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SACRED VALUES: MEDIEVAL ARCHAEOLOGY AND SPIRITUAL HERITAGE

INTRODUCTION: 'LIVING HERITAGE'

This book aims to engage medieval archaeology with two distinct fields: heritage studies and the material study of religion. The focus is on medieval Christian heritage, principally later medieval monasticism in Britain, while this introductory chapter frames medieval sacred heritage in a global context. It reflects on how we define sites of sacred heritage and the basis on which we value and interpret them. What is the contemporary *value* of medieval European sacred heritage in an ostensibly secular society? The archaeological study of medieval Christianity has remained largely outside social, political and heritage discourses. Religion is frequently perceived as something separate from everyday life in the Middle Ages, the exclusive preserve of the church. As a discipline, archaeologists have also failed to consider the significance of medieval sacred heritage to contemporary social issues such as identity, conflict, cultural diversity and professional ethics. Why have medieval archaeologists failed to reflect critically on the sacred? How can we connect medieval archaeology with the sacred, to make it potentially more sustainable as a discipline and more meaningful to a range of audiences?

The first and final chapters of this book place the archaeology of medieval religion within a critical framework of heritage analysis, examining how archaeological knowledge is constructed in relation to belief and reflecting on the contemporary value of sacred heritage. The central chapters explore

medieval monastic archaeology through the lens of the material study of religion, focusing on 'what bodies and things do, on the practices that put them to work, on the epistemological and aesthetic paradigms that organise the bodily experience of things' (Meyer et al. 2010: 209). Archaeology can make a distinctive contribution to understanding the *embodied experience* of religion through the study of material culture, bodily techniques and the spaces of ritual performance (Mohan and Warnier 2017). A practice-based approach to medieval monastic archaeology enables innovative perspectives on identity and regional distinctiveness, technologies of healing and magic, and memory practices in the sacred landscape. This introductory chapter reflects on how archaeologists have engaged with the sacred and considers why and how sacred heritage matters.

I will begin by briefly exploring the term 'heritage', a label which has multiple meanings and connotations. Heritage refers in one sense to the fixed material legacy of the past; in this case, the archaeology, material culture and landscapes of medieval belief. It also represents the contemporary use of this material legacy for social, economic and political agendas, that is, the use of the past to shape the present and the future (Harvey 2008). Heritage theory has developed in a piecemeal fashion over the past thirty years: two dominant strands have emerged, with one branch contributing critical commentaries on *heritage as a cultural process*, and the other addressing more applied questions in *heritage management* (Waterton and Watson 2013). The field of critical heritage studies examines how heritage as a cultural process represents power relations through language and cultural discourse, often applying a semiotic approach (Smith 2006). More recently, heritage theorists have reasserted the role of material things and the importance of the body in constructing the social experience of heritage (Harrison 2012; Holtorf 2013a). A third and alternative approach has interrogated *heritage as a political process*, for example investigating multilateral heritage bureaucracies, the political relationships between heritage and conflict, and how the material remains of the past are mobilised to shape new versions of post-colonial and post-conflict histories (Meskell 2012, 2016).

Among heritage professionals, two diverging philosophies on *heritage management* have developed over recent decades, resulting in a conflict between approaches that emphasise *evidential* value on the one hand, versus *social* value on the other (Emerick 2014: 219). The more established tradition in Europe is that of cultural heritage management, in which decisions are guided by professional assessments of the 'importance' of a monument according to qualities such as historical or aesthetic value, authenticity or relevance to a national story (Emerick 2014: 1–5). This prevailing model has been termed 'the Authorized Heritage Discourse' (AHD): 'a professional discourse that privileges expert values and knowledge about the past and its material manifestations, and dominates and regulates professional heritage practices' (Smith

2006: 4). A contrasting approach emphasises the 'significance' of a place according to the different contemporary values attached to it, often privileging social values over established national or international criteria based on age, attribution or connoisseurship. The 'living heritage' approach explores heritage in relation to living people and how they interpret and engage emotionally with their material world (Clark 2010; Emerick 2014; Holtorf 2013b). This more inclusive perspective was pioneered in Australia, the United States and Africa, to acknowledge and explore conflicts of meaning around indigenous heritage. Its influence spread rapidly following the adoption of the Faro Convention by the Council of Europe in 2005 (Holtorf and Fairclough 2013). Living heritage emphasises an interactive, community-based approach to heritage management. It champions local significance and sustainability and represents heritage as something made in the present and renewable, rather than something finite and inherited (Emerick 2014: 7). An emphasis on the changing meaning of heritage can also be seen in the French/Quebecoise approach to heritage as 'patrimonialisation', the dynamic process by which material remains *become* heritage, and how successive generations reinvent or reappropriate heritage by discovering new values in changing social contexts (Berthold et al. 2009).

The living heritage perspective emphasises diversity and multi-vocality – the legitimacy of different living voices to participate in heritage debates (Hodder 2008) – but it has seldom addressed the *spiritual* value of heritage or the voices of faith groups in interpreting their own heritage. However, the living heritage approach has been incorporated in strategies for the conservation and management of sacred sites inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage list, such as Meteora in Greece (Poulios 2014), the Temple of the Tooth in Sri Lanka (Wijesuriya 2000) and Angkor Wat in Cambodia (Baillie 2006). The spiritual value of heritage is central to understanding the concept of '*intangible heritage*', which encompasses the oral traditions, myths, performing arts, rituals, knowledge and skills that are transmitted between generations to provide communities with a sense of identity and continuity (Nara Document on Authenticity, ICOMOS 1994; UNESCO 2003). The recognition of intangible heritage developed from non-Western understandings of heritage but offers interpretative potential globally. It places greater emphasis on empathy, present beliefs and the importance of local voices and communities in making decisions about heritage (Jones 2010, 2017). In summary, there is an increasing tendency for heritage practices to focus on recognition of the *contemporary significance* of the past based on its *social value* to living communities. While this perspective has been adopted in global heritage studies, it has so far had little impact on the archaeological interpretation of medieval sites and material culture. Further, neither archaeologists nor heritage practitioners have given sufficient consideration to *spiritual value* in shaping contemporary understandings of medieval European heritage.

This book aims to revitalise the archaeological study of medieval sacred sites by exploring currents in heritage studies, museology and the material study of religion. Prevailing archaeological approaches continue to prioritise constructs of value that have been challenged by social (constructivist) approaches to heritage. By privileging certain narratives – such as authenticity, economic value and 'rational' behaviour – archaeologists have failed to take adequate account of *spiritual value* and its relevance to people both today and in the past. Archaeological interpretations of medieval religion can be enriched by engaging critically with supposedly 'irrational' concepts like folk belief, magic and spirit, to develop compelling accounts that acknowledge multi-vocality and the popular appeal of intangible heritage. At the same time, these alternative perspectives reveal innovative insights that have been neglected by previous archaeological scholarship on medieval beliefs, such as materiality, sensory embodiment, gender, healing, memory and folk ritual.

SECULAR TRADITIONS: WHY ARE ARCHAEOLOGISTS AFRAID OF THE SACRED?

My opening premise is that medieval archaeologists have not engaged sufficiently with the sacred, either the beliefs of medieval people or those of our audiences today. The intellectual tradition of archaeology privileges a humanist or secular position, even when we study the remains of religious buildings and landscapes. This is not merely a methodological approach but an implicit theoretical position. For example, the standard textbooks of church and monastic archaeology typically focus on technology and economy, emphasising engineering feats such as water management and milling (e.g. Bond 2004; Coppack 1990; Greene 1992; Götlind 1993; Scholkmann 2000). Buildings archaeologists have explored medieval churches principally in terms of their construction technology and chronological development (e.g. Rodwell 2005), in contrast with the more aesthetic approaches of architectural history, which often focus on religious and iconographic meanings. This secular approach to medieval archaeology informs the interpretation of monastic heritage sites and their understanding by the public – a tendency particularly prevalent in Britain. It has been suggested that this attitude may stem from the severe treatment of monasteries by the Protestant Reformation in the mid-sixteenth century. The Belgian architectural historian Thomas Coomans makes the following observation: 'Monasticism was so deeply eradicated in England that few people today understand the spiritual dimension of abbeys. This is quite a paradox when we realise that the archaeological approach to medieval abbeys and the knowledge of material culture in Britain is one of the most developed in Europe' (Coomans 2012: 227).

The first century of monastic archaeology (*c.*1870–1970) focused on recovering architectural plans and documenting the variations associated with monastic 'filiation' (i.e. the respective monastic orders). From the 1970s onwards, monastic archaeology in Britain shifted away from studying the ritual life of the church and cloister to focus on the productive and service areas of the inner and outer court (Gilchrist 2014). For example, Mick Aston situated his work on monastic landscapes as 'an attempt to show monasteries as economic institutions coping with the difficulties and opportunities presented by the landscapes in which they were built' (Aston 1993: 16). Underpinning these studies is the model of the rural monastery as a self-sufficient organism, in keeping with the ideals expressed in the Rule of St Benedict, written at Monte Cassino in Italy by Benedict of Nursia (*c.*480–543 CE). Medieval archaeology experienced a significant paradigm shift in which the discipline consciously moved away from the study of religious belief and ritual. It was influenced by methodological innovations, such as the development of environmental and landscape archaeology, and by new scientific currents advanced by processual archaeology.

Monastic archaeology has focused almost exclusively on the study of discrete monuments and their buildings and landscapes. Archaeological questions have been addressed at the scale of the institution with relatively little attention directed towards the individual experience of the sacred. There are of course exceptions to the rule, including a number of important studies on monastic space and embodiment (e.g. Bonde et al. 2009; Bruzelius 1992, 2014; Cassidy-Welch 2001; Gilchrist 1994; Gilchrist and Sloane 2005; Williams 2013), complementing a broader corpus of archaeological work on the meaning and use of medieval religious spaces (e.g. Giles 2000; Graves 2000; Ó Carragáin 2010; Roffey 2006). The study of monastic landscapes is beginning to see a shift away from studies based on single monuments toward broader studies of multi-period landscapes which highlight the complex interrelationships between religious and secular sites (e.g. Pestell 2004). The dominant archaeological emphasis on the technological and economic roles of the monastery is being challenged by novel approaches that address ritual continuities and discontinuities over the long term (e.g. Austin 2013; Everson and Stocker 2011).

The 'economic turn' in medieval archaeology in the 1970s was important in opening up a new intellectual space for a relatively young discipline that had struggled to demonstrate a research agenda independent from the discipline of medieval history (Gerrard 2003). The study of agricultural and industrial landscapes offered a distinctively *materialist* enquiry, revealing an aspect of medieval life that was not accessible through historical documents. It differed from art-historical approaches that focused on the aesthetic qualities of material culture and privileged values of connoisseurship. Instead, it resulted in a privileging of economic themes and the projection of secular values onto the

study of medieval religious settlements and material culture. This approach is characteristic of the study of monastic and church archaeology in Britain and much of Western Europe, but it is not a global trait. For example, a strong focus on ritual has continued to dominate archaeological scholarship on Eastern Christianity and Buddhist monasticism (Finnernan 2012: 253; Shaw 2013a: 84). However, it is noteworthy that recent work by Western scholars has begun to prioritise the economic and technological landscapes of Buddhist monasticism (Ray 2014a: xiii).

This tendency to frame religion in terms of economic power relations is part of a wider intellectual tradition in Western archaeology. Severin Fowles has argued that archaeological approaches to prehistoric religion are characterised by a secularist position, one which pervades both the European archaeological tradition and the American anthropological school (Fowles 2013; Meier and Tillessen 2014). The last twenty years have seen an explosion of archaeological interest in prehistoric religions, but much of this work has deconstructed the concept of the sacred as a meaningful category. Some prehistorians propose universal definitions of religion focusing on symbolism and belief in the supernatural (e.g. Malone et al. 2007: 2), while others reconceptualise religion as an aspect of everyday life, or a holistic worldview. They have been influenced by ritual theorists who stress that even quotidian aspects of life are 'ritualised', dissolving the boundary formerly perceived between the sacred and profane (Bell 1992). Many archaeologists argue that there was no understanding of religion as a separate sphere of life in past societies ranging from prehistoric Europe to medieval Islam and pre-Columbian Central America (e.g. Bradley 2005; Graham et al. 2013; Insoll 2004). Some completely reject the idea that people in the past were motivated by a concept of the numinous. Research on Stonehenge is a prime example: the current orthodoxy of interpretation is framed in terms of the veneration of ancestors, rather than a celebration of the gods. The argument is that henge monuments were constructed in wood for ceremonial use by the living community and in stone to commemorate the ancestral dead (Parker Pearson and Ramilisonina 1998).

There is also a strong tendency in archaeology to focus on *ritual practice* rather than holistic understandings of the sacred. For example, Åsa Berggren and Liv Nilsson Stutz argue for the development of a practice-based ritual theory that will better connect with archaeological sources of evidence. They call for an emphasis on 'the traces of what people in the past were *doing* rather than with what those actions "meant", or signified' (2010: 173; original italics). Archaeologists of the medieval period have frequently reflected on the importance of formal liturgy in the design and use of churches. But 'ritual' extends beyond the codified ceremonies of the church to encompass the material aspects of everyday life. Prehistorians are more comfortable in engaging with ritual as a distinct *material process*, often emphasising ceremonial events such as

feasting and funerals (Swenson 2015). However, ritual is usually conceptualised by archaeologists within a Marxist framework, as a means of legitimating power relations and extending social control (Swenson 2015: 331; Fogelin 2007). There have been calls for cross-cultural studies of ritual as a materially marked process that is susceptible to archaeological analysis (Swenson 2015: 340). Rituals have multiple meanings and they are constantly in flux: through rituals, people are able to transform religious belief and bring about change (Bell 1997; Fogelin 2007). An approach based on *practice theory* has been advocated to emphasise the role of human agency in shaping ritual experience (rooted in the works of Pierre Bourdieu, e.g. 1977). For instance, spatial studies have explored how architectural layouts have promoted ritual experience that favoured either monastic/clerical *or* lay experience, in contexts ranging from early Buddhist monasteries in southern India to parish churches in medieval England (Fogelin 2003; Graves 2000).

Recent anthropological approaches to religion have emphasised the centrality of the body and its interaction with material culture to produce religious knowledge and experience (Mohan and Warnier 2017; Morgan 2010). The '*matière à penser*' approach to material culture reasserts the role of techniques of the body (after Mauss 2006 [1936]), and takes new inspiration from cognitive neuroscience (Gowlland 2011; Warnier 2013). It proposes that two different types of knowledge are active in constructing religious practice: verbalised knowledge, focusing on creeds and texts, and procedural knowledge, based on sensory experience and 'bodily techniques that may or may not be immediately identifiable as religious' (Mohan and Warnier 2017: 371). Procedural knowledge requires a period of learning and apprenticeship in order to draw effectively on the material world to produce a religious imaginary. Medieval monastic training can be understood in these terms, requiring a novitiate of one year, plus four years of further training before final vows, during which time procedural knowledge was acquired. This ranged from sign language used in the cloister during periods of silence, to complex forms of liturgy and meditation that drew upon material culture to stimulate memory (Carruthers 2000). The '*matière à penser*' school advocates a new focus on the interaction between the material and the sensory and how together they mediate power relations. The approach emphasises the embodied religious subject but continues to project a secular framework. It assumes that devotees are 'marched' or compelled to belief: sensory experience persuades a subject 'who is often unaware of the process and, hence, uncritical about it' (Mohan and Warnier 2017: 381).

How did archaeology as a discipline come to be dominated by secularist reasoning? A key turning point is said to be an essay by Christopher Hawkes published in 1954, in which he set out the famous 'ladder of inference'. His paper is often taken as a warning to archaeologists against straying into the

sticky realm of ritual and belief, effectively excluding this area from the legitimate questions to be addressed by archaeology. In fact, Hawkes carefully distinguished between text-free and text-aided archaeology, suggesting that historical sources and folklore should be used when available to illuminate questions of belief (Evans 1998). Nevertheless, 'Hawkes's ladder' had a major influence on how processual archaeologists approached religion and ritual. For example, burials were studied as social or economic status markers rather than as ritual deposits (Nilsson Stutz 2016: 16). Marxist perspectives had an even more pervasive influence on archaeology, beginning with the works of Vere Gordon Childe and continuing through processual and post-processual perspectives (Fowles 2013: 28). Archaeologists tend to frame religion in Marxist terms, as superstructure and false ideology, structural mechanisms of social control that aim to maintain hegemonic power relations (Swenson 2015: 331).

I include myself in this stereotype: as an undergraduate, I was fascinated by Childe and chose the topic of Marxism for a special project in my final year. Subsequently, I embarked on a PhD on gender in medieval archaeology, which led (inadvertently) to a focus on nunneries (Gilchrist 1994). It was only half way through my study that I began to reflect more deeply on how spiritual beliefs shaped the embodied experience of medieval religious women. This insight did not come from archaeology, but from an encounter with a contemporary community of enclosed nuns. There are very few substantial architectural remains of medieval nunneries in Britain. I was therefore keen to visit the site of Burnham Abbey in Buckinghamshire, where some of the claustral buildings remain intact. The medieval monastic ruins were acquired by the Society of the Precious Blood in 1916 and an Anglican convent was established on the site. I wrote to one of the sisters, who, serendipitously, was studying archaeology through a correspondence course; she encouraged me to visit the convent under the terms of a religious retreat. From my secular, academic perspective, I chose to structure my retreat as 'ethnographic fieldwork'. As well as examining the medieval fabric, I observed religious services and interviewed the sisters about their perceptions of sacred space and their current use of the convent's medieval spaces (Gilchrist 1989). But our conversations grew more intense, with some of the sisters discussing their personal experiences of vocation and the sacred, and their feelings about living apart from the world outside the convent. This episode had a profound impact on my doctoral research, inspiring a focus on female agency and the embodied experience of religious women. Previously nuns were seen as passive objects of feudal relations, daughters without dowries who were conveniently parked in family convents. I was already critical of previous androcentric perspectives that robbed medieval women of social agency, but, well-schooled in Marxist archaeological theory, I had regarded medieval nuns as hapless victims of false consciousness.

The experience of speaking with contemporary nuns about their vocation made me sensitive to the ethics involved in studying religion in both living and past communities. The ethical relationship between archaeologists today and the past peoples whom they study has been raised by Sarah Tarlow and Geoffrey Scarre in relation to archaeological treatment of the dead. Scarre argues that archaeologists do not need to share the religious convictions of people in the past in order to recognise a moral duty of care towards the remains of the dead. Archaeological practice that disregards the values and dignity of people in the past impinges on their status as previously *living beings* (Scarre 2003). Tarlow contends that through archaeological scholarship we participate in animating past people as social beings; we extend their social existence and therefore have an ethical obligation to be responsible in how we represent their beliefs (Tarlow 2006). My contact with a living community of nuns instilled an enduring respect for the beliefs and conscious agency of others, and the genuine spiritual convictions by which they live their lives. It made me think carefully about how I represent the beliefs and experiences of religious women in the past. This early encounter has influenced my engagement with contemporary faith communities and it has shaped my research on the medieval past, particularly in relation to problematic categories of belief such as magic (Gilchrist 2008).

Archaeology's privileging of secular values is particularly evident when discussing magic and 'odd' or inexplicable archaeological deposits (discussed in Chapter 4). Things that cannot be explained in functionalist categories of subsistence or technology are labelled as 'ritual'. Archaeologists stigmatise ritual in the past by framing it as a fallacy, something considered as irrational (Fowles 2013: 9). A classic example is the treatment of 'structured deposition', or 'placed deposits', such as whole pots or animals buried in ditches and pits, or objects placed at critical points in settlements, such as at boundaries, entrances or the corners of houses (Garrow 2012). Such deposits are widely regarded by archaeologists as intentional acts that appear to defy any rational explanation. Joanna Brück critically assessed the assumptions underlying such interpretations, arguing that a series of binaries is projected: secular/profane; rational/ irrational; Western/non-Western, and that these attitudes are rooted in the legitimising discourses of European colonialism (Brück 1999). She argues that we need to interpret structured deposition within a different framework of values: placed deposits were *rationally* conceived according to past worldviews, directed towards specific practical purposes such as agriculture and technology.

Structured deposition was long considered by archaeologists to be a pre-Christian rite, confined to prehistoric and Roman contexts. Thus, an additional binary opposition is projected onto placed deposits dating to the medieval period: Christian/pagan joins the list of secular/profane; rational/ irrational; Western/non-Western. Here too, a colonial discourse can be

detected in the assumption that the conversion to Christianity erased long-standing practices and worldviews (Petts 2011). It is only in the last decade that medieval archaeologists have identified 'odd', 'special' or 'placed' deposits in medieval contexts, with similarities in the types of objects and materials selected for use across Europe, extending from pagan to Christian eras (Gilchrist 2012; Hamerow 2006). In Scandinavia and the Baltic, deposition appears to have been a common element of ritual practice in the home and the church (Hukantaival 2013). In medieval Denmark, for example, odd deposits comprised animal parts, metal tools and utensils, pottery vessels, coins, personal items such as jewellery, prehistoric lithics and fossils (Falk 2008: 207–8). The prevalent attitude of medieval archaeologists towards such deposits reflects their privileging of secular and economic approaches and their narrow conceptualisation of Christian ritual.

An instructive case is that of coin deposits in Scandinavian churches, with over 65,000 coin finds discovered below wooden floors in 600 churches. An interdisciplinary project based at the University of Oslo is examining coin finds in the context of the relationship between the church and monetisation, focusing on the best recorded church excavations (Gullbekk et al. 2016). Both economic and ritual perspectives are considered, with coins regarded as 'devotional instruments' (Myrberg Burström 2018). But the question of whether these coins were *deliberately* deposited is contested. The latest research concludes that these are accidental losses, for example incorporated during processes of floor renewal, or representing overflow from offertory boxes (Gullbekk 2018). Once again, archaeologists project the secular/profane; rational/irrational framework when interpreting inexplicable deposits. And yet, we have ample evidence that the medieval worldview incorporated a rich plurality of ritual practice performed as magic. We have specific archaeological evidence for the ritual use of coins, for example placed with the medieval dead (Gilchrist 2008; Hall 2016a). The historian Richard Kieckhefer proposed that magic should be perceived as 'an alternative form of rationality' that was consistent with medieval views of the universe (Kieckhefer 1994), a definition surprisingly close to Brück's discussion of prehistoric placed deposits (Brück 1999).

Archaeologists often dismiss as superstition any ritual performed outside the orthodox practices of the medieval church. For example, the burial of a complete cat was discovered beneath the foundations of the medieval church of St Mark's, Lincoln. But archaeologists chose not to report this find when the site monograph was published in 1986, because it smacked of 'superstition' (O'Connor 2007: 8; Terry O'Connor pers. comm.). The term 'superstition' has always been used pejoratively; it derives from antiquity and means the worship of the true god by inappropriate and unacceptable means (Cameron 2010: 4). More recently, archaeologists have recognised animal deposits in