The ancient mind

Elements of cognitive archaeology

Edited by
COLIN RENFREW
and
EZRA B. W. ZUBROW

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The archaeology of religion

COLIN RENFREW

Any attempt to encompass the archaeology of mind must inevitably consider the archaeological approach towards religion. For if the archaeology of mind, as envisaged in chapter 1, may be considered in terms of a series of functions of the symbol, of various ways in which symbols may operate, the role of symbols in coping with the unknown and with the supernatural is surely one of the more significant (see Renfrew and Bahn 1991: 358–63). But there is the danger here that we may carry to the inquiry our own culturally-encapsulated, and therefore perhaps stereotyped, view of what religion is. Through our acquaintance, in the first instance, with the great religions of the Book (Judaism, Christianity, Islam), all of which proclaim a unitary deity, we undoubtedly begin from a very special viewpoint. Even some acquaintance with other great, contemporary faiths such as the Buddhist, Hindu, Jain and Zoroastrian, serves in some ways to reinforce the impression of coherently codified (and thus literate), authoritative systems of belief, operating often in an urban context. A preliminary knowledge of the religious systems and the pantheons of Ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome might, at first, reinforce this view of text-based, well-delineated and formalized structures of belief. Clearly, however, the studies of cultural anthropologists have much to tell us about the religious systems of non-urban societies and of social groups operating on a basis of band or tribal organisation, so that some of these preconceptions can be counteracted and the effects of literacy discounted.

A more serious difficulty perhaps accompanies our very conceptualization of 'religion' itself, as a distinguishable, and in some senses separable, field of human activity. For we shall soon note that, from the standpoint of the archaeologist, religious activities are potentially open to observation only when they might be identifiable as religions by an observer at the time in question. Places set aside for religious observances and objects used specifically for cult purposes may, in favourable circumstances, be recognized as such. Such identification is much less easy when the locus of religious activity has a whole range of other functions, or when the artefacts used there also have other, secular uses. The problem of the 'embeddedness' of cult activity within the other activities of daily life is thus a very real one. And just as economic anthropologists warn us that the economy in simpler, non-state economies is often inextricably embedded within the matrix of the social organization, so might we anticipate that the same could apply to cult observance. The very term 'religion', conceived as a separate dimension or sub-system of the society, could thus prove to be something of a misconception, even among those communities where the supernatural plays a significant role in shaping the thoughts and actions of its individuals.

These, however, are inescapable constraints: at least we can try to be aware of them. We should therefore concede that in many societies the religious life is more varied and more widespread than we might realize, especially if it has this quality of embeddedness.

In all attempts to investigate the early past there is the risk that we first conceptualize, setting up a whole series of categories of our own construction, and then order our data (our observations bearing upon the past) in terms of such categories. The past is then presented in these terms, and it is easy to assume that our description is telling us about the way the past was and the way it was ordered. In some cases, however, all that we are seeing is a reflection and an exemplification of our own a priori categories. Such criticisms have, for instance, been made of the term 'chieftain', much used for a while among evolutionary anthropologists, and still useful among archaeologists. But it has been pointed out, with some justice, that it can be a cumbersome exercise to set up elaborate criteria by which a chieftain may be recognized, and then to spend much time and effort arguing whether this culture or that society is to be regarded as a chieftain against the standard of those criteria. The ultimate moral must be that such classifications are not useful in themselves. Classifications are of value only if they are put to some use once they are established. These cautionary thoughts are perhaps easier to formulate than they are to apply in practice, but right at the outset of our consideration of the archaeology of religion, it should be acknowledged that the very use of the category 'religion' inevitably influences some aspects of the discussion.

Aspects of religion

Religion is not an easy term to define. But it clearly implies some framework of beliefs. These cannot, however, be
restricted to general philosophic beliefs about the world or about the way it works. They must relate to forces which are not merely those of the everyday material world, but which go beyond it and transcend it.

The Shorter Oxford Dictionary offers one convenient definition (Onions 1973: 1978) for religion: 'Action or conduct indicating a belief in, or reverence for, and desire to please, a divine ruling power ... Recognition on the part of man of some higher unseen power as having control of his destiny and as being entitled to obedience, reverence and worship.' This convenient definition has many merits, but not all its components may be of universal validity. For instance, there are some oriental belief systems (such as that following Confucius) which are generally recognized as religious but which avoid specific divinities and where such powers as are postulated are immanent, not readily to be separated from other aspects of the world with which they are to be associated.

To speak of the 'supernatural' in such a case might be misleading if it were taken to imply a belief in spirits or other separable entities. But the Shorter Oxford Dictionary definition for 'supernatural' is perhaps a broadly acceptable one (Onions 1973: 2195): 'That is above nature; transcending the power of the ordinary course of nature.' Transcendence does not necessarily imply separation.

These are important and basic points. Durkheim, for instance (1965: 47) was able to define religion without reference to the supernatural (although he could not avoid the term 'sacred'). Geertz (1966: 4) offers a definition which indeed avoids the supernatural and the sacred, but which is so lacking in focus that it could apply to secular ritual or even to the system of values which is used to uphold a monetary economy. Such a definition lacks any sense of what must surely be a component of any religion: the individual religious experience.

Religious experience
Central to the notion of religion is that of a personal experience for the individual which seems to him or her not only important, but of a larger significance. This is a feature carefully discussed by Rudolf Otto (1917) in a work which still makes valid points, where he laid emphasis on the sense of the numinous which he viewed as central to religious experience. It cannot be escaped that when we allow ourselves to speak of the religions of early societies we are making something of a cross-cultural assumption, namely that there was indeed some variety of numinous experience enjoyed by the members of those societies, some sense of mystery and of external, non-human power. We do not need to assert that such a power has any real existence—that is a matter for the individual's religious beliefs today. But to talk of the archaeology of religion presupposes that religious experience was available then as now. This is a point which it would be very difficult to demonstrate, although such an experience is certainly perfectly plausible as a motivating force for some of the symbolic monuments which we may observe from the past. But the existence of such an experience in the past seems to be an assumption which the student of early religion has to make: there is a uniformitarian assumption there which needs to be recognized.

This is a question which I believe was largely avoided by Durkheim, and then less subtly (and less successfully) by Geertz, in the discussions cited above. Both avoided placing such religious experience as a central feature of their definition of religion, preferring instead to see religion rather as a social phenomenon. But it seems to me that when we are speaking of the belief systems of other people, while we do not need, ourselves, to share or even to understand these beliefs very well, we can scarcely avoid the view that they, the participants in the culture, did indeed themselves believe them. While other aspects of the diagram offered by Rappaport (1971a, 1971b) may be open to discussion, the place within it of religious experience seems appropriate.

Mystery and purpose in the human condition
Every religion, by definition, involves a system of beliefs which offers answers to profound existential questions. Indeed most religions provide, at the individual and at the collective level, answers to those basic existential questions posed so effectively by Paul Gauguin in the title to one of his canvasses: 'Where do we come from? Where are we? Where are we going?' Most religious systems offer a coherent view of the nature of the present world, of the origins of the world and of future human destiny. At a personal level also the mysteries of birth, death and of what happens after death are resolved.

It should be noted here that the answers supplied by religious belief systems to these questions, and in particular those of origin, are often provided in mythological form. The 'answer' takes the form of a history, a kind of historical narrative. But the personages are not simply historical people. They have a greater significance, indeed for the community or culture in question a universal significance. The answers to general questions are not general propositions, as they have become for us in the aftermath of the scientific revolution, following Descartes and Newton. They are specific, narrative propositions, as Frankfort et al. (1949) have so clearly shown. But they do serve to answer the questions.

Most religions indicate also how we can take steps to harmonize with the world, and often, through this process how we, through our actions (or our prayers) can influence
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The social aspect

Central to the notion of religion, although not well brought out in the definition by Onion cited earlier, is the circumstance that it is a shared belief system. Religion in this sense implies a community of believers: Durkheim (1965) speaks of ‘beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them’.

This view of religion as a social and cultural phenomenon is naturally one which preoccupies the cultural anthropologist. It is, of course, important to the archaeologist who, as noted earlier, hopes to define actions, ritual actions, which were carried out at specific places in special ways. The setting apart of the place, and the special distinctive manner of the actions, will always be important for the detection process, the recognition process undertaken by the archaeologist. Of course Durkheim intended the term ‘church’ purely in the social sense, to indicate a community of persons. But the term ‘church’ in our language, as in several others, implies also a special place dedicated by those persons for special activities, rituals, undertaken in relationship to the beliefs shared by that community. These activities are, in most religions, formalized. They are carefully prescribed and accompanied also by proscriptions (things which must not be done, forbidden words, taboos). As noted, they often take place in special places, in the manner established by tradition and by doctrine. They are also coherently time-structured: they take place at special times of day, on special days of the week and at special occasions in the year.

These generalizations are of crucial importance to the archaeologist, although there has been very little broad, theoretical discussion of them. For it is usually through the investment of effort into the construction of special places (whose remains may be preserved), through the use of special equipment in rituals at those places (which may also be preserved), in the development of iconic representations for use in such places, and in some cases through the depiction of such rituals, that we have our principal insights into past religions. These matters are further discussed in the next section.

Another important and very interesting social aspect of most religions is that the belief system, as it relates to the supernatural, is inevitably related in some ways to the social reality of the culture. Karl Marx, one of the first thinkers to deal seriously with the sociology of thought (Marx and Engels 1977) saw the religious beliefs of a society as part of the ideological superstructure which he viewed as arising from the relations of production within a given social formation. One does not need to follow all his assumptions.
to see that there is much in this idea. Whether man is made in the image of God or vice versa, it is certainly the case that the deities of many human societies have been conceived of as anthropomorphic, although animal gods (theriomorphic) are at least as common. The notion of a hierarchy of deities is one which comes more easily to a society which is itself hierarchically structured, for instance to a state society. It is difficult to imagine such a feature in an egalitarian society organized at band level.

The functions and consequences of religion
Various thinkers have considered religious systems not from the standpoint of the inherent content of their belief structures nor of their communal behaviour, but in terms of their consequences for society as a whole. Within the Marxist view, for instance, with its emphasis upon class antagonisms, religion is viewed as a means, developed by the elite, for the manipulation of the masses. Within most state societies it is indeed the case that the ruler (the ‘king’) has a special place in relation to the leading religious specialist (the ‘chief priest’) and in many state societies the two offices converge (the ‘priest-king’), sometimes with the deity ruling through this head of state (a theocracy), or at least inspiring and sanctioning his actions (the ‘divine right of kings’). Marxist archaeologists have also applied such ideas to societies generally regarded as essentially egalitarian, where, for instance, the elders are seen as using religious beliefs to ensure their own favoured and privileged position in relation to younger members of society (Tilley 1984). A very different view of religion is taken by anthropologists working broadly in the ‘functionalist’ tradition of Malinowski, for whom religious beliefs and rituals are useful in governing and regulating various aspects of the social system (e.g. Rappaport 1971a). The earlier ‘functionalist’ view saw religion as useful in ensuring the smooth functioning of society by ensuring some considerable degree of community of belief, some acceptance of the social system and hence some general social solidarity among members of the community. More recent work, notably by Rappaport, would accord religious beliefs a further, more active role, in bringing into play mechanisms of a broadly homeostatic nature whose timing is governed by ritual.

A further, broadly evolutionary, perspective has been proposed by Lachmann (1983) who contrasts the variability in all human behaviour with that among species where quite complicated social behaviour is genetically determined, for instance among bees. In his perspective there are enormous advantages in cultural evolution, precisely in the special human ability to learn, and thus to change the whole behaviour of society in the space of just a couple of generations. But there are penalties too, in terms of lack of stability of behaviour and in the risk that valuable information, no longer stored in the genome, may become lost between generations. It is here that the devices used by religion for the very long-term storage of information may be particularly useful. For, as Lachmann stresses, it is through religion that ‘ancient wisdom’ is most effectively stored and transmitted. Much of the repetition associated with religious ritual may be regarded as ‘redundant’ in the information-theory sense, and secure transmission is thereby more adequately assured. It is the case that the oral transmission of religious knowledge has been shown to be enormously effective. The Hymns of the Rigveda, recorded in archaic Vedic Sanskrit, were preserved orally for many centuries before being set down in writing about the fifth century BC at a time when classical Sanskrit was already in use. Much of their vocabulary was by that time not well understood, but later learned study has shown the accuracy of transmission to be remarkably high. This gives support to Lachmann’s view that a coherent religious system, with its high survival value, confers a selective advantage upon the society which possesses it.

In general, the wider effects of religious beliefs have been little considered by archaeologists. Yet clearly frameworks of religious belief provided strong motivational contexts for many aspects of the behaviour of ancient societies. This has been well documented, for instance, for the case of the ancient Maya (Schele and Miller 1986) and the role of sacred concepts, both in the development of urbanism and in its specific forms, has been emphasized by a number of authors, including Whealey (1971). For the traditional Marxist historian these may be mere epiphenomena, where the superstructure follows the economic infrastructure, but neo-Marxist thinkers are inclined to give greater causal weight to ideational factors. For the functionalist there is a similar inclination to see symbolic factors as contributing to greater efficiency in the culture system and thus having an adaptive value, but perhaps not much more than this. Such a view seems related to the Binfordian notion that ideational and religious aspects are akin to ‘paleopsychology’ (see chapter 1), and that more basic causal factors reside in the ecological relationship between humans and their environment.

Today, however, within the framework of cognitive-processual archaeology, such assessments seem deficient. It is no longer sufficient to see the ideational component of early societies (including their religions) as simply some superstructural reflection of the more substantial infrastructure, albeit one that is readily subverted by the dominant elite in their ceaseless application of the class war. Nor can religion be seen as purely and simply a device for promoting efficiency, or even for lengthening the memory span of society within an evolutionary context. The causes
Recognizing religion

Some of the foregoing discussion may seem a shade premature, when it is quite evident that the identification and elucidation of early cult practices from the archaeological record is a challenging task, and the analysis of the belief systems which sustain them an even more difficult problem. The appropriate methodology for these tasks is only now being developed, and the focus of attention has so far been upon the recognition of cult (Renfrew 1985: chapter 1; Renfrew and Bahn 1991) rather than upon any attempted inference towards the belief system underlying it. So far, as we shall see in the next section, this has been examined largely in the context of the analysis of the iconography of depictions in which aspects of the world are figuratively represented.

Constraints of space preclude the detailed analysis here of the problems which face the archaeologist seeking to identify sanctuaries or other places devoted primarily to cult practice and to recognize the equipment of cult. The rub of the matter is touched on above, in the discussion of the social aspect of religion. As noted, it is, in general, only where religious practices involve either the use of special artefacts or special places, or both, that we can hope to discern them archaeologically. The logic of the inquiry must, I believe, start from the general property of religious belief and of cult practice as discussed in the earlier section. This is not to assert that all the belief systems involved are similar or even comparable, but it does imply that the term ‘religion’ carries with it certain correlates which are certainly general if not necessarily universal and by which the investigation can be advanced. I have argued (Renfrew 1985) that cult observances employ a range of attention focusing devices. When sacred ritual takes place, it is situated at the boundary between this world and the other, supernatural world: the very act of religious observance ensures that the celebrant is situated within this liminal zone or boundary area which itself possesses certain characteristic features. And the purpose of much religious ritual is to secure the attention (if one may put it that way) of the deity or of the transcendental forces which are invoked. This, in general, requires the active participation of the celebrants in speech acts (or song acts) and in a range of ritually determined actions, which may also involve the making of offerings, whether of food or drink, or of material goods. Such considerations as these can allow the formulation of a series of indicators, which can reasonably suggest to the archaeologist that religious ritual has taken place. It is not intended that these should be used as a mechanical check list, nor is any particular ‘score’ to be regarded as conclusive. But any archaeological recognition of ritual and hence of religion, is likely to be based upon such indications, as well as upon information from representational schemes of painting or other depictions, and on information from such texts as may survive.

Archaeological indicators of ritual (from Renfrew and Bahn 1991: 359–60)

Focusing of attention

1. Ritual may take place in a spot with special, natural associations (e.g. a cave, a grove of trees, a spring or a mountain-top).
2. Alternatively, ritual may take place in a special building set apart for sacred functions (e.g. a temple or church).
3. The structure and equipment used for the ritual may employ attention-focusing devices, reflected in the architecture, special fixtures (e.g. altars, benches, hearths) and in movable equipment (e.g. lamps, gongs and bells, ritual vessels, censers, altar cloths, and all the paraphernalia of ritual).
4. The sacred zone is likely to be rich in repeated symbols (i.e. ‘redundancy’).

Boundary zone between this world and the next

5. Ritual may involve both conspicuous public display (and expenditure) and hidden exclusive mysteries, whose practice will be reflected in the architecture.
6. Concepts of cleanliness and pollution may be reflected in the facilities (e.g. pools or basins of water) and maintenance of the sacred area.

Presence of the deity

7. The association with a deity or deities may be reflected in the use of a cult image or a representation of the deity in abstract form (e.g. the Christian Chi-Rho symbol).
8. The ritualistic symbols will often relate iconographically to the deities worshipped and to their associated myth. Animal symbolism (of real or mythical animal)
may often be used, with particular animals relating to specific deities or powers.

(9) The ritualistic symbols may relate to those seen also in funerary ritual and in other rites of passage.

Participation and offering

(10) Worship will involve prayer and special movements – gestures of adoration – and these may be reflected in the art or iconography or decorations or images.

(11) The ritual may employ various devices for inducting religious experience (e.g. dance, music, drugs and the infliction of pain).

(12) The sacrifice of animals or humans may be practised.

(13) Food and drink may be brought and possibly consumed as offerings or burned/poured away.

(14) Other material objects may be brought and offered (votives). The act of offering may entail breaking and hiding or discard.

(15) Great investment of wealth may be reflected both in the equipment used and in the offerings made.

(16) Great investment of wealth and resources may be reflected in the structure itself and its facilities.

These then are some of the categories of information which may be useful to the archaeologist. It is not, however, the presence or absence of specific diagnostic criteria of this kind which are significant, but rather the documentation of repeated actions of a symbolic nature which are directed, it may be inferred, towards non-terrestrial and therefore transcendent forces.

The negative term employed in the term 'non-terrestrial' has a wider implication. For if a given practice, which might otherwise be taken to have a religious function, can be explained in other, 'functional' terms, such an explanation is likely to be the preferred one. I am not confident of the logical strength of that assertion, but it certainly reflects the prevailing process of archaeological inference whereby, if a feature cannot plausibly be explained in rational, 'functional' terms, then it may be ascribed a 'ritual' function. The archaeological category 'ritual' thus often becomes an essentially residual one, defined principally by the absence of something else, namely a good alternative explanation. The purpose of the foregoing list of indications is to counter, in part, this prevailing attitude. But at the last analysis, is that attitude altogether misguided?

The question is complicated further by the important and difficult question of play. For it is the very nature of actions undertaken in play that they are in some sense symbolic. In many cases they mimic other actions, and in that sense represent and thus symbolize them. In other cases the play is undertaken following well-defined rules. These are rules which generate repetitions (redundancies) of action and often give rise to special modes of behaviour including gestures which may be analogous to those of ritual. Play will certainly use attention-focusing devices and often involves the participation of most of those present. Special equipment is used, very much as for religious rituals, and play often takes place in a special location which, while not precisely a 'liminal zone' in the sense used earlier, may nonetheless partake of some of its qualities. When, for instance, the play is conducted between potentially hostile teams, it may have to take place on neutral ground which is, indeed, in a boundary area of some kind. For all these reasons, the distinction between play and religious ritual is, in practice, a difficult one archaeologically, just as is the distinction between toys and cult images (although the two categories need not be entirely exclusive anyway). At a last analysis it may well be found that in several ways play and religious (and other) ritual are indeed homomorphic: that is to say they share the same forms. Both are symbolic, metaphorical. Perhaps therefore they are not always exclusive. Certainly religious rituals may often have as participants individuals who do not subscribe fully to the belief systems which those rituals are supposed to proclaim. Is such participation so different from play? And while a high seriousness of purpose, and dedication towards a transcendental entity, may well be the key discriminating factor between them play too can be a serious business. In Mexico as in Turkey, lives have been lost in recent years in disputes between supporters of rival football teams.

A further area of human activity also deserves to be brought into the discussion at this point: burial. The disposal of the dead is generally considered, by archaeologists, under a different rubric from that of religion. This may be the case because burials, like death, are of frequent occurrence. But that is hardly a persuasive reason. Nearly every burial, however, constitutes a highly symbolic act. That is to say it has a purpose not simply to get rid of a lifeless and possibly noisome corpse (which can be done in a number of effective and inexpensive ways). Many burials involve a considerable investment of effort and the use of well-defined symbolism. Of course the investment, as has been well argued, may have the twin objectives of enhancing the status of the person undertaking it (the person doing the burying, rather than the one who gets buried) and of securing rights to the property of the deceased. Neither of these need involve religious concepts. But at the same time, where there is a belief in an after-life, it is likely to have an influence upon the details of the practice of burial. Other aspects of the burial may also be symbolic of the world-view of the community since burial is the last of all rites of passage and the most permanent.
So far most of the discussion by archaeologists seeking a theoretical context within which to consider burial has centred upon the social questions touched upon above: questions of prestige, of social persona and of property (Binford 1971; Saxe 1970; Chapman, Künne and Randsborg 1981). The emphasis has been very much upon 'tombs for the living' to use Fleming's telling phrase (Fleming 1973). But it is easily forgotten, amongst all this Binfordian talk, that tombs may indeed also be for the dead. Their construction and the other circumstances of burial may reflect (and have a role in developing) a belief system relating as much to eternal values as to the present secular world. Moreover, it may not be unduly naïve to bypass the cynicism of Marx and to suggest that many members of society actually did hold the purported beliefs in question – persons of high rank as well as low. The celebrated paper by Ucko on this topic (Ucko 1969), in its presentation of many different circumstances and of varied responses to circumstances, served to give the impression that the relationship between form of burial, form of religious belief and form of society was in general not a coherently patterned one. But while the relationships may certainly differ, that need not imply that patterning is lacking. There is much to learn, I believe, about ancient belief systems, including systems of religious belief, by drawing on the detailed study of ancient burial practices. The relationships remain to be investigated in a systematic way.

The iconography of religion

The most coherent insights into the belief systems of the past must come, if we exclude from the discussion the information available from written texts, from the analysis of symbolic systems. In such systems a coherent, non-verbal language is employed in such a way that someone familiar with the conventions can understand the significance of the symbols (i.e. what they signify). In many cases the propositions which are asserted are not novel: the principle of redundancy in religious ritual extends to representation, and the divine sentences may be repeated just as often and as authoritatively as the calligraphic inscriptions in an Islamic holy place.

Nor need it follow that the symbols which we seek to understand are directly representational in the figurative sense. It is not necessary that we recognize human beings, or deities, or forms which depict entities already known to us from the world of nature. Recently I spent a very interesting afternoon with George Eogan examining the incised schemata visible on the kerbstones which surround the great passage grave of Knowth in the Boyne Valley in Ireland (Eogan 1986). Although the precise significance of these designs is not yet clear – that is to say what, as signs, they signify – there is the strong intuition, not yet made formally explicit, that there is in operation here some coherent system, consistently used.

Much the same can be said for the cup-and-ring markings of the British Bronze Age which have recently been subjected to study by Richard Bradley (this volume). The close study of the contexts of occurrence may, in favourable cases, reveal correlations which give indications of the way these symbols were used. As noted in chapter 1, to seek to attain their meaning in any complete sense (as it would have been understood by their makers) is hardly a feasible undertaking.

More complex figurative systems, although rarer, may offer commensurately greater rewards (in the sense of more complex analyses of 'meaning', when that term is understood in the more restricted sense of limited but coherent interpretation, rather than comprehensive insight). Constraints of space prevent a fuller discussion here of these problems, for which a coherent methodology has not in any case yet been established.

It is already clear, however, that the interpretation of complicated figurative schemes depends crucially upon the successful identification of the successive representations of repeatedly occurring individuals, whether these are humans, deities or mythological persons. In favourable circumstances a clue may be given by specific attributes, such as those which accompany individual saints in Christian iconography (often the instruments of martyrdom, as for St Catherine of Alexandria and her wheel). In the Maya case, the juxtaposition of specific glyphs along with royal representations has now allowed the elucidation of what are, in effect, narrative cycles for the reigns of individual kings (Schele and Miller 1986). The great fresco cycles in Byzantine churches can certainly be read in this way, although it must be admitted that in such cases it certainly helps the viewer to know the basic story first. Indeed, in many cases where depictions are used in a religious context, their role is to reinforce what is already known and perhaps to act as a mnemonic. Partly for this reason they may not always supply sufficient information to make reasonable inferences possible for the uninitiated.

For the archaeologist, for whom such symbolic material is rarely abundant, one crucial question is the extent to which evidence from different sites may justifiably be brought together under simultaneous consideration, to provide a corpus of material sufficient to allow of systematic analysis. The analogy may perhaps be drawn with a number of small archives, each consisting of just a few tablets found at various different sites, and all in what is thought to be a single script. To what extent can this body of material be
amalgamated? In the case of written records the answer can be provided internally, as it were, by close study of the script employed on the tablets from the various locations whose unity or diversity can thus be evaluated. In the case of iconic representations, however, the answer is not always so clear. This question is equivalent to asking whether the same system of beliefs, and the same symbolic system for linking the signifier and the thing signified, are in operation at the various sites. A categorical answer is not always possible, but where a considerable range of specific symbols is found in each location, with a good degree of overlap between them, it may be reasonable to infer, in some instances, that a single coherent system is in operation.

These are crucial questions for the archaeological interpretation of data bearing upon early religions. They, and others like them, have not, in general, yet been very clearly addressed. As noted in chapter 1, the methodology of cognitive-processual archaeology is still underdeveloped. But already it is clear that in many cases there is patterning there among the data. This is an inviting field of study.

References


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