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Colin Renfrew, Iain Morley and Michael Boyd, eds. *Ritual, Play and Belief, in Evolution and Early Human Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018, xii and 339pp., 117 b/w illustr., hbk, ISBN 978-1-107-14356-2)

This engaging, interdisciplinary, cogently written volume takes a welcome and timely look at the intersection between play and ritual and how they reinforce and are reinforced by belief—it is about how we make belief and make-believe. It stems from a symposium held at the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, Cambridge University, entitled ‘From Play to Faith: Play, Ritual, and Belief in Animals and Early Human Societies’. As someone who studies play (principally board games) and the overlap between play and ritual and play and religious practice in the European medieval period I was not disappointed by the long durée espoused by the book and its pertinent set of case studies. The volume is elegantly structured to lead us on a journey of cultural diversity and shared human nature along a chronological horizon. The book’s broad chronology is prehistoric and the broad geography is Eurasia, with a trio

of first millennium AD examples from Mesoamerica. A key absence from this assemblage is any specific examination of Palaeolithic art, which offers an equally fertile performance interface between play, ritual, and belief.

Drawing together the work of twenty authors, the book comprises twenty-one chapters, two of them introductions and the remainder split unevenly across four sections and supported by a comprehensive index. The brace of introductions covers the background to the book and its coverage and the symposium it grew out of (the first of three chapters by one of the project leads, Iain Morley) and then the precursor link between play and ritual, in which Colin Renfrew explores the evolutionary strand. This fundamental question of the project is pursued through comparing animal behaviour and early hominin behaviour and looking for correspondences between the two and whether we can trace

from one to the other. Understandably, therefore, the analyses offered are partly rooted in ethology—the study of animal behaviour. In relation to animal play Renfrew quotes (p. 11) Burghardt (2005, 82) who defines it as: ‘play is repeated, incompletely functional behaviour differing from more serious versions structurally, contextually, or ontogenetically and initiated when the animal is in a relaxed or low stress setting.’ Burghardt considers this further in his contribution to the volume (Chapter 3). Renfrew’s introduction also opens up other insights including on assembly as play and ritual in human and animal spheres, suggesting there is a wider context to human assembly (certainly not one captured yet in studies of medieval assembly, for example). All the papers are never less than stimulating but available space precludes a blow-by-blow of each one and so I will inevitably focus on some of the highlights.

Part I—‘Play and Ritual Forms: Foundations and Evolution in Animals and Humans’—encompasses five papers dealing with the wider evolutionary perspective in animals and humans, including Morley’s second contribution (Ch. 6) on play behaviours (particularly pretending) in animals and humans and how they change in different life stages. The concluding paper of Part I, by Dissanayake (Ch. 7, on Upper and Middle Pleistocene hominins) notably takes the four stages of hominin cognitive evolution posited by Donald (1991) to clarify the development of ritual behaviour and religion linked to play, during the transition from Mimetic to the Mythic culture phase: ‘I further claim that although it has not been sufficiently recognised or described by other scholars, a predisposition to *deliberately create the extraordinary*, especially in matters of biological importance [...] is inherent in human nature as it evolved during the transition from Mimetic to Mythic

culture’ (p. 91, emphasis in original). Her definition of creating the extraordinary encompasses the arts. As a medievalist I was particularly taken by the reference to rituals as being constituted by art-like behaviours; surely an area of study to which medieval archaeology and art can make a deep contribution.

Part II—‘Playing with Belief and Performance in Ancient Societies’—moves on to consider eight case studies focussing on beliefs performed in play in various ancient societies ranging from Early China to Malta to Peru and several places in between. Halley’s contribution (Ch. 9) exploring ancestral Puebloan ritual is richly informed by contemporary performance in the American Southwest (an approach equally effectively adopted in Chapter 8 by Friedel and Rich about Maya sacred play and in Chapter 17 by Taube about the ballgame and boxing in Mesoamerica). Garfinkel (Ch. 11) contributes a study of a distinctive area of performance, the using of masks, in the context of protohistoric dancing rituals in the Near East. It offers both a comprehensive new catalogue of masks and mask-depictions from the Near East and also sets it in the context of religious performance, dance rituals and masking elsewhere, including Europe, though without reference to several vital studies collected in Meller and Maraszek (2010; 2012). Sterckx’s study (Ch. 13) of early China introduces a different aspect of animal behaviour: its influence on Chinese ritual practice, especially as revealed by textual evidence. Various forms of mimesis were deployed to determine and infer human behaviour from that of animals.

Part III—‘The Ritual in the Game and the Game in the Ritual’—assembles five case studies that explore the subgroup of play known as games, in a variety of cultural contexts—Egyptian and Aegean art, Minoan bull games, Ancient Greece

(through the epic lens), and the ballgame and boxing in Mesoamerica. The fifth study (Ch. 18) takes a wider thematic approach—an acute analysis by Kyriakidis on the similar/different activities of rituals and games, one that eschews ambiguity to re-affirm her own definition of ritual and distinguishes games from other forms of play. She argues that games are set differently to ritual and also have a different, special intention-in-action. This does not stop both sharing the same performance space and occasion. Both are loaded with mechanisms for learning—both afforded the absorption of related information in similar ways (p. 306). One slip in the editing of this paper means that the reference to Howe (2000), on p. 304, is not detailed in the bibliography.

Part IV—‘From play to faith? Discussion’—brackets a trio of papers that variously offer concluding thoughts. Malafouris (Ch. 19) takes a material culture perspective on some of the main, recurring themes thrown up by the book, including how belief, play, and ritual are defined and the need to further refine what kind of animals play what kind of games and how they relate to human evolution without being anthropomorphised. Osborne (Ch. 20) provides a very fruitful discussion around the volume’s three key terms—ritual, play, and belief—noting that belief was the issue covered least by the authors, which accords with a general reticence by scholarship to deal with belief (and his line ‘most scholars have attempted to remove questions of belief from discussions of Greek and Roman religion completely’ (p. 319) left me wondering why and wanting to know more). In part this is because, although we can identify some of the material culture of ritual and play, such objects do not inherently embed the beliefs that motivated their making and use. But partly it is because the beliefs in some instances only exist at the moment of

performance and are also mutable. Tellingly, he concludes: ‘In that sense the editors of this volume seem to have been not simply right to insist that belief is *the* central issue, but also right to think that experience of play crucially prepared humans not just for ritual, but for the entry to a supernatural world that ritual can effect. And right too, to think that it is only if we stop shying away from belief that we will understand the place of either play or ritual.’ (p. 320, emphasis in original). Finally, the book concludes with Morley’s third contribution (Ch. 21) drawing out some wider points about how play and ritual enable social transformation, though perhaps neglecting the significance and role of magic as a materialism of make believe and a communication mode with the supernatural—see, for example, Garland, 2018 and Leoni et al., 2016). He concludes with the elucidation of his interactive model which underpinned his contribution to the project proposing that: ‘ritual, play, music, and dance, social learning and mimesis were all interrelated in fundamental ways, in terms of the ways in which they function, the capacities that underlie them, the ends that they achieve, and the extent to which they rely on each other in achieving their ends.’ (p. 331)

The subject of this book is clearly massive and no one book could cover all its aspects but from my biased position I would have liked to read more on the role of board games (which receive only a couple of scant mentions) both as underpinnings of some magical practices (e.g. divination) and as arising out of such practices and also elements in ritual mortuary practice (e.g. Hall, 2016; Garland, 2018). I also wondered how we might approach understanding the role of boredom in fostering play and ritual and their evolutionary trajectories. Such thoughts also invite the wider question of what is the ongoing evolutionary trajectory of play, ritual, and

belief—do they reach a stasis or are they always changing? A recent study of board games in Ancient Egypt (Crist et al., 2016) suggested that the ritual dimension of board games may have fluctuated depending on cultural context: long after the game of twenty ceased to be popular in Egypt it continued to have a divinatory role and an elite symbolic function in Mesopotamia and the Levant (p. 71). It would be easy to criticise the book for an origin-focussed sensibility but this would be to misjudge the project, as signalled by Morley's final sentence that ends the book: 'It is hoped that this will provide a framework for the future exploration and elaboration of these relationships in human societies past and present' (p. 321). I can only endorse this call for further work, not least in medieval and later contexts to assess how the social evolution of the interplay between ritual/religion and play continued/continues (cf. for e.g. Bornet & Burger, 2012). The tensions between play and religion in the medieval period, the breaking or fracturing of the childhood stage of play by the Industrial Revolution and its re-forging anew as capitalist opportunity, and the digital domain's impacts on the social evolution of play/ritual are all grist to that mill.

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