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‘Materiality, Belief, Ritual – Archaeology and Material Religion’. An Introduction

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Restrictions of space mean this introduction can only be brief, but it gives me great pleasure to introduce the papers that constitute this special edition of *Material Religion* ‘Materiality, Belief, Ritual – Archaeology and Material Religion’. These indicate both the level of interest, and the degree to which archaeological research focused upon ritual and religions has developed over the past few years. Even a decade ago there existed almost complete disinterest in the subject by archaeologists, certainly with regard to religions, and to a lesser extent ritual (see Insoll 2001, 2004). The latter term was often used as a catch all descriptive category for material otherwise deemed ‘odd’ or not understood by archaeologists (Insoll 2004:11). Recently, there has been a proliferation of good studies focusing upon ‘cult’, ‘ritual’, and ‘religion’ from archaeological perspectives (e.g. Barrowclough and Malone 2007; Whitley and Hays-Gilpin 2008; Kyriakidis 2007). This is commendable, yet the extent to which these studies engage with what constitutes the materiality of ritual and religions, and what this might tell us about defining religions and religion, and reconstructing beliefs and ritual actions is variable. Often, archaeological consideration of ritual and religions remains underlain by assumption, that labels and definitions derived from other disciplines, anthropology or religious studies for example are ‘right’, and thus applicable to different contexts, perhaps far removed geographically and temporally. Whilst material culture might be treated as just ‘there’ instead of being interrogated as to how it symbolizes, represents, misleads, and informs the archaeologist attempting to explore the subtleties of ritual practice and religion.

The papers herein seek to challenge such assumptions and instead focus, literally, on how ritual and religions are, or might be materialized, all in a theoretically engaged manner. This is achieved in different ways. Nicky Boivin considers the ‘big picture’ in focusing upon how the non-language like qualities of material culture make it perfectly suited to experientially and emotionally directed ritual activity. She moves between discussing issues of meaning, symbolism, metaphor, ritual, and religion, in indicating that material symbols are not entirely arbitrary, but through drawing on the qualities of tangible things, create meaning themselves. Hence whilst language may frequently be adequate for dealing with everyday activities, Boivin argues that material culture and ritual better address the somatic experiences that individuals face at critical points in their lives. My paper questions the static nature of much archaeological interpretation and conceptualization in relation to ritual and religion. I argue that the static nature of material residues leads to the transference of this static image onto archaeological material, but instead much more dynamic, fluid and active ritual behaviors might structure some of this material encountered archaeologically. This is considered via performance, movement and bodily understandings in relation to space and material culture through a case study drawn from the archaeology of Tallensi shrines in northern Ghana, and ethnohistoric records of the Tallensi Golib festival.

Terje Oestigaard is concerned with world religions, and specifically how the Christian Hell is materialized in a comparative perspective. He examines the inter-relationship between belief and material culture in indicating how visualizations and materializations of Hell on earth played an important part in the process of developing ideas of Hell. He argues that it is not only theological and eschatological reasoning that accounts for the presence of Hell in

world religions but it is the materiality of Hell; architecture, art, literature, monuments, and natural places that guarantees its 'reality'. In the final paper Josh Pollard engages with the concept of prehistoric religion(s) and examines how ritual and religion, as ontologically similar, are materialized through practice, and are thus as much technologies of the body and material world as the mind and the immaterial. He considers this in working through a case study centered upon Later Neolithic monuments in the famous Stonehenge region in southern England.

Hence material culture and materialization are fore-grounded in all the papers. Meskell (2005:1) has noted that archaeology "has been notably remiss in producing substantive accounts of materiality for archaeological contexts". This might be less true now (e.g. Thomas 2006/2007), but in relation to thinking about the materiality of ritual and religions from an archaeological perspective is absolutely correct. Anthropologists are engaging with the materiality of religion (e.g. Keane 2008), and archaeologists need to do likewise. It is thus hoped that this volume contributes an archaeological component, albeit in a small way, to the burgeoning literature of materiality and material culture studies more generally construed (e.g. Buchli 2002; Tilley et al. 2006).

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