Archaeology Experiences Spirituality?
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Edited by

Dragoș Gheorghiu

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—D. G.

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INTRODUCTION

TOWARDS A NEW PARADIGM

Dragoş Gheorghiu

New Subjective Anthropologies

By the end of the 20th century, it was apparent that a new paradigm was emerging in the humanities; one leading to a new phenomenological model for the new millennium. We now see that both ethnography and cultural anthropology have become phenomenological (Katz and Csordas 2003: 277), slowly shifting towards the study of embodiment and experientiality.

An anthropology of the experience (Throop 2003), which, according to Throop, can be traced down to the work of Victor Turner (1986), coexisted alongside an anthropology of the senses, developed by Classen (1993), Howes (1991, 2003), Seremetakis (1994), and Stoller (1997), and characterised by the “oculocentricity of the west, the sensory as embodied experience, and the interconnectivity of the senses” (Pink 2006: 44).

Archaeology too was influenced by this new approach; the post-processualist opening directed the research to symbolism (Hodder 1982), metaphor (Tilley 1999), phenomenology (Tilley 1997), and experientiality (Shanks 1992).

Experientiality

Until the recent past, it would have been hard to imagine subjective approaches providing the basis for scientific papers. Today, however, more and more voices are rising in favour of accepting the experientiality of the researcher (Grethlein 2010). According to Csordas (2002), the human body is the main instrument used by the individual in the process of experiencing the world, and one which is culturally modelled; this last assumption thus led, in archaeology, to the emergence of experiential
approaches centred on the human body (Graves-Brown 2000: 3; Hamilakis et al. 2001; Hamilakis et al. online; Skeates 2008; Gheorghiu 2009).

**The Emergence of the Research of Spirituality in Archaeology**

If at the midpoint of the last century archaeologists believed that the spiritual life of ancient peoples was one of the most indefinable and unapproachable components of a culture (Hawkes 1954: 162), today’s archaeology tends to go beyond the materiality of human existence.

With every new approach used, archaeology has expanded the scope of its exploration of the past; new subjects have been added to the current research agenda, some moving beyond the sphere of the material culture, such as the study of ancient spirituality.

The last decades have witnessed the appearance of several collective studies on the archaeology of religion and cult (Biehl and Berthèmes 2001, Barrowclogh and Malone 2007, Hodder 2010), or of spirituality, to cite only the 2008 WAC sessions, “Archaeology of spiritualities”, organized by Doctors Alan Peatfield, Christine Morris, Kathryn Roundtree, and Tönno Jonuks, and “Archaeology and experimental spirituality?” organised by Professor Dragoş Gheorghiu and Dr. Alan Peatfield, or the “Roots of Spirituality”, a project at the McDonald Institute, run by Professor Colin Renfrew and Dr. Iain Morley, and funded by the John Templeton Foundation.

As a result of this opening towards the study of the spirituality of the past, this book gathers together some of the scholars from Western and Eastern Europe, and the USA, who, more or less obviously, have used their experientiality to approach the concepts of life (or cosmovision) of ancient peoples’ mystic experience.

The book intends to present several arguments in support of an archaeology of spirituality through a series of seven case studies.

What method should we use to approach spirituality? Are we still dependent on quantitative methods? Is phenomenology an appropriate instrument? Can experientiality approach a spiritual experience? Is the emic approach efficient enough to approach the spiritual side of a studied phenomenon? Are the analogous ethnographic models suitable instruments for this task?

How much of the spirituality of the Past is still accessible today? Could we build artificial contexts that would allow the recreation of the phenomenological condition analogous to the originals?
The answers to these questions will represent a significant contribution to the archaeology of spiritualities, and therefore will help to extend the frontiers of archaeological hermeneutics.

**Presentation of Chapters**

The first chapter, *The relationship between solstice light and the entrance of the Palaeolithic painted caves*, by Chantal Jègues Wolkiewiez, discusses the problem of mixing experientiality with scientific observation, especially data measurements. The archaeologist approaches the subject through quantitative methods; she measures and compares. Her research started with a personal observation concerning the orientation of all the painted caves from France, which led her to hypothesise a possible relationship between the Magdalenian cave in Lascaux and the position of the sun at the summer solstice, a hypothesis she then validated experimentally.

The archaeologist expresses the importance of the experimentation on the site, and of the experientiality of the phenomenon:

“Then, on the summer solstice evening of 1999, an hour before the scheduled setting of the king of the sky, my husband and I were waiting (...) in front of the cave, and the sun approached the cave entrance from the left. (...) At the final moment before its fall, as for millennia before, the luminary glorified the entrance to the depths of the earth.”

The emotion of the personal experience of the time spent in front of cave entrance illuminated by the sunset is expressed in the text by a series of quotations from the Egyptian sarcophagi of the middle Empire.

With the help of specialized software, Dr. Wolkiewiez reconstructed the star positions in the Magdalenian sky some 18,000 years ago, measured the orientation of the zoomorphic images from the cave walls, and finally compared the two spatial organisations. She concluded that, except for Aquarius and a fragment from Pisces, the Zodiac was accurately represented by the animals painted at Lascaux. Computer simulations, combined with the physical measurements of landscape forms, stars’ positions, and together with chromatic studies, it was possible to reveal a symbolic and spiritual relationship between the ancient sky and the Palaeolithic paintings.

Chapter two, *Expressing the Self: early prehistoric perforated bead production and use in South-west Wales*, by George Nash, illustrates the possibilities, as well as the limits, of the experimentation of ancient
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spirituality. It is focused on the possibility of “measur[ing] in qualitative terms sacredness”, to communicate the sacredness of items and processes, as well as to approach prehistoric identities, i.e. to link the objects analysed to the self of the owner, or to a place. The approach is based firstly on ethnographic models like Nancy Munn’s or Bronislaw Malinowski’s, and secondly on the personal experimentation of processes. Discussing the difficulties of the approach, he states:

“I have intimated [...] that sacredness is difficult to quantify, especially in terms of experimentation under scientific conditions. Indeed, if we are to accept the notion that sacredness was incorporated into the production and use of an item or commodity, how can it be measured? The physical act of collecting, preparing, manufacture and transferring/distribution can be, in archaeological terms quantifiable, as witnessed through, say, the movement of polished stone axes during the Neolithic period or production, consumption and distribution of coinage during the European Iron Age.”

Analysing the small but significant Mesolithic stone bead assemblage from Wales that includes two perforated beads from the recently excavated Dolmen site of Trefael in Pembrokeshire, south-west Wales, George Nash arrived at the conclusion that it is not just the item that gains prestige and/or sacredness, but also the process in which it is sourced, manufactured, exchanged/received and used. Through experimentation with one of the items - from its design inception to the finished product, he postulates that concept, design, manufacture and finished product experienced a number of ritualized processes or stages which turned mundane material into ritualized items of intrinsic value.

The third chapter, Working with Agni. The phenomenological experience of a technological ritual, by Dragoş Gheorghiu, stresses that experientiality can sometimes offer new directions for scientific research, such as the study of technological rituals. It examines the relationship between performance and rituality, i.e. the use of the phenomenological experience of the experimentalist to study the ritual characteristics of the chaînes opératoires, thus trying to capture part of the ritual experience of ancient technologists. He perceives the phenomenological experience of some pyrotechnologies as a technical ritual, due to their repetitive technical operations. The neuropsychological responses of the body to the rigid structure of the chaînes opératoires, as well as the influence of the context of experimentation led the experimentalist to undergo states of altered
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consciousness, compared in this text with the shamanic visual imagery and non-bodily awareness.

According to the author, sensoriality and the embodiment of phenomena play a central role, especially when carrying out experiments with ancient pyrotechnologies:

“Through my experiments I tried to create a corporeal memory of the chaînes-opératoires stages, in other words, to ritualise my body, to experience ASC states with temporal dislocation or loss of Ego awareness, and in this manner to have access to a part of the experientiality of the ancient techno-shaman potter. I am aware of the impossibility to approach the ancient symbolic codes of the techno-shamans, but I realized that through experientiality I could come up to a ritual activity that produces the sensorial conditions of an opening towards a spiritual experience.”

The fourth chapter, Prehistoric sky lore and spirituality, by Emilia Pásztor is dedicated to the use of ethnographic models and historical data to approach spirituality, but does not neglect the personal experience of the archaeologist (in this case the personal participation in a shaman’s ceremony among the Reindeer people).

A rich set of ethnographic information about Eurasian shamanism is used to demonstrate the presence of a shamanistic activity in the Bronze Age Carpathian Basin. The author believes that an approach to the shamanistic way of thinking could be achieved through the study of the Siberian animistic mythology, and examines the difficulties of the subject:

“Trying to avoid applying the word ‘shaman’ - except in ethnographical analogies - as its existence in prehistory is hotly debated, we rather use ‘spiritual mediator’ instead. The existence of such a specialized person with an animistic mythological background in the Bronze Age Carpathian Basin seems to be more plausible than a hierarchical priesthood.”

The investigation of the ethnographic objects in relation to animistic/shamanistic beliefs or activities is considered to be an appropriate method to approach the prehistoric cognition and spirituality of the populations living in a daily interaction with a natural and animated environment.

After taking part in a shamanistic ceremony, the author concludes:

“Personal experience can help a lot in learning and understanding a belief system/spiritual life different from how the researcher was educated, but in an attempt to reconstruct and understand the distant past, one cannot treat modern-day interpretations as absolutely accurate statements about the past. However, they may offer an image that is beginning to take shape.”
In the fifth chapter, *The lost witches of Saveock*, Jacqui Wood presents a case of ritual oblivion in the contemporary world and warns about the difficulties in understanding rituals when the lineage of practice is broken.

As experimentalist, the author easily replicated numerous technologies, but encountered difficulties when she tried to understand rituals through the experimental method:

“To replicate what is in the mind of someone performing a long dead ritual is another matter entirely I have always thought. How could one measure such experimentation if the actual belief system is unknown? How would one know if one had got the ritual or concept right or not? Without a time machine who could one ask about it?”

When she discovered some unusual ritual pit deposits, radiocarbon dated as 350 years old, the main problem of the investigator was “to imagine possible belief systems that could explain such activities”. As a result of the high public visibility of the find, she came in contact, either directly or by e-mail, with a series of members of the pagan communities from the UK and the continent, hoping to use their information concerning contemporary magic, as a source of inspiration for interpreting the finds. Without any exception, all the information she received was from literature, a fact which lead the author to conclude:

“I realized how impossible it actually is to try and revive a lost belief system. One needs those unbroken lineages of the practice behind you to understand and perform the intricacies of such rituals. Whether they work or not who knows?”

Chapter six, *The Spirit of Manitou across North America*, by Herman E. Bender, is an attempt to mix ethnographic data with experientiality, in order to approach topics appearing “irrational” to the modern mind.

The chapter argues about the difficulty in approaching the central topics of the traditional societies’ cognition, like “presence”, or the sacred, without previous experimentation.

Demonstrating a deep knowledge of the history and ethnography of the American Indians, the author brings forward the symbolic complexity of the spiritual landscape, the *qualia* of different natural features, the marriage of the Sky and Earth, and the holistic perception of naturalness and sacredness, called Manitou. Through experientiality he associates the notions of “place” and “presence” as the existence of Manitou in the materiality of the landscape:
“[…] while hiking or exploring, sometimes a rock outcrop or glacial erratic (boulder) seemed to 'jump out' as being 'different' or 'special'. A rock, which by its color, unique setting, lighting or some other attribute calls attention to a certain undefined quality; namely ‘presence’ [...]. In those cases I knew I was not looking at something random or that science alone was going to describe my personal feeling and awareness. The experience was too profound to simply or scientifically describe it as a natural object. I had come face-to-face with a Manitou stone and my own sense of humanity.”

Because the different attributes of the geomorphs containing Manitou, such as distinct geographic locations or special physical qualities, confer them a “supernatural dimension”, their scenic force attracts today thousands of worshippers. The magnetic force of these spiritual landscapes acts also on the mind of the contemporary scientist; the author, when confronted with such a spiritual spectacle was immediately struck by the form and riveted to the view.

All through the chapter the personal experience of the author supported by an extensive ethnographic information, sustains the existence of a holistic spirituality disseminated within all materials and space.

The final chapter, Experiencing spirituality in built contexts by Dragoş Gheorghiu, insists on the importance of the natural and cultural contexts to be studied, and proposes an experimental approach to past spirituality in real or reconstructed contexts. According to the author, this would allow the experientiality of different anthropological aspects, otherwise invisible in the archaeological record, such as the rites of passage:

“An advantage of the full scale reconstructions is that they allow the occurrence of a sensorial experience approximating that of the original context, and the subsequent discovery of different invisible cultural aspects like rituality, for example.”

The possibility of a sensorial experience of the properties of materials (i.e. their forms, textures, colours) can bring the experimentalist closer to the visual and sensorial context of the populations studied, and permit a direct corporal experience of the rites of passage.

One benefit of the experiments carried out in the full-scale reconstructed contexts is the possibility of immersion, i.e. of having a synaesthetic, or a sensorial holistic experience.

A significant topic derived from this type of experience was the identification of two kinds of geometries, which were, according to the author, invested with spiritual value by the Chalcolithic populations.
Bibliography


CHAPTER ONE

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOLSTICE LIGHT AND THE ENTRANCE OF THE PALAEOLITHIC PAINTED CAVES

CHANTAL JÈGUES–WOLKIEWIEZ

Introduction

The map of the Lascaux cave (Fig. 1-1), and the cross section of its entrance (Fig. 1-2) have allowed me to calculate and envision that, prior to the rock collapse that blocked the access way used by its Palaeolithic inhabitants, during the summer solstice, at the moment of sunset (at approximately 304° of geographic azimuth), the direct sun rays entered the Hall of the Bulls and the Axial Diverticulum. For the remaining days of the year, daylight could only be glimpsed from the Hall of the Bulls and the back of the Diverticulum. Except for the solstitial summer evenings, the direct view of the sun was never possible from the interior.

The map and cross section of the cave let us trace an imaginary beam of light penetrating through the entrance. It reaches the opposite point in the Hall of the Bulls before the cave wall recedes towards the Axial Diverticulum. At that time it would throw light on the Red Bison No. 14 (Windels’ numbering), in other words, on the wall of the Hall of the Bulls situated at 304° - 180° = 124° of geographic azimuth.
Fig. 1-1. Central point of the Hall of the Bulls: at the intersection of the entrance- Diverticulum Axis, and the Passage axis.

Fig. 1-2. Direction of the light beam at the moment of the summer solstitial sunset. Based on the cross section of the cave established by Bassier (after Leroi-Gourhan and Allain 1976: 48).
On the 13th of March 1999, guided by Jean-Michel Geneste, Lascaux curator, I discovered this memory-witness of the mind of Homo Sapiens from the Reindeer Age.

Then, on the summer solstice evening of 1999, an hour before the scheduled setting of the “king of the sky”, my husband and I were waiting together with Jean-Michel Geneste in front of the cave, and the sun approached the cave entrance from the left.

Having reached the highest point of the firmament of the northern hemisphere, the sun found itself, as always, in the place the Sumerians named An-Bil (“the blazing point of the skies”). This designation was an equal reflection of the summer solstice sun’s heat and colour, and of its position at the highest point in the sky. (In 1911, having translated the Drehem archives, Stephen Langdon concluded the Sumerians possessed this knowledge approximately 2000 years before king Dungi’s era; thus 4000 BC).

At 21:00h (UT) the sun was shedding light upon the cave door (Fig. 1-3). At 21:50h the shadow re-descended upon the lintel: 50 minutes of intense lighting could not go unnoticed by the humans who normally only had the distant daylight illuminating this cave!

Fig. 1-3. Photograph by the author objectivises this event. The solstitial sun (1999) in front of the steps leading to the present entrance illuminates the door to the Lascaux cave.

At the final moment before its fall, as for millennia before, the luminary glorified the entrance to the depths of the earth. I could not silence the texts, so often read, now speaking to my heart:
“Glory to you Re, supreme power who illuminates the bodies, who are at the horizon. You who enter the cave. Glory to you Re, supreme power who approached the cave of “He-who-is-in-the-West”. You are the body of Atum”. (Text from Egyptian sarcophagi of the Middle Empire. Spell 642 [M2 nv] Barguet 1986)

Here at Lascaux the lord of the sky precisely harmonized once more the time of Earth and humans. At the time of its setting, the same as at sea level since the site’s elevation is counterbalanced by the north-west relief of the hill facing it, the brilliant luminary coloured with its flames the threshold of the cave, as well as the landmark for the Axial Diverticulum’s entrance, placed on the butte over the cavern.

Prior to the collapse of the entrance cornice, he was indeed illuminating the Hall of the Bulls and the Axial Diverticulum! Deeply moved and admiring, we witnessed the glorification of the cave’s threshold by the life-giving luminary.

For how many centuries, had humans, conscious of the importance of the moment waited in this spot for the triumphant god’s pageant? Is it possible that, since the Palaeolithics, no-one before that day, had waited next to this entrance to mother Earth, for the arrival of the world’s organizer to measure its step? And yet, starting from its place of wintry exile, this sumptuously adorned sanctuary entrance has, for 18000 years, been the final destination of its continuous and intense ascension effort.

All throughout the ages, other initiates to the secrets of sacred caves have learned to revere the god of light upon its entrance into the bosom of mother Earth.

“Another formula of the secrets of the Duat¹, of the mysteries of the empire of the dead; seeing the solar disc upon its setting in the West, adored by the gods² and the blessed of the Duat; transfiguring the blessed in the heart of Re, making him powerful in the sight of Atum and magnified in the sight of Osiris,… Any blessed person for whom this will be recited may arise in all the transformations he desires, he shall be powerful among the gods of the Duat who will recognize him as one of their own, and he will enter the mysterious porches as a power”. (Text of Egyptian sarcophagi of the Middle Empire. Formula 642 [M2 nv.] Barguet 1986)

¹ For the Egyptians, the Duat is a cave opening to the West; Atum, the setting sun, enters it to regenerate and be reborn on the other side of the world, to the opposite of its disappearance, accompanying the deceased who will be reborn like him.
² The gods of the Duat represent the constellations (The Egyptian Book of the Dead – chapter of the transfigurations).