2013. Review of “An Archaeology of the Cosmos. Rethinking Agency and Religion in Ancient America” by Timothy Pau...

Timothy Insoll

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relied on. If clinicians, with an abundance of evidence on which to base their diagnoses feel that they need criteria to guide them, how much more so do palaeopathologists, whose evidence is derived almost exclusively from looking at the skeleton? True, there may be occasional recourse to other evidence of which radiography is the most frequently used, but even this is often not very helpful. It seems to me that the only satisfactory way to proceed under these circumstances is for palaeopathologists to agree on a set of algorithms or operational definitions which would be used to arrive at a diagnosis. The operational definition would consist of a variable number of criteria—the variation in number depending on the disease under consideration—which would need to be satisfied in order that a diagnosis could be made. In a very few instances, the disease may produce a pathognomonic sign (or signs) on the skeleton which would be sufficient for it to be diagnosed with confidence—eburnation in the case of osteoarthritis, for example. This would certainly have the result of reducing the apparent prevalence of disease in a skeletal assemblage but it would mean that those new to the game would have some guidance to enable them to come to a conclusion which would be clinically valid, and not just the name of a disease that they had plucked from the pages of a medical book or, even worse, second hand from an anthropological or archaeological text. Regrettably, no-one looking through the present volume is going to leave its pages any more able to diagnose a skeletal lesion than they were before they browsed through its excellent photographs.

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This is a book concerned with big questions. First, “why do so many people believe in supreme beings and holy spirits?” and secondly, “does history cause beliefs, religious and otherwise, such that we and our beliefs are shaped by the times in which we live? Or do our beliefs change history?” (p. 1). The focus of attention in answering these questions is the Mississippian civilisation of ancient North America. It is an interesting and thought-provoking study, and should appeal to the non-specialist.

Chapter 1 sets the scene and outlines Pauketat’s theoretical perspectives. He challenges approaches that attempt to define homogeneous and static belief systems based on archaeological evidence, and instead argues that agency should be seen as significant. Archaeoastronomy and the ‘celestial realm’ are highlighted as important sources of evidence in addressing the big questions he poses, and his own “personal discovery” (p. 4) of archaeoastronomy has influenced this book. Chapter 2 considers, in brief, anthropologies of religion with, presumably because of the cosmological emphasis, some focus on the work of Mircea Eliade. The role of analogy in exploring religion in ancient North America is also considered. Chapter 3 examines agency and religion via the useful concept of ‘bundling’—concentrations of things, but also people, places, qualities or phenomena. The concepts of intentionality, materiality and animism are also introduced. Chapter 4 more fully explores ‘bundles’ in the North American context through; for example, Native American medicine bundles and the implications of their transfer for religions, and “repositionings and translations of entire social fields” (p. 57).

Chapter 5 is that most directly concerned with the archaeology of the cosmos through consideration of the archaeoastronomical evidence for his study region. For example, Native American solar alignments and how they potentially correlate with monuments such as the Great Houses and Great Kivas of Chaco Canyon are discussed. The moon is similarly considered, as are, to a lesser extent, the stars. The conclusion drawn is that “astronomy is the gist of religious performance” (p. 87). Chapter 6 examines in detail alignments of architectural constructions: villages, Greater Cahokia, ridge-top mounds, sugarloaf mounds and processional avenues, marker posts and other alignments, and Cahokian medicine lodges. Comprehensive data sets are analysed. Chapter 7 presents, summarises and analyses a range of archaeological data that will be useful for the regional specialist. Chapter 8, ‘Cosmic deposits’, focuses on deposition and presents archaeological examples of possible bundles—of the
dead, and of the living. Chapter 9 provides the conclusions where there is a return to the ideas of agency, and of the concept of bundling as in “big histories as big bundle transfers” (p. 187).

Inevitably there are some flaws and weaknesses. For example, theoretically it is in some ways very much a product of its time and is likely to date quite quickly. It is filled with current buzzwords such as 'agency', 'intentionality' and 'materiality', and is probably the first archaeological text—but no doubt not the last—to integrate and draw upon Ingold’s (2007) work on 'lines' [see also Ingold’s review of Bradley in this review section]. There is also sometimes a tendency to generalise based on limited data in the way that Eliade himself did. This might not be the case with regard to the North American data—this reviewer cannot judge—but is evident, for instance, where African religions are mentioned with reference only to the work of Comaroff and Comaroff. This is followed by a few general archaeological ‘theory’ references and from this the inference is drawn that “based on such studies, we may assert that religions and religious conversions are experiential processes” (p. 31). If conversion was at the point of a gun or spear, or to avoid slavery, as was sometimes the case, one wonders about the degree of agency and experience involved—experience, certainly of a sort, but perhaps not quite how Pauketat defines it.

Similarly, we find the very general statement made that “in Africa, socio-political orders were cosmological orders” (p.187) referenced to five texts, some of which are quite dated. To make such a statement in a seminar on a campus of an African university might lead to rigorous questioning, to put it mildly. Considering the emphasis placed elsewhere in the book on agency and individuality, why is the great diversity of the African past subsumed within such a meaningless statement? Perhaps in the context of Mississippian civilisation it works, but the value of archaeoastronomy more generally is also questionable, and needs convincingly working through with other bodies of evidence. Further criticisms could be highlighted but this is unnecessary, as there are also many strong points in the book.

For this reviewer the particular value lies in the concept of ‘bundling’. This is not so much as it pertains to religions but with reference to materiality. Like wrapping or binding, it provides food for thought that can be explored in other archaeological contexts as a further mechanism for how people interacted with substances, objects and material culture, and invested them with agency. This book is less successful in answering the big questions posed with regard to religion in general, but this is an impossible task. More successful is the consideration with reference to the ancient Mississippian evidence. Overall, this is an innovative book that deserves to be read. It would appear to be the product of many years of primary field research and thought about the material and concepts presented, and Pauketat is to be congratulated for tackling issues of religions and beliefs from an archaeological perspective.

Reference


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Ban Non Wat: a great site reviewed

Three volumes on Ban Non Wat by Higham and Kijngam (2010, 2012a & b) were reviewed in Antiquity 87(337) September 2013 by Joyce White. Here, author and editor C.F.W. Higham responds.

Joyce White began her recent review of three volumes reporting on our excavations at Ban Non Wat by stressing that it is a great archaeological site (White 2013). Unfortunately, she did not reason why.

Location is one key. It commands a pass over the Phetchabun Range linking Central Thailand with the Mun Valley. Where the former region has access to marine resources and copper ore, Ban Non Wat has salt. The prehistoric transit of valuables—marine shell, copper, tin and, later, glass, carnelian, silver and gold—from Central Thailand to the Khorat Plateau sites had to pass through the bottleneck controlled by Ban Non Wat. Our three volumes cover the excavation seasons 2002–2007, which were co-directed by myself, Dr Amphan Kijngam and Dr Rachanie Thosarat as part of our project ‘The Origins of Angkor’, and uncovered an area of 880m². For the first time in Southeast Asia, we encountered a
Using archaeological evidence gathered from ancient America, especially case material from the Great Plains and the pre-Columbian American Indian city of Cahokia, Timothy Pauketat explores the logical consequences of these two fundamental questions. Religious beliefs are not more resilient than other aspects of culture and society, and people are not the only causes of historical change. This rethinking theories of agency and religion provides readers with challenging and thought provoking conclusions that will lead them to reassess the way they approach the past. Discover the world's research. 20+ million members. An Archaeology of the Cosmos: Rethinking Agency and Religion in Ancient America. Routledge. Timothy R. Pauketat. Why have so many archaeologists before and after Harris borrowed the delusional constructs of their nonarchaeologist colleagues to explain the ancient past? The answer is that archaeology has an inferiority complex. This is the reason, I suspect, why E. A. Hoebel thought archaeology was doomed always to be the lesser part of anthropology (cited by Willey and Sabloff 1993:152) and why some archaeologists insisted that there is no archaeological theory, only anthropological theory (Flannery 1982). The Origin of the Cosmos. Before there was soil, or sky, or any green thing, there was only the gaping abyss of Ginnungagap. This chaos of perfect silence and darkness lay between the homeland of elemental fire, Muspelheim, and the homeland of elemental ice, Niflheim. Thematically, Ymir is the personification of the chaos before creation, which is also depicted as the impersonal void of Ginnungagap. Both Ymir and Ginnungagap are ways of talking about limitless potential that isn’t actualized, that hasn’t yet become the particular things that we find in the world around us. This is why the Vikings described it as a void (as have countless other peoples; consider the darkness upon the face of the deep of the first chapter of Genesis, for example). Timothy R. Pauketat, An Archaeology of the Cosmos: Rethinking Agency and Religion in Ancient America. London and New York: Routledge, 2013. Paperback (edition reviewed), 230 pp. inc. 85 illus., 8 tables. ISBN 9780415521291. £27.99. Hardback, 256 pages. ISBN 9780415521284. £95.00. eBook. ISBN 978020308518-9. £25.19. Using archaeological evidence gathered from ancient America, especially case material from the Great Plains and the pre-Columbian American Indian city of Cahokia, Timothy Pauketat explores the logical consequences of these two fundamental questions. Religious beliefs are not more resilient than other aspects of culture and society, and people are not the only causes of historical change. This rethinking theories of agency and religion provides readers with challenging and thought provoking conclusions that will lead them to reassess the way they approach the past. Toon meer Toon minder. Productspecificaties. The Cosmos in Ancient Greek Religious Experience. (0). 93,99.