

# The Archaeology of Ritual

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## Abstract

The main objective of this review is to consider what archaeology can contribute to general anthropological theories on “ritual in its own right” and to highlight the potential for advancing knowledge about ritual experience as a distinctive material process. An examination of the exceptional material frame marking ceremonial events demonstrates the value of ritual as a heuristic and challenges archaeologists who privilege the interpretation of religion, affect, ontology, or cultural rationalities as necessarily determinative of the ritualization process. Therefore, archaeologists should not interpret ritual places and residues as immediate proxies of other sociopolitical realities but instead should base their inferences on cross-contextual analyses of archaeological data sets. Ultimately, attention to the amplified materialization of the ritual process, often entailing the performative bundling of disparate material items in archaeological deposits, permits a re-evaluation of theories proposing that ritual is intimately connected to agency and power.

## INTRODUCTION

The analysis of ritual contexts in the material record has witnessed unprecedented popularity in recent archaeological research. The physical traces of ritual events are privileged as valuable ciphers to interpret power relations, struggles over identity, social transformation, experiences of place and time, and cultural constructions of ecology, community, and personhood. Unsurprisingly, archaeological deposits of a ritual nature are also considered an unrivaled font for the reconstruction of past worldviews and political ideologies.

The elevation of all things ritual is the legacy of both a long genealogy of anthropological research and the peculiar characteristics of the archaeological record. Rappaport (1999, p. 137) famously regarded ritual as “the basic social act,” whereas Geertz (1973, 2005) approached it as the key to the inner workings of culture for both anthropologists and practitioners alike. Other theorists contend that ritual performance provides a window onto micropolitical processes and the interplay of domination and resistance (Bell 1992, 1997; Fogelin 2006). Indeed, scholars have argued that reflexivity is intrinsic to ritual practice (Bell 1997, Højbjerg 2007, Lambek 2000, Lewis 1980, Morris 1987, Renfrew 1994, Smith 1980, Turner 1967). Archaeologists often rely on ritual contexts to search for the material articulations of ideology (orthodoxies/heterodoxies), creative agency, and discursive or contestatory forms of practice (Brumfiel 2001; Fogelin 2006; Inomata & Coben 2006; Joyce & Weller 2007; Keane 2010, pp. 187–88; Leone 2005; Pauketat 2013; Swenson 2008). Moving beyond Durkheimian theories that ritual codifies “social facts” and legitimates social order, recent archaeological research examines ritual as a prime vehicle not simply of representation but of active “culture-making” (Emerson & Pauketat 2008). Ritual is no longer viewed as a conservative bastion of tradition but is celebrated for its potential to foster social change and to create a forum for the assertion or transformation of subjective positions (Kelly & Kaplan 1990, Kertzer 1989, Pauketat 2013). In fact, interpretations of placemaking, social memory, and the ideological naturalization of time usually rely on ritualized archaeological contexts, whether temple renovations, henge constructions, or offerings demarcating and animating sacred landscapes (Bradley 1991, Gosden 1994, Pauketat 2013, Pollard 2008, Swenson 2012, Van Dyke & Alcock 2003). Even theorists who advocate the traditional Marxian position that ritual performance mystifies consciousness similarly recognize ritual as a powerful instrument for the reproduction of social institutions (Bloch 1989, Heckenberger 2005).

Archaeological research has thus increasingly relied on ritual deposits as the principal entrée to reconstruct many aspects of social life, especially power relations and historical change. Ritual remains have also been mobilized to advance theories on cognition, phenomenology, personhood, embodiment, emotion, social memory, gender relations, and household organization (Bradley 2005, Fowler 2011, Gilchrist 1997, Hamilakis 2011, Plunket 2002, Whitley & Hays-Gilpin 2008). Despite a shared focus on ritual, it is striking that these approaches are not easily lumped together; scholars interested in affect or ontology hold divergent understandings of human behavior than do archaeologists who have adopted cognitivist theoretical frameworks. Ritualized deposits are thus mobilized to support very different theoretical agendas. Nevertheless, these approaches often lose sight of how action is ritualized relative to practice in general. Archaeologists most often combine intellectualist and symbolist theories of religion (e.g., Weber, Durkheim, Geertz, and Marx) and tend to overstate both ritual’s expressive properties—as unequivocally reflecting worldview, social structure, economic disparities, community dramas, etc.—and its ability to reinvent tradition and transform social structure (Handelman 2004; Højbjerg 2007; Swenson 2010, p. 192). I argue that archaeologists should not interpret ritual spaces and residues as immediate proxies of other sociopolitical realities but should instead base their inferences on cross-contextual analyses of archaeological data sets. Therefore, the central objective of this review is to reflect on what

archaeology can contribute to general anthropological theories on “ritual in its own right” (see Handelman 2004, Housman & Severi 1998, Lévi-Strauss 1981) and to highlight the potential for advancing knowledge of diverse traditions of ritual experience as a distinctive material process. The ritual formation of the archaeological record lends credence to the argument that ritual constitutes a special quality of action entailing a material reframing or marking of practice (Bateson 1958; Bradley 2005, p. 33; Dietler 2001; Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994; Moore & Myerhoff 1977a; Renfrew 1994; Verhoeven 2002, pp. 26–27). This material reframing not only is observable in the archaeological record but also invites an expanded theoretical exploration of ritualization as an inflection of action in general. Certainly, in some social settings, ritual creates culturally specific domains of the sacred, setting apart places and times from quotidian routines (Bell 1992). However, the varied material contexts, meanings, effects, and frequencies of ritually marked practice reveal that it defies reduction to any one interpretive framework. Therefore, ritual complexes do not in every instance mirror social relations or provide a model for thought and action—a “sense-making” device in the Weberian–Geertzian tradition (Højbjerg 2007, Swenson 2010). Nor can these contexts be read as transparently expressing belief systems, social inequalities, political ideologies, or universal cognitive processes.

Ultimately, an examination of the distinctive material frame marking ceremonial events demonstrates the value of ritual as a heuristic and challenges archaeologists who privilege the interpretation of religion, ontology, or cultural rationalities as determinative of the meaning and effect of ritual performances. I argue in turn that attention to the amplified materialization of the ritual process, often entailing the performative bundling of disparate material items, can accommodate theories proposing that ritual is intimately connected to power. A focus on the material scaffolding sustaining the ritual process also permits a critical appraisal of the strengths and weaknesses of power-centric models developed to interpret past ritual activity.

## **IN DEFENSE OF A HEURISTIC: RECENT TRENDS IN THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF RITUAL**

The past two decades have witnessed the publication of a vast literature on archaeological approaches to ritual, and space restrictions limit this review to a consideration of just a few prominent trends. Many archaeologists continue to follow Durkheim or Marx in analyzing past ceremonial events in terms of social function, mainly as a mechanism of either integration or ideological regulation (see critique by Angelo 2014, pp. 272–73; Fowles 2013, pp. 64–67; Swenson 2010). The reduction of ritual to ideology represents a variant of functionalist theory whereby the residues of ceremonial events are interpreted as instruments of social control or subversion. This position is espoused by archaeologists who embrace universal theories of human behavior and by those that emphasize the historical contingencies of practice (Brumfiel 2001, Fogelin 2006, Gonlin & Lohse 2007, Hayden 2003, Leone 2005, McGuire & Bernbeck 2011, Swenson 2008). To view ritual as social control is all the more paradoxical because scholars have largely abandoned the Durkheimian–Marxian framework that ritual simply reflects, mystifies, or legitimizes sociopolitical orders. In contrast, archaeologists of various theoretical persuasions increasingly argue that ritual is generative of the social, the symbolic, and even the cognitive (McAnany & Wells 2008, Pauketat 2013, Renfrew & Morley 2009). However, these studies generally privilege reconstructions of power relations, and the political ramifications of the ritual process still tend to be interpreted in a surprisingly mechanical and ahistorical fashion. Ritual may now be viewed as actively creating or contesting political inequalities, but how social differentiation was achieved is often just assumed and not properly contextualized culturally or archaeologically. In fact, semantic substitutions of this sort (a shift from reification/reflection to creation/structuration) often do little

to improve our understanding of the specific historical meanings and the subtle structuring effects of past religious regimes. Approaches that foreground power relations also tend to reduce ritual to a political game played between generically conceived superordinate and subordinate agents (see Swenson 2011). In their search of how past ritual mediated relations of domination and resistance, archaeologists have relied especially on feasting deposits (Dietler 2001), domestic ritual (Dietler 2010, Gonlin & Lohse 2007, Plunket 2002), and the construction and experience of sacred landscapes (see critical review by Brück 2001).

Recent proponents of theories focusing on ontology, materiality, and performativity—outgrowths of practice-based models—have been critical of the reductionism underwriting traditional Durkheimian and Marxian approaches (Alberti & Bray 2009, DeMarrais 2004, Inomata & Coben 2006, Swenson 2011). They disapprove equally of the limitations of hermeneutic perspectives designed to infer worldviews and the nature of other-than-human powers from past ritual practices. Although professing to foreground the historically particular, the latter often fall back on structuralist epistemologies (in the spirit of Lévi-Strauss) to reconstruct past conceptual schemes (Tilley 2004, 2007; Whitehouse 2007). The patterned distribution of material remains in specific places (ditches, thresholds, settlement boundaries, house corners, etc.) is interpreted as expressing binary classificatory principles such as inside/outside, nature/culture, wild/domesticated, and male/female (see critical summary by Garrow 2012, p. 97).

Some anthropologists have questioned the heuristic value of ritual altogether. The category of religion has been critiqued in particular as a purifying category of modernity that has distorted and simplified past cultural practices (see Asad 1993, Fowles 2013, Masuzawa 2012). As a mode of action, and thus more readily reconcilable with the cherished trope of practice, ritual has fared a little better. Nevertheless, many archaeologists argue that the delineation of certain activities as ritualistic in contrast with the technical, mundane, or practical imposes Eurocentric dichotomies of the sacred/profane, the symbolic/utilitarian, the irrational/rational, and the discursive/nondiscursive (Brück 1999, Goody 1977). Privileging distinct ontological modes configuring alternative material worlds (and not simply alternate constructions of such worlds) intends to circumvent these problems and eliminates the need to denote certain modes of practice as ritualized in contrast with other fields of action (Brück 2006, Haber 2009, Hamilakis 2011, Hull 2014, Price 2008). Therefore, some anthropologists have eschewed traditional definitions of ritual as encompassing the highly symbolic, communicative, and rule-governed or as actions transacting relations with suprahuman powers. If both the manufacture of a cooking pot and the sacrifice of an animal are constitutive of society, embedded in efficacious if arcane formulae, and are goal oriented (instrumental), then what is the point of calling the one technical and the other ritual? As a solution, certain archaeologists have resorted to deploying emic categories or amalgamating ritual with other heuristics. For instance, Lewis (1980, pp. 39–40) and Fowles (2013, pp. xii, 101–3) note that practices we would typically designate as ritualistic are described as “doing things” or “doings” among both the Gnau of Papua New Guinea and the Pueblo communities of the American Southwest. Therefore, focusing on indigenous categories, ontological modes, culturally specific rationalities, or the varied affective contexts of embodied practice is deemed to offer a more accurate and historically sensitive framework of analysis than would the employment of standard etic categories (Alberti & Bray 2009; Brück 1999; Haber 2009, p. 428; Hamilakis 2011; Harris & Sørensen 2010). Wells and colleagues propose the heuristic of “ritual economy” to describe the inextricable relationship linking the staging of ceremonial events with material production, provisioning, and consumption (McAnany & Wells 2008, Wells & Davis-Salazar 2007). They caution that no one category should be ascribed primacy in explaining past archaeological data sets. In materializing worldview and dispositions, ritual practice underwrites much economic behavior in past societies. Yoffee’s (2005, pp. 170–73) notion of “rituality” also describes political economies and government bodies that

are embedded in religious institutions (see also Inomata & Coben 2006). Indeed, proponents of practice theory commonly assert the indivisibility of ritual, politics, and economy. Likewise, other archaeologists have affirmed that religion provides a safer heuristic than does ritual in interpreting archaeological contexts if understood as a totalizing structure of practice (Insoll 2004, pp. 10–14). For instance, Insoll argues that all dimensions of Islamic material culture are a product of an Islamic worldview, and he decries the reductive subsumption of ritual to politics and ideology, a move that elides questions of belief, faith, spirituality, and religiously inculcated routines and dispositions (ranging from diet to the gendering of everyday space).

Of course, archaeologists have agonized over whether ritual can be defined at all and have debated how its traces can be accurately identified in the material record (see Fogelin 2007, Marcus 2007). Most would now agree that ritual does not constitute an essentialized thing but is best described as a quality or inflection of action that varies considerably from culture to culture (Kyriakidis 2007; Verhoeven 2002, 2011). As elaborated in the following section, an understanding of ritual as a quality of action entailing the material reframing of practice intends to put to rest the epistemological angst surrounding the analysis of ritual in archaeological contexts. Moreover, thinking of ritualized practice not as a kind of action but as a condition thereof ideally respects the historical particulars of past events while permitting cross-cultural comparisons (Keane 2010, p. 190). Fowles (2013, p. 103) provides a definition of “doings” among the Pueblo “as practices characterized by a heightened awareness of interconnectedness and the relations between things.” Practices directed by a keen apprehension of the relationality of the world actually conform well to influential models of ritual developed by anthropologists. A mode of action in the subjunctive mood, as Turner argued (1967), ritual commonly entails the focusing of attention, which implicates distinctive frames of practice, thought, performance, and emotion (Lewis 1980; Renfrew 1994; Smith 1980, p. 114; Tambiah 1979). Whether understood as a differentiated “stance” (Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994), as a “strategy of ritualization” (Bell 1992), or as processes of “condensation” (Housman & Severi 1998), performances of this kind qualitatively mark and distinguish actions and their performers (Keane 2010, p. 196). Practices invoking greater awareness of the world’s entanglements might in certain instances be expressive (even constitutive) of cultural worldviews, but their meanings are often mutable and polyvalent (Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994). As Bradley (2005, p. 33) notes, “rituals are more about actions of a specialized kind rather than propositions about the world that involves a form of participation and commitment to action. Once it is accepted that ritual is a kind of practice—a performance which is defined by its own conventions—it becomes easier to understand how it can occur in so many settings and why it may be attached to so many different concerns.” In a similar manner, Hodder (2010a, p. 17) recognizes that ritual constitutes “a marking event, and it can be called religious not because it is separate from everyday life, but because it focuses attention, arouses, refers to broader imaginings and deals with the relationship between self and community.” The material reframing of action often sets apart recognized events (initiations, pilgrimages, festivals, etc.) from the stream of everyday practice, events that often afford alternate experiences of time, place, and being (Morley 2007). The degree and scale to which certain practices are conspicuously marked or unmarked (say, as taboo)—in both a material and potentially a semiotic form—should thus allow for an improved approximation of the context, meaning, and even type of activity that occurred in past social formations (Fowles 2008, Keane 2010). This observation affirms that ritual is profoundly mediated by the material world, and the specialized framing of practice is most often achieved through its altered “mediatisation” (Engelke 2010). Taking heed of the maxim that the “medium is the message” (McLuhan 1966, pp. 8–12), archaeologists have much to gain from charting how variably marked (framed) practices related contextually to unmarked (unframed) acts in the archaeological record (Hull 2014, p. 175; Keane 2010; Turner 1986, p. 93; Verhoeven 2002, p. 27).

In this vein, the materiality of ritual demands greater scrutiny, and scholars in numerous disciplines have begun to embrace the “material turn” in their analyses of ceremonial events and religious life (Clark 2010; Engelke 2005, 2010; Meskell 2004; Rowlands 2004; Tilley 2004; Vázquez 2011). It is perhaps ironic, however, that until recently archaeologists have taken for granted the material force of ritual performance. The diverse effects and often contradictory meanings generated in the unfolding of particular rites are largely a consequence of the intensified material, sensual, and emotional experiences generated by the ritualized framing of social action (Dietler 2001, Fogelin 2007, Gerholm 1988, Hamilakis 2013, Swenson 2011).

## RITUAL AS MATERIAL PROCESS

Ethnographers have demonstrated that ritual often alters the intentional and communicative quality of action, an observation that would explain the long-standing popularity of both symbolic and functionalist theories of ritual behavior (Grimes 1990, Housman & Severi 1998, Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994, Kyriakidis 2007, Tambiah 1985). Whether a foundation sacrifice to animate a dwelling, a rite of intensification to ward off environmental perturbations, an initiation to transform a girl into a woman, a healing ceremony, a funeral to ancestralize the recent dead, or a carnival in which social norms are inverted, very different rituals are designed to either reinforce or alter the relational orders of self, society, and cosmos (Descola 2013, p. 37; Swenson 2011; Verhoeven 2002, p. 19). Despite the great historical differences in recorded ritual regimes, the ritual process thus commonly entails the generation or reconfiguration of distinct relational fields (Houseman & Severi 1998, pp. 197–202). The amplified materialization of ritual action, involving aesthetic media, marked speech, music, and specialized manipulations of the body, has the potential to enhance (or distort) sensory perception, an experience that facilitates alterations in the relationships defining a community of practice. Therefore, action is ritualized (materially altered) to more effectively strengthen, dissolve, or realign social and material dependencies (between people, places, things, gods, etc.). Ritual, then, commonly activates a specifically relational ontology, and it is unsurprising that recent archaeological research interested in animism and non-Cartesian ontological orders has often focused their attention on ritualized contexts (Alberti & Bray 2009, Fowles 2013, Haber 2009). However, ontologies were not necessarily static in a given society, and the degree to which objects were “enlivened” and entangled with the social world may have been particularly pronounced in the context of ritual events (Swenson 2015).

As an instrumental act—to initiate, curse, propitiate, fertilize, bless, empower, etc.—ritual often brings vital forces directly into material being, which explains in part why it is especially prone to politicization (Bell 1992; Bloch 1992; Fowles 2013, pp. 54, 190; Swenson 2013). The faculty of ritual to recalibrate relational networks can also explain its appeal to anthropologists interested in agency and process, especially given its capacity to make present the absent and negotiate the “paradox of mediation and immediacy” (see Descola 2013, pp. 40, 42). As Robb notes (2010, p. 503), “Many rituals create spaces within which people can act as different kinds of beings, or mark, heighten or justify the transition between modes of agency” (see also Pauketat 2013, pp. 2–3).

Although irreducible to politics, ritual performances can constitute a fundamental exercise in power, given their role in precipitating or preventing transformation, whether at the level of the individual person, the larger social collective, or the cosmos. An examination of ritual contexts in the archaeological record in relationship to the patterned depositions of other routines could thus shed light on culturally specific constructions of agency, etiology, and power (Pauketat 2013, Pollard 2008). In this regard, Henn notes that ritual “opens up a multitude of modalities of transformation listed *inter alia* as ‘framing,’ ‘shift of genre,’ ‘code switching,’ ‘parallelism,’



‘contextualization,’ ‘decontextualization’ and ‘entextualization,’ which are crucial for the formation and transformation of everything from language to the socio-political aspects of ritual” (Henn 2008, p. 23). Therefore, it becomes apparent why archaeologists have met with considerable success in interpreting historically specific traditions of personhood, time, and political subjectivity from the analyses of ritual deposits and performatively marked places in the archaeological record (Brück 2006; Fowler 2011; Fowles 2013; Giles 2010; Kidder 2010; Swenson 2012, 2015).

The intensified material frame undergirding the ritual process can account for the prominence of ceremonial deposits in the archaeological record, ranging from ordered deposits of offerings to astronomically aligned landscape features (see Insoll 2011, Pauketat 2013). Coined by Richards & Thomas (1984), “structured depositions” refer to the intentional creation of the archaeological record as formed by past ritual acts or more encompassing symbolic schemes. As summarized by Garrow (2012), structured depositions have been differently employed to describe the unusual clustering of artifacts within particular places, such as caches in a Neolithic henge (described critically by Garrow as “odd deposits”), and material cultural patterning in general that expresses meaningfully constituted worlds. The latter has included both explicit ideologies and taken-for-granted (unconscious) attitudes toward pollution, gender, and sacred landscapes, among others. The concept of structured deposition has played an important role in the archaeology of ritual since the 1980s, especially in Britain and Northern Europe. Garrow (2012) has written a comprehensive review of the changing application of this heuristic, both as a means to identify patterning in the archaeological record and as an interpretive model of ritual itself (see also Hughes 2014). Archaeologists have critiqued Richards & Thomas’s concept to describe the material traces of ritual acts in particular, arguing that all material remains, whether rubbish dumps or multiple reflooring episodes, are “structured” in some way (see critiques by Garrow 2012, Hughes 2014, Mills & Walker 2008). Richards & Thomas’s (1984, p. 191) notion of structured deposition was based on the argument that because “ritual activities involve highly formalized, repetitive behavior, we would expect any depositional patterns observed in the archaeological record to maintain a high level of structure.” Garrow (2012, pp. 104–8) rightly critiques that “structured” is a misleading term because ritualized deposits are not necessarily more structured than everyday residues. Instead, the degree to which artifacts are assembled, juxtaposed, and dispersed demands attention, something implicitly considered in Richards & Thomas’s pathbreaking analysis of the Neolithic site of Durrington Walls (but see critique in Albarella & Serjeantson 2002; Garrow 2012, pp. 90–95). As detailed below, the concept of bundled deposits refers to explicit ceremonial events that relied in part on performed acts of ritual deposition. This heuristic better captures the condensation of particular assemblages of artifacts that were consciously emplaced in the archaeological record. Therefore, ritual bundling designates something more specific than the past residues of meaningful practice (shaped by a particular cultural logic or structure) but refers to an actual genre of ritual deposition.

Housman & Severi’s (1998) notion of “ritual condensation” refers to the simultaneous existence in a single sequence of action of more than one and often opposing modes of relationships, as exemplified by the adoption of dual gender identities and contradictory kinship roles in the Naven ceremony of the Sepik River region of Papua New Guinea (see also Bell 1997, p. 160; Dietler 2001; Tambiah 1979, p. 119; Turner 1967). They argue that such symbolic condensations structure many different kinds of ceremonies, including healing rites and shamanistic trance. This understanding of condensation compares with Fowles’s definition of Puebloan doings as accentuating the interconnectedness of different things and to Robb’s recognition that multiple modes of agency are compressed within the ritual frame (to facilitate shifts in being). Therefore, as a quintessentially performed action, ritual often concentrates antithetical or complementary relations to engender material, social, and cosmic realignments. In fact, Keane identifies an

analogous process of “semiotic bundling” in ritualized modes of speech and action (Keane 2003, 2010, p. 204).

Ritual condensation is commonly realized through the combination of disparate material entities, a phenomenon analogous to the potent and protean properties of Amerindian medicine bundles (see Pauketat 2013, pp. 27–36; Zedeño 2008). In recent publications, Zedeño and Pauketat demonstrate that Native American bundles provide a useful analytical framework to interpret the political agency of sacred (animated) places and things. The famed medicine bundles of indigenous North America consisted of skin or cloth wrappings that packaged an assortment of different materials, including pipes, scalps, broken arrows, metal, feathers, plants, rocks, paint, and heirlooms evocative of mythical places (Pauketat 2013, pp. 6–8, 43–58). Differing in size, function, and contents, Amerindian bundles could play a role in healing rites as their name implies, and their curation conferred authority and identity to their guardians. Envisioned as animate beings, oracles, historical charters, mnemonic devices, and nexuses of causality and change, these power objects were supplicated with prayer and offerings, and they secured center stage in numerous ritual performances. For instance, the opening of bundles released or harnessed cosmic powers, whereas their exchange transacted and renewed social relations among the Plains Indians of the American Midwest (Pauketat 2013, Zedeño 2008). Angelo (2014, p. 271) argues that ritual emerges through the peculiar assembly of material things that accentuates practice as a marked kind of performance. It is interesting to note in this regard that the Latin root of religion (*religio*) actually means “to bind” (Engelke 2010, p. 374). Indeed, the creative bundling of different peoples, things, places, and times serves as a convenient metaphor to describe the core of ritual as a distinctive material and performative process. For Pauketat (2013, pp. 34–36), bundles encapsulate the particular force of ritual to materially establish and reconfigure relational fields (or meshworks in the spirit of Ingold). The compressed materiality (and temporality) of the ritual frame creates an enhanced “sensorial regime” precisely through the performative assembly of things, which powerfully evokes memories and induces intense affective experiences (see Hamilakis 2014). Hamilakis’s (2011; 2014, chapter 5) recent publications on the multisensorial (synesthetic) experience underwriting feasts, funerals, and processions in Bronze Age Greece serve as a reminder that ritual is a profoundly somatic, sensory, and material practice.

Diverse objects brought together in bundled performances can acquire greater efficacy in directing self-reflexive action and tend to shed their “humility,” the noun employed by Miller (1987) to describe how most material things cue behavior below the level of consciousness. Similar to liminal rites of transformation, involving the blending, inversion, negation, and renewal of social roles and relationships, the bundling of aesthetically charged and heterogeneous materials captures the creative potential of certain modes of ritual practice to unite life forces, differentiate people, realign relationships, and reinscribe the significance of times and places (Fowles 2013, p. 103; Kapferer 2004; Turner 1969, pp. 97–101; Swenson & Warner 2015).

Inspired by Peircean semiotics, especially studies of iconicity and indexicality, Fowles and others have also recognized the potential of interpreting archaeological data sets in terms of the sensuous and sympathetic contiguities that link certain objects, places, and their dominant sign modes [in particular, see Fowles’s (2013, pp. 154–56, 161–64) fascinating discussion of Pueblo pipes and offerings in kivas]. Therefore, the analysis of the juxtaposition of material items in condensed deposits could shed light on past ontological modes and how ritualized actions transacted relations between people, things, and other-than-human powers (Angelo 2014, pp. 274–75; Descola 2013). Exploring the indexical interrelations connecting bundled objects to their referents holds promise for archaeological analysis, “for it is precisely such indexical icons that precipitate causality and action, a semiotic means of getting work done” (paraphrased from Fowles 2013, p. 156; see also Gell 1998, Preucel 2010). In fact, anthropologists have argued that mimesis and “iconicity [form



the] basic modus of ritual performance, since ritual usually involves the repetition and possibly exact replication of an earlier performance. . . .” (Henn 2008, p. 14). Thus, mimetic embodiments, whether entailing dance, masquerade, possession, the manipulation of bundled miniatures, or architectural simulation of powerful landforms “combine iconicity, that is, the ritual enacting of the reification of similarity, and indexicality, that is the bodily presence, contiguity, or affinity of the represented” (Henn 2008, p. 14; see also Knappett 2011, p. 209). In realizing resemblance and correspondence [what Pauketat (2013, p. 70) calls “intimate parallelisms”], mimetic practices are also complicit in materializing the relational matrix in which different entities are (re)defined and brought into contact (made interdependent). By microcosmically condensing interconnected things, ritualized bundling served to influence the world in ways that were comparable to the desired effects of sympathetic (homeopathic) magic in the spirit of Frazer. Therefore, the potential of ritual performances to sway cosmic forces and (re)structure political relations is exemplified by the bundling of either dialectically antithetical or mimetically linked entities. Certain funerary contexts could even be interpreted as miniaturized bundlings of larger social and cosmic realities (e.g., Egyptian tombs or Paracas mummy bundles from Southern Peru attired in numerous, superimposed tunics). The act of depositing sundry materials, both quotidian and exceptional, constituted a performance in its own right and played an important role in the creation of place in past societies, the theme of the next section.

## EMPLACING RITUAL

Archaeologists have productively focused on performatively marked (bundled) deposits in the archaeological record in relationship to other “routinized and largely unconsidered” continua of depositions (Pollard 2008, p. 45; see also Joyce 2008, Mills & Walker 2008, Pauketat 2012). For instance, the placement of mixtures of human remains, neonatal sheep, and different frequencies of exotic artifacts in ditches delineating causeway enclosures in Neolithic Britain may have been intended to enliven and empower the structures, imbuing the place with the accumulated identities of the cached remains (Pollard 2008). Patterned deposits of clustered fragments of different materials as well as dispersed but enchained things—say, metal objects and cremated human bones—have also been read as indicating the partible and extended nature of persons in Neolithic and Bronze Age England (Brück 2006; see also Chapman 2000, Chapman & Gaydarska 2007). Indeed, an examination of the patterned emplacements of differing forms of ritual deposits has provided a compelling basis for interpreting past cosmological schemes, constructions of personhood, and the changing social biographies of places and things (Swenson 2012). These deposits could entail either the “bundling” of a “disruptive excess of associations” or the possible prophylactic “debundling” of otherwise commonly associated items (Hallam & Hockey 2001, p. 117; Pollard 2008, p. 55). They include everything from the breaking (killing) and specialized burial of inalienable ceramics coinciding with the death of an individual to the destruction of the houses of suspected witches in the American Southwest (Pauketat 2012, Walker 1998, Walker & Lucero 2000). The discovery of rich artifact dumps of broken ceramics, household goods, and ritual paraphernalia in the Basin of Mexico and Morelos has been directly correlated with the New Fire Ceremony of the Aztec ritual calendar, an event requiring the purposeful destruction of things to prevent the end of the world and to ensure the renewal of time (inaugurating a new Aztec century—the *Xiubtlalpilli*—a “bundle of 52 years”) (Elson & Smith 2001). Leone’s (2005, pp. 203–8) analysis of African American “tobys” (alternatively referred to as “bundles,” “hands” or “mojos”), which were discovered cached at points of access within houses of colonial Annapolis, provides another example of such ritually bundled deposits. Composed of disparate elements including buttons, bones, and crystals—and often arrayed in cosmographic configurations—these

tobys served to protect house slaves and possibly hex abusive masters. The meaning and function of such deposits differed from the bundled sacrificial offerings of copper, female victims, and animals that commemorated rites of architectural termination and rededication at the Moche temple site of Huaca Colorada in Peru (Swenson & Warner 2012). These rituals point to a gestational and cyclical understanding of time, and they intended to facilitate energy flows between distinct but interdependent entities. The archaeological data suggest an ontological continuum of people, animals, places, and things in Moche worldview. These offerings also appear to have been deposited to nourish the pyramid construction, likely viewed as a metabolizing and living organism (Swenson 2015). Comparable rites characterized the extraordinary caches of bundled offerings incorporated in the construction of the Temple of the Feathered Serpent and Moon Pyramid at Teotihuacan (Cowgill 2004, pp. 273–75; Sugiyama 2005). The nature of the foundation sacrifices reveals that the monuments of Teotihuacan were built to control the recreation and movement of cosmic spacetime. Of course, many of the pyramid renovations in Mesoamerica have been fruitfully analyzed in this light (Matos Moctezuma 1995, Mock 1998). In fact, classic theories on ancient exemplary centers as cosmograms (*imago mundis*) deserve reconsideration, precisely given their recombinant power to bundle together all the elements of the world within the confines of the sacred city. The microcosmic condensation of polity and universe is evident at sites as different as Mesoamerican cities and the pre-Islamic Ka'ba shrine in Mecca (Aslan 2011, pp. 5–29; de Montmollin 1989, pp. 227–32; Swenson & Warner 2015).

Some of the most promising investigations of past political landscapes have concentrated on how placemaking was commonly achieved through ritualized acts. Indeed, attention to the spatial specificity of different kinds of ritual performance should permit more accurate interpretations of the significance and effects of ceremonial events both within and possibly beyond the ritual frame. The efficacy of ritual often rests in its creation of evocative places, whether understood as sacred, dangerous, timeless, polluting, socially domesticated or organically animate. For instance, the extraordinary replastering of floors and walls at Çatalhöyük materialized particular conceptions of time, memory, and probably life cycle rites at this famous site (Boivin 2000, Hodder 2006). Creating strong attachments to place was thus highly conventionalized at Çatalhöyük. The valorization of wild animals and masculinity has also been inferred from the architectural emplacement (exceptional markedness) of bulcrania and by the differential deposition of both domesticated and nondomesticated animals in trash and feasting middens (Hodder & Meskell 2010, Keane 2010). The lack of other types of constructions at Çatalhöyük reveals that ritual was not rigidly set apart from other domains of residential practice, allowing for the development of place-sensitive heuristics, including “history houses,” that better accommodate the cultural particulars of worldview and social organization at this early Neolithic center (Hodder & Pels 2010; see also Banning 2011). In other contexts, comparing residences with tombs or temple-like constructions might point to important symbolic correspondences, suggesting that public rites replicated and reinforced household ritual priorities (Bradley 2005, Lucero 2003, Marcus 2007). In contrast, monumental spaces, cemeteries, or other landscape features may have served as powerfully alienating “heterotopias,” affording completely other kinds of experiences, mystical encounters, and ontological or temporal displacements far removed from the symbolic realm of the home (Foucault 1986, Swenson 2012).

Therefore, attention to the frequency of deposition and renovation, the deliberate bundling or debundling of caches, the differential maintenance of distinct architectural complexes, and the spatial and temporal relationship of marked deposits with the everyday residues of practice is essential for interpreting the meaning and social context of past ritual practices (Gillespie 2008). Contextual analyses of this sort have revealed, for instance, that massive garbage middens in places such as Chaco Canyon were not simply the by-products of taken-for-granted conventions of waste management. Instead, these feasting middens symbolized largess, prosperity, and hospitality and

served as material signifiers of past festivals and conspicuous consumption (Fowler 2011, p. 143; Van Dyke 2003). These dumps have been interpreted, in turn, as forging enduring memories and powerful experiences of place. Investigations of how certain landscapes (and soundscapes) facilitated visual and auditory communication, stimulated the senses, and configured different kinds of public performances have also yielded promising results, even if many of these studies continue to focus on the ideological functions of ceremonial architecture (Hamilakis 2013; Moore 1996a,b; Scarre & Lawson 2006; Till 2014; Weismantel 2013). Alternatively, careful analysis of stratigraphic layers of mound sites in Eastern North America have revealed that the building of monuments constituted the core component of public rituals. Thus the construction process seems to have been more important than the subsequent use of the platforms as ceremonial stages. For instance, Kidder (2010, p. 43) interprets the deposition of differently colored silt layers to build Mound A at Poverty Point as evidence that construction served to materially reenact the creation of the world (see also Gillespie 2008 and Pauketat 2013). Finally, an examination of how certain ritual deposits crosscut contexts could provide a sense of the cohesiveness of certain regimes of practice and the role they may have played in negotiating political identities (Marcus 2007, pp. 48–51). For instance, Marcus (2007) shows how certain religious spaces, symbols, and material assemblages were “structurally replicated” at the level of the house, ward, and public plaza in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica.

## **CONCLUSION: THE HISTORICAL CONTINGENCY OF THE RITUAL FRAME**

An overarching argument of this review has been that attention to how specialized constructions are ritually marked in the context of other (nonmarked) depositional practices should illuminate both the kind of rituals creating the deposits (rites of passage, pilgrimage, fertilizing sacrifices, etc.) and the degree to which these ceremonies shaped realities outside the ritual frame (Kapferer 2004). Ritually marked archaeological contexts could thus include everything from an overengineered dancing plaza and cave paintings celebrating death and regeneration to a foundation sacrifice commemorating the decommissioning of a Moche altar (Moore 1996a, Swenson 2012, Whitehouse 2007). However, none of these contexts provides a direct reflection of past beliefs, political agency, or social organization. Instead, attention to performatively marked material traces as interpreted within the broader context of routine depositions should improve our understanding of the historically specific experiences, meanings, and political possibilities afforded by different ritual traditions (Garrow 2012, Hull 2014).

A focus on variations in the material framing of ritual practice exposes the deficiencies of universalizing models and permits a more nuanced analysis of the varied social effects of different ritual traditions (Bradley 2005, Vásquez 2011). In some instances, changes in the spatial organization of household ritual or burials may have had little to do with shifts in power relations or major alterations in religious worldviews (and such contexts alone would serve as a poor source for inferring political agency) (see Jones 2004). Only a cross-contextual analysis of archaeological deposits, indexing different modalities of practice through time, could effectively test whether certain traditions of domestic ritual formed a nexus of political engagement (Bradley 2005, Lucero 2003). Furthermore, ritual cannot always be viewed as an exercise in discursive consciousness (*sensu* Giddens 1984). In fact, the situations in which the ritual framing of action becomes habituated and ingrained into quotidian routines, as opposed to explicitly politicized (made ideological) in relationship to other modes of practice, can tell us a great deal about implicit ontological orders, power relations, social stability, and historical change characterizing a given community (Geertz 2005, p. 12; Joyce 2008; Pauketat 2013, p. 31). Therefore, transformations in ritual regimes

cannot necessarily be interpreted as “sensitive indicators” of sociopolitical and economic change (Koutrafouris & Sanders 2013, p. 7; Angelo 2014). New religious movements may have had little success in altering embodied routines or everyday perceptions of the world. However, ideological innovations have the potential to disrupt long-standing dispositions, leading to new ritual observances and naturalizing novel experiences of time and place (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991). Therefore, archaeologists have much to gain in comparing quotidian “taskscape” (both ritualized and unmarked) as preserved archaeologically with symbolically charged landscapes of public ceremonialism and social memory (see Gosden 1994, pp. 89–90; Ingold 2000; Pollard 2008; Swenson 2012). Determining how transformations in one domain related to either stability or change in the other should improve our interpretations of historical process in past societies.

In the end, a consideration of ritual in its own right—as involving an alteration in the material framing of practice—does not imply that ritual should be understood as an autonomous process. Rather, it shows that the structuring effects, meanings, and political affordances of ritualized acts can be interpreted only in relationship to the entire field of social action (Garrow 2012, Handelman 2004). As argued above, ritual’s propensity to engineer transformation, rework relationships, and alter ontological states can explain its close rapport with power. Nevertheless, ritual contexts cannot be read in any straightforward fashion as reflecting the degree to which a society is hierarchically ranked, politically fragmented, or ideologically oppressive. However, many archaeologists still tend to embrace this position, as reflected especially in the employment of quasi-evolutionary typologies, including performative and liturgical rites or imagistic and doctrinal modes of religiosity (Bloch 1989, Hastorf 2007, Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994, Moore 2004, Rappaport 1999, Whitehouse & Hodder 2010). Performative and imagistic rites (infrequent, emotionally powerful, and executed through creative improvisations) are thought to be prevalent in more egalitarian (shamanistic) societies, whereas liturgical and doctrinal modes are characteristic of hierarchical polities and institutionalized religions (for a full critique of imagistic and doctrinal modes of religiosity, see Swenson 2013). However, are episodic Ndembu initiation rites any less rule-governed, ritualized, or materially elaborated than a Catholic mass or a puja liturgy in a Jain temple? Furthermore, infrequently staged imagistic events often require months of preparation involving training, resource mobilization, and large-scale economic production, thus putting into question the degree to which such spectacles predictably engineer memory and *communitas* in so-called egalitarian societies (Hull 2014, pp. 169–71; McAnany & Wells 2008). It also deserves mention that shamanistic practices (trance, altered states of consciousness, spirit journey, healing, etc.) are not simply characteristic of egalitarian or foraging societies. They have also been documented in hierarchical polities with complex religious liturgies (and for a general critique of the shamanism concept, see Kehoe 2000).

To conclude, archaeologists increasingly argue that an examination of past ritual events provides one of the most effective means of interpreting material agency, plural subjectivities, identity politics, social memory, alternate ontologies, and ideological struggle in ancient societies. I would concur, but only if archaeologists properly contextualize ritualized behavior within the larger continuum of practice in general. Ultimately, a focus on ritual as a materially marked process (often demarcating specific events and times) allows archaeologists to analyze ritual as a historically particular experience without abandoning the anthropological project of comparative analysis.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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