Review article

Gods and scholars: archaeologies of religion in the Near East

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NICOLA LANERI (ed.). *Defining the sacred: approaches to the archaeology of religion in the Near East*. 2015. 186 pages, numerous b&w illustrations, numerous tables. Oxford: Oxbow Books; 978-1-78297-679-0 paperback £38.

IAN HODDER (ed.). *Religion at work in a Neolithic society: vital matters*. 2014. xx+382 pages, numerous b&w illustrations. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 978-1-107-67126-3 £22.99.

These two edited volumes reflect the continuing surge of interest in the archaeology of religious practice and belief. Over the past 20 years, archaeologists have turned their focus on the study of ritual and religion, challenging what Hawkes (1954: 162) considered the highest and most difficult to reach rung on his ladder of inference: "religious institutions and spiritual life". Renewed interest in the archaeology of religion and ritual was largely inspired by Renfrew's (1985) work on the Bronze Age Phylakopi sanctuary on Melos, Greece, a seminal study that continues to guide archaeological interpretation based on the material correlates linked with ritual practice. Renfrew's focus on ritual (or 'cult') exposed the widespread perception that religion is archaeologically inaccessible. The recognition that a Durkheimian division between the sacred and the profane is less distinct in reality, particularly in small-scale rituals and domestic contexts, complicates the difficulty archaeologists face in the hazy area between quotidian life and religious praxis. Since Renfrew's publication of Phylakopi, these problems have been recognised and confronted in a variety of different volumes and synthetic articles.

The two volumes under review here approach their subject matter from very different perspectives. *Defining the sacred*, edited by Nicola Laneri, originates from a workshop at the Eighth International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East, held in Warsaw in 2012, with the addition of some further contributions to complete the line-up. The chapters range chronologically from the Neolithic to the Iron Age, roughly the ninth millennium to the eighth century BC, and in this respect, the volume is similar to other edited collections dedicated to the archaeology of religion and ritual. The contributions focus on a single region, the Near East, plus one paper on Turkmenistan. The editor's opening chapter is an introduction to the archaeology of religion and provides an overview of the contributions. The chapters are grouped into three sections: 'Sacred nature', 'Housing the god' and 'The materialisation of religious practices and beliefs'. In the first of these sections, Dubova focuses on finds from Gonur Tepe, in western Turkmenistan, where numerous animal burials dated to the second millennium BC relate to an elite cult. Recht discusses identifying animal sacrifice through iconography, primarily Mesopotamian, although she makes no mention of another volume on the archaeology of sacrifice in the ancient Near East by Porter and Schwartz (2012). Writing on the southern Levant, Rosen views the rise of Neolithic cult sites in the southern Negev as connected with the transition from hunter-gatherer groups to pastoralists herding (recently domesticated) goats. Also in the southern Levant (primarily Jordan), Anderson explores the widespread phenomenon of Early Bronze Age standing stone monuments and notes that, although diverse, they connect to the ceremonial landscapes of open-air sites,

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funerary structures, stone alignments or enclosed cultic structures. Butterlin explores sacred space in Chalcolithic Mesopotamia and Susiana, focusing particularly on the changes in the urban environment of the fifth to fourth millennia BC, and finds that rather than regular and continuous development, major crises and reconstructions punctuate these highly dynamic societies.

The second section, 'Housing the god', leads with Dietrich and Notroff who support the identification of Göbekli Tepe (*contra* Banning 2011), as a specialised Aceramic Neolithic site for ritual practice involving the burial and deposition of symbolic items. Nakhai, discussing the places and types of worship of the southern Levant (Israel, Judah) during the Iron Age II (tenth–sixth centuries BC), finds that there were places for worshippers of all social statuses, whether dedicated ritual space or profane space rendered sacred through performative ritual acts. Valentini examines ritual objects and architecture to explore the spread of communal places of worship in the Jezirah during the Early Bronze Age (fourth–early third millennia BC). Drawing on Bronze and Iron Age examples from Syria, Mazzoni stresses the importance of open spaces near temples for ritual performance. A short survey of Mesopotamian cuneiform by Catagnoti summarises evidence for ritual circumambulations from the mid-third to early second millennia BC. Two *favissae* (votive deposits) associated with a temple at Early Bronze Age Ebla are examined by Romana, who identifies different stages of the temple's life.

The third, and final, section of the volume, 'The materialisation of religious beliefs and practices', begins with Watkins's overview of ritual in the early Neolithic of the Near East, arguing that religious practice was fundamental to the creation of religious belief at Göbekli Tepe. Gosic and Gilead examine the sophisticated Chalcolithic metallurgy best known from the Nahal Mishmar hoard, and propose that the copper artefacts were symbols of physical and spiritual worlds rather than functional implements. Finally, Battini challenges the common perception that official and private beliefs were distinct, finding that Early Dynastic iconography, texts and material culture indicate that official and popular beliefs were not substantially different—to think otherwise reflects our own modern perspective more than that of ancient people. A brief summary by Snell completes the volume.

Religion at work in a Neolithic society: vital matters, edited by Ian Hodder, takes a quite different approach to the previous volume and offers a refreshing new perspective. It derives from a project funded by the Templeton Foundation, an organisation known for encouraging expansive research questions. The contributors, including theologians, philosophers, cultural anthropologists, sociologists and scholars of religion, met at the Neolithic site of Çatalhöyük in Turkey over the course of three years (2009–2011). Charged with writing about religion at the site through a process of engagement with the data collected during excavations, their own experience and their interactions with each other, these scholars bring very different perspectives. Eschewing their original assumption that religion would have a strong relationship with power and property, Hodder notes that the participants found that although religion may be used to obtain power, this is not the reason for its appearance. The group found little correlation between building size or elaboration and the number of burials or burial goods; nor were the burials found in the history houses (those with frescoes and bucrania) significantly different from others found at the site. The 'vital matters' of the subtitle hint at this new definition of religion: the ways in which humans see agency in the world, an "agentful 'beyondness' to the world", attributing causal powers to things (Hodder, p. 2).

After Hodder's presentation of the background to the project and the site, the first section, 'Vital religion: the evolutionary context of religion at Çatalhöyük', starts with Goring-Morris and Belfer-Cohen who present a diachronic overview of the highly variable burial practices from the Natufian to the Neolithic across the Levant. They note that burial patterns at Çatalhöyük reflect different regional groups. In the next chapter, LeRon Shults asks, where gods come from. He suggests that the concepts of anthropomorphic promiscuity and sociographic prudery are helpful ways to examine the role both of ancestors and of aurochs as supernatural agents. Guthrie argues that religion as anthropomorphism, which perceives animacy in objects, has an evolutionary advantage because objects as vital beings are potentially dangerous. Van Huyssteen examines personhood as the "embodied human self in prehistory" (p. 109), arguing that the emergence of the historical self is found in the materiality of houses and memory, which shifts from the personal to the abstract and referential. In the following chapter, Whitehouse and colleagues argue for a transition from low-frequency yet dysphoric (painful or frightening)

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rituals, considered more adaptive due to high levels of cooperation, to high-frequency religious rituals, which become more routinised and allow greater cooperation among larger populations.

While the first section addresses very broad issues concerning the relationship of religion and self, anthropomorphism and evolutionary adaptations, the second section, 'Vital materials at Çatalhöyük', approaches more specific archaeological themes. Based on her expertise of Pueblo societies in the North American Southwest, Mills finds support for the idea of history houses based on networks of relatedness founded in religious practices, perhaps religious sodalities, rather than biological relatedness. Nakamura and Pels examine occurrences of concealed (or temporarily stored and later revealed) acts and items as a material negotiation with abstracted or collective powers as part of spiritual or transcendent magical practice. The example of a mother who died in childbirth motivates Patton and Hager to reconsider childbirth as a root metaphor for fertility, suggesting that this represents perhaps the realm of life and death, where the bodies constituted a powerful talisman for the living. Noting that the physical house should not be confused with the household, Weismantel explores the house as a site of reproduction for shelter, stability and sociality, using animate elements such as the bucrania and animal bones incorporated into the structure's walls. Buchli stresses the engagement with surfaces (of walls, pots, colours and impressions), rather than with form, in order to get at semantic fields distinct from our own typologies. Kamerman examines artistic styles and spatial patterns as persuasive devices of communication. The volume concludes with a short insightful summary.

These two volumes differ in approach, integration and breadth. Overall, the Laneri volume will engage those scholars looking for specific case studies addressing their own period- or region-based interests, particularly Near Eastern specialists. As with many edited conference proceedings, integration across the volume is limited, and an index would have aided in searching for cross-cutting topics and themes. Moreover, some chapters would have benefited from more careful editing as typographical errors and awkward phrasing are notable in some chapters. Hodder's volume presents an innovative, interdisciplinary approach that inspires and offers fresh directions for thinking about well-known motifs and problems. Some readers may be put off by the abstract level of discussion or perhaps even by the fact that the participants could not agree on how to define 'religion'. Nonetheless, this volume marks an inspired approach to the exploration of ancient religion and religious practice.

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