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Excerpt

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## CHAPTER ONE

**MATERIAL CULTURE AND RITUAL:  
STATE OF THE QUESTION****Jaś Elsner**

The last twenty years have seen a remarkable increase in the use of ritual as an analytic and conceptual tool across the range of material-cultural disciplines – archaeology, architectural history, the history of art. This very book is one example of that efflorescence. Certainly there can be no doubt about the rich range of rituals and ritual cultures that not only gave rise to images and objects for use and even veneration in ceremonial, but were themselves in fundamental ways determined by the deployment of artifacts within them and the constraints of material culture around them. In particular, the establishment of spatial boundaries through the markings of landscape and the placement of architecture, and the decorative embellishment of such spaces with art that was in some cases descriptive of sacred histories but was often potentially prescriptive of initiatory and ritualistic experience, is a ubiquitous feature of artistic and archaeological survivals from prehistoric antiquity into the middle ages and beyond. A number of classic anthropological studies and works in the history of religions in the twentieth century have laid the foundations for the study of material culture in its ritual aspects – as liminal space, as sacred centre, as participatory artefact within ritual.<sup>1</sup> Indeed – given the very different disciplinary demands of such fields as Neolithic prehistory, Classical archaeology, Byzantine aesthetics and the architectural history of the middle ages (all of which may at different points need to draw deeply on the study of ritual) – one might argue that what all these material-cultural subject-areas have in common (apart, that is, from a focus on material culture) is a shared



interest in the study of ritual, which means in modern academia especially its anthropological and history-of-religions literature.<sup>2</sup>

My aim in this brief introduction is not to justify the current interest in ritual, which is hardly necessary, nor indeed to attack it, nor to attempt any kind of unified approach to ritual on the part of the great diversity of material-culture-centered disciplines that have had recourse to its study, and are well represented in this volume. Rather, I want to examine some of the assumptions we commonly make in looking to ritual as an explanatory system and to worry a little about whether they have all been sufficiently justified or grounded in argument. I will turn at the end from discussion of the general issues of material culture and ritual which must necessarily underlie many of the ramifications of the essays in this volume to the specific problems of architecture, sacred space and experience. The question of architecture is a special case of the theme of ritual and art, since it is about the orchestration of (performative) space – the frames within which people were constructed as ritual subjects – as opposed to the specific artifacts used by people within ritual. In general, whereas artifacts within ritual are so often manipulated by bodies, the special case of architecture, alongside large-scale sacred topographies, relates to its enclosure of bodies within a space at least potentially and on occasion reserved for ritual action. Moreover, insofar as architecture is an invitation into and an announcement of sacred space, it serves a material function analogous to some qualities of ritual itself. Notably, insofar as ritual is about liminality and the articulation of boundaries between sacred and profane, architecture is potentially one of its supreme material formulations.

**Issues of Method.** The rediscovery of ritual is certainly part of the cognitive movement in archaeology,<sup>3</sup> but it is also part of the rebellion of what was in the 1980s called “the new art history” against stylistic formalism and iconographical studies,<sup>4</sup> and in particular a turn towards more religious and anthropologically-focused interests away from the semiotic formalism and Marxist inflections that initially dominated the new art history. Certainly ritual has come to be seen in recent years as a critical concept in both prehistoric and historical archaeology,<sup>5</sup> as well as a critical term of art history.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, specifically in the arena of classical archaeology, the study of ritual through iconography has come to be established as a prime model for the study of ancient religion through the



magisterial volumes of the *Thesaurus cultus et rituum antiquorum*, known as ThesCRA, which have used the concept of ritual as represented in art and in texts as a means to unite both visual and historical approaches to the study of ancient religion.<sup>7</sup> Although hardly the prime purpose of this emphasis on ritual studies, the alignment of material-cultural with historical approaches that has been part of its effect is certainly to be warmly welcomed.<sup>8</sup>

The birth of a new emphasis on ritual in archaeologically inflected studies from the 1980s, associated with such signal contributions as Colin Renfrew's *The Archaeology of Cult* and Simon Price's *Rituals and Power*,<sup>9</sup> took place at the same time as a burgeoning revitalization of interest in ritual on the part of historians of religion and anthropologists. These latter created the *Journal of Ritual Studies* in 1987; and certainly the anthropological exploration of ritual has been hugely creative in the last two decades with a number of seminal works published since the late 1980s. In the same decade, art history saw the birth of the journal *Res* from 1981, subtitled *anthropology and aesthetics* (although over the years it has not been notably ritual-centered in the kinds of anthropology its contributors have drawn on) and ancient history created the journal *Kernos* (from 1988) which has a strong ritual focus as part of its main remit for the study of ancient Greek religion, and *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* (from 1999) whose focus extends beyond Greece and Rome to Israel, India, and pre-Columbian America.

What is surprising is the relative lack of cross-fertilization between what one might have imagined were kindred fields. Of major recent anthropological studies of ritual, there is almost not a word on material culture – whether on objects as implements within rituals, on buildings, enclosures or landscapes as spatial or geographic frames for rituals, on visual adornments as cues or potential non-written prescriptions for rituals – in the many acute pages of, for example, Bell 1992 and 1997; Boyer 1994, pp. 185–223; Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994; Rappaport 1999; Whitehouse 2000 and 2004; let alone the monumental pair of volumes edited by Kreinath, Snoek, and Stausberg 2006 and 2007. In the more than twenty years in which the *Journal of Ritual Studies* has flourished, only one early issue (vol. 6, no. 1, 1992) has been devoted to “Art and Ritual in Context” and as far as I can tell only two articles in the entire run outside this single issue (mainly consisting



of papers by art historians) have touched on material culture at all.<sup>10</sup> There has been some discussion of the aesthetics of ritual,<sup>11</sup> but arguably this is not the same issue as the place of material culture as part of the frame and structure of ritual. While the anthropology of the subject has remained strikingly immune from contagion with the concerns of material culture,<sup>12</sup> it is also true that much art history and archaeology has not progressed far into the theoretics of ritual studies beyond the pre-1980s world of the works of such as Van Gennep, Victor Turner, and Clifford Geertz.<sup>13</sup>

Although anthropology, on the one hand, and the historical study of material culture, on the other, may agree on the importance of ritual, it is worth stressing a fundamental methodological difference between them. In anthropology, rituals are empirically observed data. That data may of course be wrongly interpreted as ritual by a misguided anthropologist, but in principle for a ritual to have been recorded in anthropology, it must have been directly and empirically attested. In art history, archaeology, or architectural history, ritual is not an empirical observation but rather an *inference*, a best guess, derived from material culture with the help of any other evidence (contextual, written, comparative) that can be supplied to help the argument work.

In both sets of disciplines, ritual represents a move to cognitive conclusions.<sup>14</sup> But what is meant by cognition is not quite the same in the two sets of fields. Anthropology has looked toward “intentional states behind ritual actions ... located at least partly outside the mind of the actor,”<sup>15</sup> to all kinds of emotions,<sup>16</sup> from “high arousal” to boredom,<sup>17</sup> not to speak of failure.<sup>18</sup> In other words, it has begun to develop a rich and differentiated picture of the varieties of cognitive response to ritual, which may also be cognitive motors of ritual activity.<sup>19</sup> By contrast, in material-cultural disciplines, ritual is itself taken as a virtually cognitive category in its own right, in that it at least adumbrates a dimension of “past ways of thought as inferred from material remains,”<sup>20</sup> a “cognitive space.”<sup>21</sup> In particular – and we will discuss this shortly – the category of “ritual” has come swiftly to elide into that of “religion.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, it is not always clear exactly what is meant by “ritual” when it is evoked in archaeology or art and architectural history. Is it religion, with the dread name and implications of “religion” avoided? Is it something other than religion? In which case, is it something that overlaps with



religion or is entirely different from it? Or has “ritual” become a kind of dust-bin category for all kinds of not terribly precise sacred, mystical, and emotional urges.<sup>23</sup>

However, before pressing the question of definition, it is worth staying with method. The use of material culture as evidence from which to infer ritual is one thing; the assumption that the ritual (whether a specific ritual, a ritual process or a culture that was in certain ways ritually invested) is what gave rise to the evidence of material culture before us, is quite another. In other words, there is a danger of circularity in inferring ritual from archaeologically attested artifacts and then arguing that the ritual, which is the result of our inference from those objects, was in some sense the cause of those objects. Circularity in itself may not always vitiate an argument, but one had better be strongly self-aware about the issue before pressing it. Yet why should we infer ritual unless we are seeking a generative context, which is in some respect causal of the objects or spaces under discussion?<sup>24</sup> In other words, the interest in the move from physical to cognitive,<sup>25</sup> is at least about reinforcing material culture with a deeper structure of meanings and mental intentions, and is often a matter of providing it with causes. But what are presented as causes are (in this case) inferences from what we take to be their artifactual effects.

Now here there are some differences between material cultural studies in historical periods and those from prehistory. In the former, artifacts and buildings can be placed beside other products of those periods (especially texts) and together the two bodies of evidence can be used to throw cultural light on bigger questions. In the latter, we have very little by way of corroborative evidence except for other comparanda – often from other cultural contexts and periods. Historiographically speaking, both these areas have been very reluctant to let objects – images, buildings, artifacts, works of art – stand simply as themselves. Both have wanted to supply a deeper structure of meanings to underpin the material evidence (hence the urge to go cognitive). It is not entirely obvious to me why this should be the case, or why it should be desirable; but if we want to apportion blame, then clearly the Iconology of Erwin Panofsky, defined as the “intrinsic meaning or content,” “the symbolic values” of a culture, as re-presented in any one of its artifacts,<sup>26</sup> is a good candidate on account of its huge and still pervasive influence,



even if Panofsky is no longer so often explicitly cited or read as he was until relatively recently.<sup>27</sup>

This is not the place to examine the complex origins of Panofsky's theory, but the point is that in the art and archaeology of the prehistoric periods (or shall we say the ones from which no writing survives?), the notion of ritual as a theoretical postulate has come to provide some of the deeper structure of "intrinsic meaning" and "symbolic values" that can hardly be supplied any other way. Of course it inevitably comes with dangers of anachronism, especially the reading back of Christianizing (or anti-Christian) models of religion and ritual into the past. In the historical disciplines – especially classical archaeology and the study of medieval art – we are fortunate in the ritual-centeredness of many of our surviving texts that make any mention of images. Most striking in this regard for antiquity is the travel book by Pausanias written in the second century C.E., which is certainly a ritual-centered and religiously inflected account of the art and monuments of Greece.<sup>28</sup> But if Pausanias was indeed a repetitive pilgrim with his text itself a ritualized version of his travels,<sup>29</sup> then it is hardly surprising if his record is weighted in that direction. It makes him an excellent witness to the *imaginaire* and even the precise realities of Greek ritual in the Roman period (by no means the same thing as Greek ritual in archaic, classical, or Hellenistic times, despite the fact that the text is repeatedly used in that way), but not necessarily a good guide as to how everyone else saw the material culture which he so insistently aligns in a ritual-centered direction.<sup>30</sup> Other sources, like Pliny the Elder, have very little interest in ritual as it relates to works of art. In other words, the reflex to Pausanias in so many studies that emphasize ritual<sup>31</sup> may be misleading in that they skew the evidence in the direction of a very particular but by no means universal or dominant set of "intrinsic meanings" and "symbolic values."

**Optimism and Pessimism.** The fundamental problem, however, seems to me to rest in two questions. First, the key empirical issue: how can we tell that it is appropriate to infer ritual from any given artifact or space? This was well articulated by Renfrew as "how do I know that this artifact had a ritual significance?"<sup>32</sup> And beyond the initial move of inference lies the problem of whether ritual is the only form of behavior we can infer, even in contexts where it may be a correct inference. In other words, what is the price of deciding for ritual? If we emphasize



this, are we precluding other inferences or explanations? The second issue is that of definition: what do we mean by ritual? I shall take them in turn, but arguably they are not so different as distinguishing them into two questions makes it appear. A positive answer to the question “Is this an object of ritual?” is likely also to be aligned to a positive view of the value of ritual as a heuristic category and consequently to an optimistic or extensive view of the ramifications, consequences and meanings of ritual for our historical, social and conceptual understandings of a given culture.

At the opening of *The Archaeology of Cult*, Renfrew refers “with disapproval” to views elegantly advanced over a generation before by C. Hawkes who argued that to infer from archaeological phenomena to the religious institutions and spiritual life of the human groups concerned is the hardest inference of all.<sup>33</sup> Renfrew responds that “there is nothing inherently obscure or problematic” about inferring religious institutions or spiritual life<sup>34</sup> and goes on to argue that “the pessimism expressed by some archaeologists as to the possibility of reconstructing any elements of the content of religious belief from archaeological data alone is misplaced.”<sup>35</sup> This conviction represents the bedrock of that optimism about identifying ritual and about what ritual may signify that has come to dominate material-cultural approaches to the topic.

Putting things in terms of optimists and pessimists is a good way to approach the problem. Here is a recent “optimistic” account of the value of ritual in relation to the Aegean Neolithic from M. Nikolaidou:

There seem to be *inexhaustible* occasions for the ritualization of human actions, that is, *their elevation to a rank of priority over other practices ... it is their very participation, body and soul, in an act valued higher than the mundane order, that enables realization of fundamental symbolic knowledge...*<sup>36</sup>

Now it is probably always unfair to select and dismantle a single quotation. But this puts the problems of modern scholarly optimism about ritual into firm focus. I have italicized what I take to be the optimistic assumptions. First, there are “inexhaustible occasions” for ritual – that is to say, in human lived experience (at any rate in the past) ritual is assumed to be frequent, perhaps omnipresent; also (implicitly) it is easily recoverable from the archaeological record. Second, by ritualization, we do not mean simply any old repeated or repetitive practice (for example,



secular or personal rituals) but, clearly something “valued higher than the mundane order” that offers “realization of fundamental symbolic knowledge.” In other words, without the explicit mention of the word “religion” much of what a committed insider to a faith would mean by religion has been imported into “the ritualization of human actions.” Now this is very optimistic in its view of all rituals as positive and life-enhancing, as offering a substantive structure of intrinsic meaning and symbolic values (in Panofsky’s terminology) underlying the particular data we find attested in the archaeological record, ultimately as not only moving us into cognitive space but giving the cognitive a clear steer.

In the face of this kind of approach, I have to confess my own pessimism by contrast (and here I suspect I agree with Hawkes against Renfrew, let alone Nikolaidou). First, I cannot see on what grounds other than faith one need necessarily make the leap from empirical data to ritual on “inexhaustible occasions,” and second I don’t see why ritual need in principle mean religion or be a positive category at all.<sup>37</sup> Are there are not endless examples of repetitive and ritualized activity from the nonsacred sphere,<sup>38</sup> from the brushing of one’s teeth to the daily taking to and collecting of children from school by parents to all the rules we obey when driving a car to the rituals of the justice system and imprisonment (to move from the personal to the collective level)? To what extent do these deserve the terminology of “ritual”? To what extent can any be excluded? Some of these leave no mark in material culture, others leave as many material remains as a sacred sanctuary might. Such examples militate against any excessively optimistic view of ritual as the avoidance of analytic thought rather than its application.

A good example of taking “ritual” without further definition and without much apparent thought as a core category to mean “religion” are the five volumes of *ThesCRA*.<sup>39</sup> The literal translation of the title (*Thesaurus cultus et rituum antiquorum*) is “Thesaurus of the cult and rituals of antiquity.” The word “ritual” is never defined, but the introduction (repeated at pp. xi–xii of each volume) claims to present “a comprehensive account of all substantial aspects of Greek, Roman and Etruscan *religion*, apart from any assessment of the purely spiritual or philosophical, and only incidentally of the historical” (whatever that means, my italics). What is then offered are a long series of detailed and impressive entries, drawn from visual evidence and



iconography alongside epigraphy and other texts, on different kinds of rites (e.g., processions, sacrifice, libation, fumigation, and dedication, to summarize vol. 1), which together, it seems, constitute religion. Notwithstanding the great usefulness of such a compendium, it is frankly a monumental testimony to a series of presumptions and presuppositions grounded in no argument or analytic justification whatsoever. There is no discussion of the assumption that cult and rite can constitute religion, or how they may do so; no definition of either “ritual” or “religion”; no account of the method that translates a range of empirical entries into grand generalizations about cult in different periods and contexts. There is moreover no account of where ritual may cease to be religious, or where the overlaps do not work. This is optimism so extreme that it fails to entertain even a genuflection towards the possible attitudes or responses of the pessimist.

Yet even where we can infer ritual from material culture, there is no need for it always to be religious. A good example of nonreligious ritual (a category for which Renfrew now argues)<sup>40</sup> is the recent discovery of a room from the fourth century C.E. in a late Roman house of thirteen rooms in Trimithis in the Dakhleh Oasis of Egypt.<sup>41</sup> The house has wall paintings (some palimpsests with earlier paintings beneath) that include epic and mythological subjects. One room – only excavated in 2007–2008 – has whitewashed walls with various epigrams inscribed on it, which appear to have been written by a teacher for his students. Now the kind of context might be said to parallel the sorts of cult rooms built into houses in Dura Europos in Syria in the mid-third-century, which had wall-paintings, some palimpsestual, and inscriptions. From these images both a Christian baptistery and a Jewish synagogue have been inferred by the excavators and subsequent scholarship.<sup>42</sup> Yet it is obvious from the Egyptian material that what we have is a schoolroom. All the aspects of prescriptive decoration (here in the form of invocatory texts) and of liminal boundaries to define the space in which the ritual took place are there in the Trimithis house. And the ritual concerned is certainly one of the great ritualized activities of late antiquity, namely the passing on of *paideia*, which is more than merely education but rather the whole gamut of traditional culture, to the young. Indeed, as anyone who spends any time in or sends children to either school or university today is all too aware, education remains one of the great rituals of



modern culture. But it is definitively not religious or mind altering in the terms implied by Nikolaidou (“body and soul”).

In general, the current era of the application of ritual theory to material culture, and of inferring ritual realities from material culture, is extremely optimistic – much more so that I think is warranted either empirically or analytically. Ritual is now used as a concept to explain the longue-durée of cultural change, communication, and meaning in history.<sup>43</sup> It has become a catch-all category that fills a cognitive space to which empirical observation fails to point quite as often as the data offers grounds for inference. And what is meant by ritual has never been adequately defined, even by those anthropologists who have had the benefit of observing rituals as opposed to the archaeologists who have only inferred them. The assumption that rituals must be capable of communication and redolent of meaning is ubiquitous in the material-cultural literature,<sup>44</sup> despite a significant challenge to this from anthropology and history of religions, in which one strand has argued for the meaninglessness of ritual or at least its noncommunication of meanings.<sup>45</sup> The repetitive nature of ritual has been presented as an argument for the better preservation of this type of human activity than others in the material record,<sup>46</sup> despite the doubts about it being ephemeral which may work to vitiate its place in the record.<sup>47</sup> All this is excessive optimism. And the problem with it is that it leads not only to speculation,<sup>48</sup> but to heavily invested assumptions about culture and causation, evidence and inference, which have no possibility of being tested or justified. That is to say, if we are not careful, the turn to ritual studies will become the avoidance of thought rather than the appropriation of a useful category to think with.

Part of the problem is a pair of too swift leaps in interpretation: from the presence of regularity in the deposition of archaeological evidence to the assumption that this means ritualized behavior, and the move (often unacknowledged) from ritualized behavior (i.e., ritual) to inferring some sort of religious activity. Yet in fact regularity in the material-cultural record need not imply more than stylized or repeated behavior. Insofar as that is communicative (and there is no evidence that it is *always* so) then such stylized communication through artifacts is either with the supernatural world (in which case it does constitute some kind of religion and needs to be read theologically) or with the human world (in