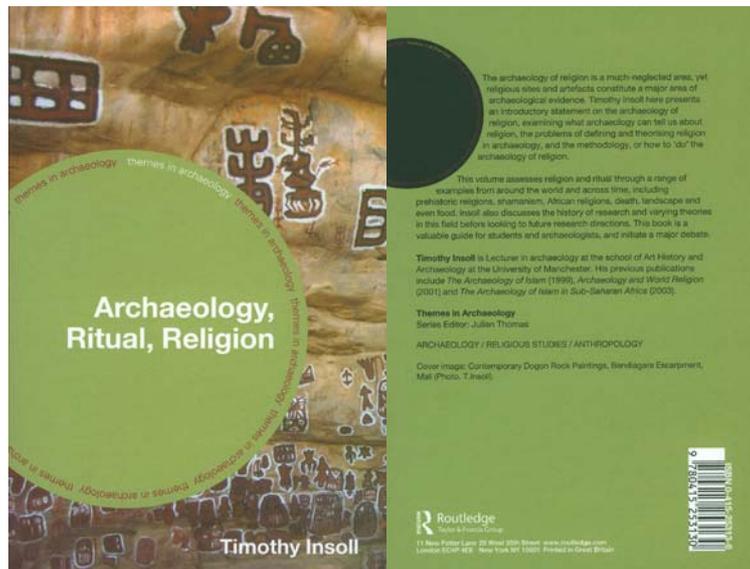


Insoll, T. 2004. Archaeology, ritual, religion. – London, Routledge

Book review by A.K. Stevens



In 'Archaeology, Ritual, Religion' Timothy Insoll offers an introductory statement on approaches to the archaeology of religion. Far from a 'how to do' manual, the book represents rather a moment of reflection on past and contemporary approaches to the subject. Insoll maintains that religion is an aspect of society often overlooked in archaeological research, whilst the subject of the archaeology of religion itself lacks an adequate body of discipline-specific theory. The study transcends regional and temporal boundaries and in this review is considered with particular reference to the archaeological recovery of ancient Egyptian religion, largely of historic periods.

The book opens with an account of a contemporary sacrificial ritual at Dafra, Burkina Faso, a device that introduces effectively the complexities often inherent in religious practice and belief and the difficulties faced in the recovery of such complexity through material remains. From here, the theme proper is introduced and the question of the definition of central concepts arises. 'Religion', 'ritual' and related terms receive attention in a brief survey of definitional trends. Insoll himself avoids committing to rigid definitions but highlights some of the more important components of religion: the interweaving of the intangible, irrational and indefinable within a logical framework; a focus on the essential concerns of the human condition and the potential to shape mindsets and word views. Components of ritual: a combination of action and mental activity; elements of emotion, experience, movement and communication; often a facet of religion, but certainly not its whole. This leads to the central thesis of the book: that religion is more than ritual alone and is archaeologically recoverable as such.

Insoll maintains that the archaeological retrieval of religion has focussed overwhelmingly upon ritual, which in turn has often been conflated with religion. It is a viewpoint that has great resonance for Egyptian archaeology, given the dominant position afforded ritual in modern reconstructions of the ancient Egyptian religious landscape. Surviving texts certainly suggest a prominent position for ritual, attested also in the layout of religious structures. There are other forms of conduct, however, that fit less comfortably into this realm; those that were less bound spatially or temporally, or required less focussed attention of the participant. The wearing of personal amulets provides an example. The role of such conduct, its interplay with ritual and the extent to which less ritualistic elements of religious behaviour were a feature of different social and spatial arenas are elements of ancient Egyptian religion that remain under-investigated from an archaeological perspective, quite apart from the non-behavioural element.

This raises a second major theme of 'Archaeology, ritual, religion'; that of the interaction between religion and life. By this the author means more than just the intersection of religious and secular spheres of activity, but the potential role of religion as a fundamental structuring element for life itself, a perspective from which, it is maintained, religion is rarely considered. Within a broader Egyptological context, religion has often been afforded a prominent role in shaping mindsets and behaviour in this manner, although this is a viewpoint that has to a large extent been taken for granted and the issue has only rarely been addressed directly (see for example Kemp (1995), where the role of religion as such is challenged). Archaeological contributions to the topic have remained in the background and more nuanced studies of the theme are lacking. The challenge remains for Egyptian archaeologists to explore further the degree to which and manner in which religion was an

inherent factor in the shaping of patterns of life, and vice-versa: everyday routines, the construction of the built environment, the use of space, social interactions and so on.

In part two the history of the study of religion in archaeology and other relevant disciplines is considered. Approaches within the fields of anthropology, history of religions and phenomenology of religions are discussed briefly with a view to assessing the relevance of each for the archaeology of religion, whilst the potential for archaeological data to contribute to each field is also considered briefly. Anthropology and history of religions receive the most positive assessments. A call for archaeology to adopt a more nuanced approach to religion as witnessed in these disciplines is an important one. The focus then shifts to past research undertaken within broad archaeological frameworks, including antiquarian, evolutionary and early archaeological approaches, New Archaeology, Marxist approaches, and studies based on direct analogy. At times, the wide-reaching surveys of this and part one read as somewhat cursory, a reminder that the book is very much an initial short foray into a vast body of related literature. These sections are also thick with direct quotations, a style that reads somewhat awkwardly at times but does have the advantage of signposting the key works in each field.

Contemporary archaeological approaches are reviewed in part three. The issue of the predominance of particularistic studies at the expense of holistic research is raised, in terms of evidence selected, the isolation of individual spheres of religious conduct and the separation of religion from a broader framework of life. Again this observation is of relevance for Egyptology, where particularistic approaches are readily visible. One of the most fundamental, of course not confined to this field, is the tendency for research to focus on sub-spheres of religious belief and practice: state religion, private religion, folk religion, funerary religion, and so on. The interfaces between them, potentially very blurred, are only more recently receiving direct attention, and are one aspect towards which archaeological data may have much to contribute.

Overall, post-processualism offers for the author an appropriately inclusive framework within which to approach the archaeology of religion, although the general absence of religion in post-processualist studies to date is noted. This is suggested more as a reflection of the predominantly secular mindsets of the practitioners than limitations in the evidence they use. At the same time the author advocates the incorporation of relevant elements from other disciplinary frameworks. One such framework that he does not see as offering a way forward, however, is cognitive processualism, criticised as failing on the basis of its “assumption of ‘same’ between past and present, the essential human condition across time and space [...], the existence of rules or guidelines which somehow structure past belief and action, and the suppression of the individual” (p. 92). Renfrew’s (1994: 51) list of archaeological indicators of cult (grouped into four main categories: the focussing of attention, the presence of a boundary zone between this world and the next, the presence of the deity, and participation and offering) is criticised as an automatic ‘checklist’ which has the effect, albeit unintended, of isolating religion and its archaeology from a broader context.

Renfrew’s list is intended primarily as a guide to the initial identification of relevant material evidence. This is a phase of research largely unaddressed in ‘Archaeology, ritual, religion’ itself, perhaps reflecting a wish to avoid an overly general statement of what is a complicated and to an extent context-specific process. Ultimately, processes of selection of the drawing of boundaries are inevitable in any study of the archaeology of religion, regardless of how integrated it is intended to be. Also inevitable, it seems, is the tendency of such processes to mimic to some degree those laid out by Renfrew. In this sense, these guidelines remain valuable as an explicit statement of what are, to an extent, universal processes and are particularly important for drawing attention to what can be a transparent stage of research. At the same time, the shape of the framework within which evidence is identified will of course influence the manner in which that evidence is interpreted, and it is in this sense that the criticisms in ‘Archaeology, ritual, religion’ are most justified. This leads directly to the important question of why archaeologists have focussed so closely on ritual. In general, architectural features with ‘symbolic’ elements have proven the most readily identifiable remnants of religion, or have at least been identified as such with the greatest confidence, particularly from prehistoric contexts. At the same time, there has been a tendency to shy away from the association of portable objects with religion unless they are found with such features. A reliance on structural elements as indicators of religion develops and one is soon on the path to ritual, reflected in Renfrew’s list. Whilst a focus on ritual in archaeology is probably due in part to a lack of reflection on the complex relationship between ritual and religion, a situation highlighted in ‘Archaeology, ritual, religion’, at the same time it seems linked to the practicalities of the discipline, and perceived constraints therein. Because of this, the latter perhaps deserved closer consideration in the book under review.

The book concludes with three case studies of traditional religions and Islam in West Africa. Again, the focus is on the interpretation of the evidence rather than the processes of data collection. Ultimately, in fact, the case studies rely quite heavily on non-archaeological sources; their purpose is to examine specific past approaches and illustrate what can be done with a more inclusive view. The potential for carefully applied ethnographic research and the use of complex analogy to contribute data is highlighted. Neither approach has ever been in vogue in Egyptology, certainly not with regard to the study of religion, and nor it would seem has their potential been fulfilled. The case studies also highlight several themes that remain under-explored in

general in archaeological studies: the influence of mythology, the emotional and sensory elements of religion, temporality, and syncretism, or the blending and fusion of religions. All would repay closer consideration in Egyptian contexts, albeit differentially across Egyptian history. The challenging of the sterile presentation of religious scenes in Egyptian art is just one example of the scope for archaeology to contribute, in this case, to an understanding of the emotive and sensory aspect of religion.

Underpinning 'Archaeology, ritual, religion' is the notion of integration: the integration of data types, the application of different theoretical approaches, the placing of ritual into a broader religious landscape, and the greater inclusion of religion into a social framework. The degree to which such integration is attainable is likely to vary greatly across regions and cultures, but it is certainly a worthwhile goal. Ancient Egyptian society must offer more scope to realise these aims than many others, with a material culture, for many periods, supplemented by a rich framework of literary and representational evidence. Moving beyond 'ritual' structures and the material found in association with them is an important step in proceeding to a more inclusive approach, and it is here that this broader framework of supplementary information is particularly important. At the same time the challenge remains, to echo an ever-recurrent theme, to give Egyptian material evidence a voice alongside that of texts and artistic sources, as more than an illustration of the information contained therein.

In summary, 'Archaeology, ritual, religion' is to be very welcomed as an accessible and thought-provoking means of broadening horizons, rich in observations that resonate in the context of Egyptian archaeology.

Insoll, T. 2004. *Archaeology, ritual, religion*. – London, Routledge. 155 pp. ISBN 0-415-25313-6. Price € 12.99 (paperback).

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