of paintings (Lewis-Williams 1982). The religious mythology of the Bushmen, in this hypothesis which has subsequently been modified (Lewis-Williams 1986, Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1990), permeates throughout and informs Bushmen relationships of production. The rock art is the visual expression of their religious beliefs.

Disagreement exists with Lewis-Williams over the shamanistic content and nature of the rock art (Solomon 1997), and this has been most effectively expressed in the viewpoint that "the relationship between them [myth and ritual] needs further attention, since it is culturally and situationally variable. In addition, it is as likely that myth and cosmology inform trance (i.e., that the trancer experiences what s/he expects, on the basis of knowledge of this lore) as the inverse, that trance experience permeates the myths." (Solomon 1999, 58) A more recent study (Parkington 2003) has invoked Bushmen ethnographic examples of male and female initiation ceremonies, such as the eland bull dance and initiated hunters wearing cloaks, to draw parallels with certain scenes depicted in the rock art of the Western Cape, South Africa, involving therianthropes, lines of cloaked figures and lines of naked women (Figure 2).

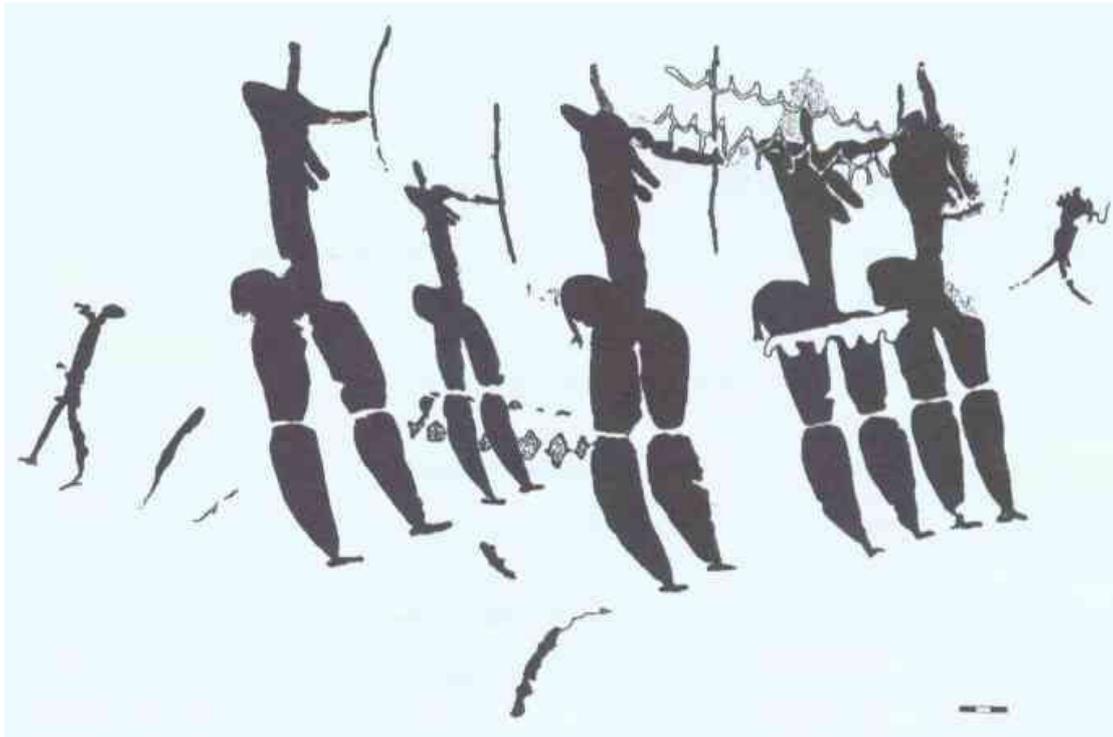


Figure 2. Painted rock art line of naked Bushmen women. *From (Parkington 2003)*

Neolithic Southern Italy and Sicily have abundant evidence of such contextual ritual activity where the cults sites are caves and other rock-cut structures. These locations are distinguished by their inherent secrecy and their hidden locations (Whitehouse 1990). Caves have often been favourite burial places and burial is generally accompanied by a form of ritual. However, ritual in caves is not exclusively concerned with burial. Caves are convenient, durable chambers which permit repeated usage and are then imbued as possessing a mysterious aura. Whitehouse (1990, 21) argues that “obscurity of location was one of the most distinctive features of the cult”. She believes that the Italian and Sicilian ritual sites correspond to the liminal zone and they are also liminal in terms of spatial location (Whitehouse 1992).

Unlike in Sicily, the religious scene in prehistoric Malta is characterised by prominent monumental architecture (Trump 2002). The temples are an attention-focusing device in themselves and they also have other such devices within the actual structures. The statues found in the temple sites come in different sizes and the largest to date is at Tarxien. Their lack of sexual characteristics has been the subject of fierce debate, but there is a consensus that they can be taken as representative of some form of

transcendental power (Trump 2002). In places like Tarxien, they may have been the main centre of focus. It is also the Temple Period, 4 100 – 2 500 BC, that stone axes first acquired and then increased in symbolic importance, as a quantity were deposited and worn as amulets (Skeates 2002). Other objects found within the temples, such as beads and pottery vessels (paralleled by the black-topped pottery ware in Early Dynastic Egypt which had taken in symbolic purposes in ritual and funerary settings (Sowada 1999), could either be part of the equipment needed for ritual or offerings. Hagar Qim is one of the sites where there is evidence for animal sacrifices, as indeed there is from localities HK11, HK29 and HK29A at the Predynastic site of Hierakonpolis, Egypt (Brass 2003). HK29A is a ceremonial complex with unusual faunal patterns in that the younger *Bos* crania are under-represented. The implications of ritual activity is increased by Predynastic seals and vessels displaying impaled cattle heads on fences (Friedman 1996).

Power and control, an ideological production, can be exhibited in such factors as controlling who is authorised to enter the chambers of tombs. This is a form of social domination which Barrett (1991, 7) hypothesises can be seen in the chambers from West Kennet. Thomas Huffman (1996) has proposed similar readings of the site of Great Zimbabwe in terms of exclusivity and ideological control, which are symbolised most potently in the Zimbabwe birds which are bateleur eagles (*chapungu*) believed to have carried messages from the ancestors (Figure 3). However, his account has also been criticised for being too static and not permitting internal evolution within the society (Beach 1998).

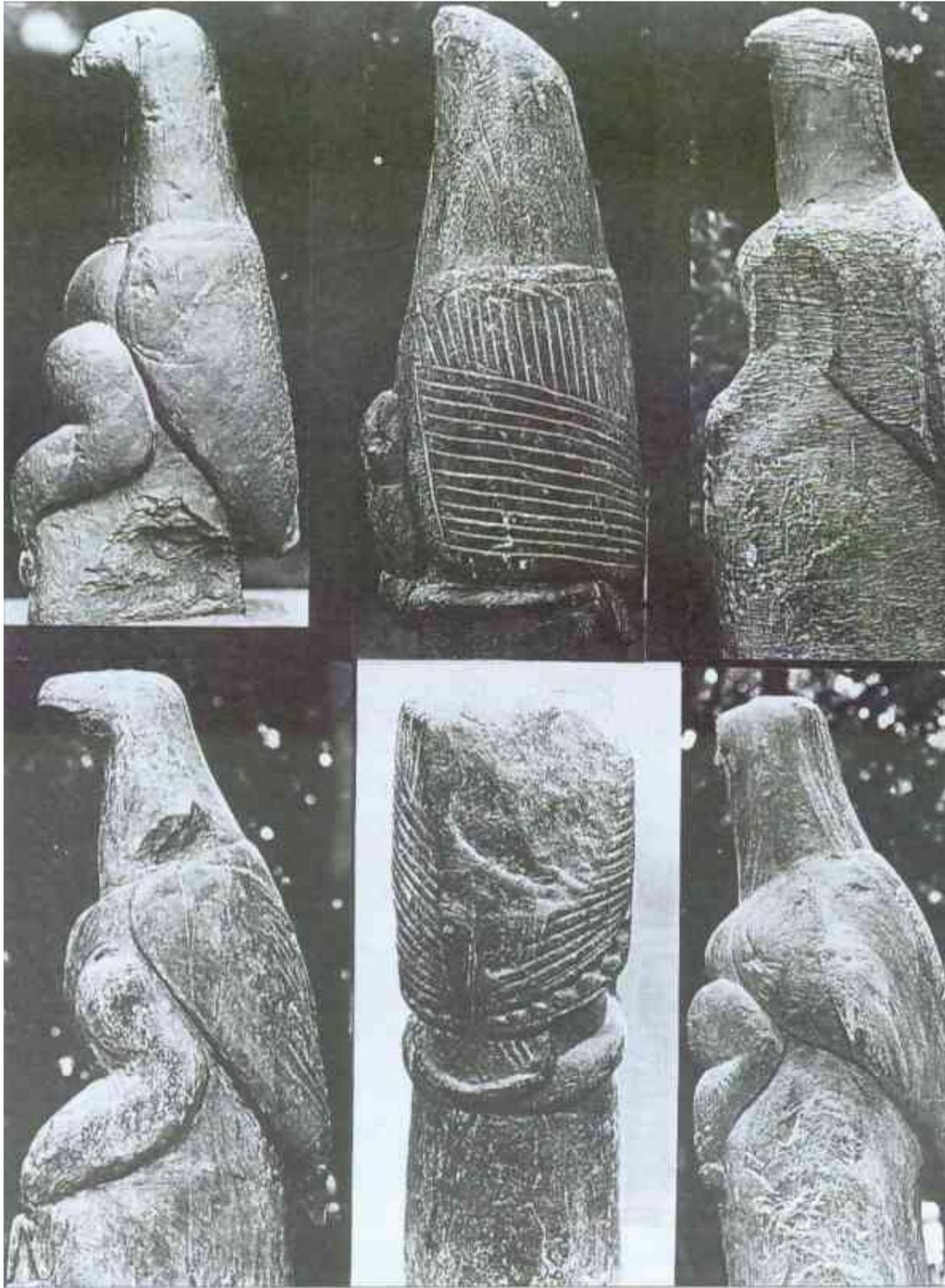


Figure 3. Six soapstone Zimbabwe birds, Great Zimbabwe. *From (Huffman 1996)*

The institution of kingship lays at the heart of Ancient Egypt and two of its most enduring symbols are the Narmer Palette and the monuments of the famous Fourth Dynasty. The Unification of Egypt ushered in the beginnings of “highly significant innovations in the spheres of titulary, iconography, and mortuary architecture.

However, they are but manifestations of a wider phenomenon: the reformulation of the concept of rule during the period of state formation. This process succeeded in establishing the court-directed styles which were to be promoted vigorously by Egypt's kings until they had effectively snuffed out all traces of earlier, Predynastic cultural traditions. The reign of Narmer, in particular, marks an important transition between older, Predynastic and new, pharaonic brands of kingship." (Wilkinson 2000, 32) Similarly, changing religious values and notions have been traced and documented in the Fourth Dynasty Mortuary Complexes through changes in orientation, superstructure designs and the advent of causeways and the valley temples (Macy Roth 1993).

Just as there is no one definitive, over-arching archaeological theory of methodology, so there is no single definitive archaeological theory of religion. Methods of how to recognise and investigate religion and ritual in the archaeological record are varied and their application depends upon both the theoretical position of the investigator and the research aims of the project in question.

Conclusion

Renfrew (1994) comments that we bring our own culturally determined conceptions of religious formations to the study of religion. However, if religion is to be successfully theorised, then methodologies are also established through which the material manifestations of ritual activity can be studied. The problems with the excavation, recognition and interpretation of religious beliefs, structures and rituals are manifold. Different approaches are required according to the societies under study and whether there are ethnographic or other records available.

The Direct Historical approach has been applied to cultures where ethnographic records are available to shed light on later practices, and ritual and artifactual remains. The application of the approach to the archaeological record is fraught with the inherent potentially static nature of direct correlation. Objects or paintings may originally have had a different meaning and functioned in a dissimilar contexts in the past. This approach has to be supplemented by other archaeological remains and the context in which they are preserved.

The majority of archaeological cultures, however, do not have any ethnographic records upon which to draw, and reliance for the recognition of ritual activity falls solely upon the excavated artifacts, graves and structures. Here, the criteria of Renfrew (1994) and Whitehouse (1996) have much interpretative power and have elicited valuable insights into the placement and compositional context of late Neolithic ritual settings and structures in the Mediterranean. However, as important as it is to first recognise a ritual setting, their approaches do not permit adequate interpretative access to elicit aspects of the ideological productions of power and control, i.e. forces of social domination and how they are manipulated. Alternative perspectives on ideological productions in the landscape and in the internal structures of remains are provided by post-processual studies such as Barrett (1991).

The pessimism which has often surrounded the study of religion is slowly becoming less justified. Archaeologists have no alternative but to utilise the excavated remains and any other appropriate materials at hand to continue to develop scientific

methodologies with the aim of extracting the maximum amount of information possible. By theorising and setting up appropriate methodologies, increasing aspects of religion and ritual are open to interpretation from different perspective angles. These perspectives are, in turn, dependent on the forms and types of questions asked of the archaeological record. The results help inform how the societies in question lived and functioned socio-economically in relation to themselves, the environment and their landscape.

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