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# „Ritual" in Archaeology

In her 1999 article „Ritual and Rationality: some problems of interpretation in European archaeology" (Brück 1999) Joann Brück focuses on issues connected with the conception of "ritual" and it's employment in archaeology. The category of ritual, as used in archaeology and (then current) anthropology she considers a "product of post-enlightenment rationalism" and lacking any "satisfactory definition in general terms" and "unambiguous archaeological correlates" (Brück 1999, 313-314). Truth is, that for many years in archaeology "ritual" has been, as Bahn puts it, basically an "all purpose explanation used where nothing else comes to mind" (Bahn 1989, 62). Unfortunately, in Central European archaeology, this is often still the case.

In Brück's main line of reasoning, "ritual" is a term borrowed from anthropology denoting an irrational activity of a symbolic, non-technical, formal, prescribed, structured and repetitive nature. This stress on "irrationality" as opposed to "western rationality" makes it not only a problematic concept, but also a part of the colonialist discourse (conflated with dualisms like "them-us" or "traditional-modern") and a tool serving political purposes (see Brück 1999, 314, 317-319). What "we" deem irrational, however, are just different conceptions of instrumentality and causation. Instead, ritual actions are perfectly logical given a particular understanding of how the world works and following different logics articulated as sets of cosmological beliefs and values (i.e. different "worldviews"). "Rituals" do not meet modern western criteria for practicality, therefore they appear to be non-functional and irrational, this is however a misapprehension of prehistoric rationality and a different approach that explores the essential difference between prehistoric rationality and our own notions of what is effective action is required (Brück 1999, 314, 317-318, 321, 326).

Problems with identifying rituals (i.e. non-rational actions) in archaeological record and distinguishing them from non-ritual actions, implicitly assumed to be mutually exclusive, have already led many archaeologists and anthropologists to question this distinction, since many of the supposed diagnostic properties of ritual practice are shared by "secular" action (Brück 1999, 315).

The British anthropologist Edmund Leach (Leach 1968, 523) argued that ritual is not a distinct category of behaviour, but can be understood as the expressive, symbolic or communicative aspect of all human behaviour and that every human action has a technical aspect (which "does" something) and an aesthetic aspect (which "says" something). In those types of behaviour, where the aesthetic and communicative aspects are particularly prominent, are then labelled as "rituals". Similar approaches were however criticised as "stripping the concept of it's analytical value" since they only tended to incorporate wider groups of activities under the banner of ritual and did not help to distinguish rituals from non-ritual activities in any way (Brück 1999, 315).

Following a similar logic, that because rituals do not appear to do anything, they must be symbolic, the postprocessualists were interested mainly in the "social role of ritual in reproduction and renegotiation of social order" (whatever that means). However their "counter-dichotomy" of "ideal-real" led to the same divorce of ritual and day-to-day living as the previous "ritual-rational" dichotomies. At the same time, their stress on symbolic aspects of human actions (as opposed to processualist archaeology) carried the same risk as Leach's approach, that everything would become subsumed within the category of ritual and human actions would be reduced to the "irrational" and "symbolic" (Brück 318, 324-325).

Brück on the other hand does not see "symbolic" and "practical" as two different aspects of human actions, but rather that they are the one and the same. Cosmologies are not abstract ideological/symbolic systems but enable people to understand the world and to get on in it by providing logic for action and an explanation of the universe. In this sense any practical action is also symbolic, because it reproduces the sets of values and social relations which are embedded in cosmological schemes. The notion that ritual is special because it draws on and enables the reproduction of the social and cosmological order is then problematic, because all actions do that (Brück 1999, 325-326). She thus calls the use of of dichotomies like "ritual-secular" and of the category "ritual" itself into question. Also because cultures different from our own often do not distinguish ritual and non-ritual actions, which according to her means they are not universal categories of human thought (Brück 1999, 319-320).

Brück's conclusions are then that instead of trying to differentiate the symbolic from the practical we should rather focus on the historically-specific logic and see all activities as people's practical engagement with material conditions, albeit based on a very different set of ideas about how the world works. The analytical value of the concept ritual should then be rejected and certain activities should be regarded as different "fields of discourse" only when the practitioners themselves see them as "special", based on their own criteria, which should be discussed (Brück 1999, 327-328).

While I agree with Brück's criticism of the use of the concept of "ritual" in archaeology and with many points she has brought up, I feel that many issues connected with this topic have not been addressed adequately and that her conclusions by themselves will not lead to any remarkable improvement of our understanding of prehistoric cultures. Brück's approach is similar to that of some cognitive-processual archaeologists like Collin Renfrew (for example Renfrew – Zubrow 1994) or Richard Bradley (for example Bradley 2005), who aim for a better and more scientific account of the symbolic nature of material culture and human activities than what the New Archaeology and postprocessualist archaeology have presented. These however do not stray too far beyond the "borders" of archaeology, not counting the numerous references of anthropological and ethnographic analogies. This seems to be the most common attitude within cognitive archaeology and works based on a deeper understanding of human cognition or containing explicit references to cognitive sciences, like those of Merlin Donald (1998), Steven Mithen (1996; 2001) or David Lewis-Williams (2004), seem to be rather rare.

This is somewhat surprising, given that archaeology rests somewhere on the edge between natural sciences and humanities[1] and often borrows techniques and methods from the former and theories from the latter. Unlike, for example, Religious Studies, however, it *does* have a special theory (sort of) and a method of its own, which probably leads some archaeologists to the conclusion, that that is all they need and influences from other fields may or should be kept at minimum.[2]

This "isolationist" attitude however may easily lead to misconceptions and may actually hinder growing understanding of the problems under research. In Brück's case for example, there are a few rather "shallow" general statements about human mind and behaviour, such as: "human action is always both symbolic and practical" (Brück 1999, 325), or that " 'practical' activities cannot be expected to obey some kind of universal functionalist logic" and conversely that "ritual activity constitutes a perfectly logical and practical way of dealing with the world, given a particular understanding of how the universe works" (Brück 1999, 326).[3] These statements are however not discussed in depth and appear to be based simply on anthropological observations without any

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1  In fact, many laymen are surprised when told that the Department of Archaeology (in Masaryk University at least) is part of the Faculty of Arts and not of the Faculty of Natural Sciences. Then again, there seems to be a tendency in the public to mix archaeology together with palaeontology.

2  Note that this is my personal, possibly biased, view of the situation here in Central Europe, where most of the limited available time and resources is spent on "rescue excavations" and "site preservation" (i.e. data collecting), rather than on "theoretical research" (i.e. data processing). The situation is of course a bit different on university departments, where research and education should be more in focus. Even here however, in lower grades especially, the goal seems to be "to train a successful data-collector" and/or "data-publisher" rather than "teach them what to do with their data in a critical and meaningful way". I am not familiar with the "archaeological environment" in Western Europe or in the Americas, but I assume theory and methodology are discussed a bit more often there and in a broader perspective.

3  This notion that *all* human actions have some kind of purpose, whether practical or symbolic/communicative or both is, I think, a nice example of teleological reasoning, which however does not necessarily reflect the actual state of things.

involvement of psychology or cognitive sciences. Which is unfortunate. While looking at a problem from a different perspective may be enlightening in itself, trying to understand an issue outside of one's field *without* actually looking at how it is understood in the field that was meant to deal specifically with the issue in question will, more often than not, lead to more confusion than true understanding. Addressing "cognitive issues" alone is certainly better than outright ignoring them (as the New Archaeology did), but an interdisciplinary cooperation is even more desirable. Without it, interpretations of matters beyond the "casual" cultural-typological-chronological classification of material culture will remain tentative at best and archaeology risks to put itself into a "short end of the deal" position. Seeing as contemporary cognitive psychology would probably call into question many assumptions, both implicit and explicit, some archaeologists have about past (and present) peoples' minds, this is all the more necessary.

Another issue connected with this is a matter of terminology and it's use. The term "ritual", as was mentioned above, was introduced into archaeology from anthropology and was likely conceived differently than in the Religious Studies from the beginning. In archaeology the term was conflated with "religion" and the two are often used interchangeably, as can be seen in Brück's use of dualisms like "ritual-secular" or "ritual-mundane" (Brück 1999, 314, 319, 327). This makes some sense, since archaeology deals more often with remains of (supposed) "ritual" activities (i.e. religious practice) than with "theological" notions or counter-intuitive concepts themselves. It may however become quite confusing when used in a non-archaeological context, more so when there often is no general consensus on how to use terms that are not archaeology-specific. Another related issue has already been brought up by Anders Kaliff (Kaliff 2007, 27-28), namely that often the same term is used both as an operative (and/or descriptive) term and an interpretation of a phenomenon or a find. As a typical example he mentions the term "grave" used both in a descriptive (a pit or other object containing human, or in some cases animal, remains) and in an interpretative (assumption that the deposition of the remains was intentional and part of a funeral/burial rites) way at the same time. The term ritual is often used in a similar way – for example tools made of inappropriate materials or otherwise unsuitable (too weak, thin or small, etc.) for their typical use are sometimes readily *described* as "ritual tools", implicitly presuming that they are indeed "tools", but cannot be used in a practical (rational?) way and therefore must have been used in "symbolic" = "ritual" = "religious" acts. The question whether these are actual "tools" or rather "tool-shaped" artefacts of a different kind (toys, decorations etc.) or whether "symbolism" has to automatically relate to "ritual" and "religion" and at the same time exclude "practical use" is seldom asked.

The conflation of "ritual" and "religion", rather typical for central-european archaeological literature, also has another consequence. Here ritual and ritualized behaviour are always seen as "religious" while there is no concept of a "non-religious ritual". The term "ceremony" is sometimes

used for similar activities that did not necessarily have a religious character even in the eyes of archaeologists, however it's use and exact definition (just as with "ritual") are almost never clearly and explicitly designated. This lack of distinction between "religious" and "non-religious" ritualized behaviour may easily cause terminological problems when confronted with fields where non-religious ritualized behaviour is a major topic, like ethology or psychology (not that archaeologists would adress these fields too often). But more importantly, it enforces a "religious" interpretation on whatever finds that show features "typical" for or tentatively interpreted as "ritual", making these same features "typical" for "religion" as well in the process. That "religion" itself often isn't clearly and explicitly defined in any way, a state somewhat opposite to religious studies, where definitions of all kinds abound (only those "universally applicable" and "all-encompassing" are kind of hard to find), does not exactly improve the situation.

In her conclusion, Brück (1999, 327) stated that the concept of ritual should be abandoned and that our (archaeologists') attention should focus on "historically-specific logic" of past cultures. While there certainly are reasons to get rid of the archaeological category of "ritual", this by itself does not solve the problem, which lies not in the category itself (since there is no such thing as a "ritual" in the "real" world) but in the way it is used by archaeologists. If instead we made a clear, explicit and consensual definition of ritual, which would probably be for the first time ever in archaeology, and actually stick to it, the situation might have been quite different. The argument that we shouldn't use the category of "ritual" because the cultures we study often do not distinguish such category, seems to me like saying that zoologists shouldn't use the category "crustacean" because crabs don't use that category as well. This argument seems to miss the point of what analytical categories are and how they should be used.[4]

Furthermore, even if we did scrap "ritual" and managed to actually get a grasp of how were the concepts of practicality in past cultures different from our own,[5] what should we do then? Create new separate categories of "perceived-as-practical" and "perceived-as-special/different" for each and every culture we study? If so, then we would end up with thousands of "unique" categories of little use, whose "analytical value" would not be much higher than that of the all-encompassing "ritual-as-an-aspect-of-all-human-behaviour" category by Leach. Analysis without reduction is not an analysis but a reformulation, instead of a map, we would have the territory. Now, I'm pretty sure this is *not* what Brück had in mind, but the fact remains she isn't very specific about it.

Besides, to base a category, we create for our own scholarly purposes, on the distinction

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4    For discussion on categories and classifications see works by J. Z. Smith (Smith 1990; 1993; 2000). I borrowed the crabs from there as well (see Smith 1990, 37).

5    How *exactly* would we accomplish that is not explained anywhere, surely we can't reconstruct any given "historically-specific logic" system for each "culture" just from a bunch of shards and some earthwork.

made by the specific culture under study in order to replace a previous category of our own will not necessarilly lead to a greater understanding of the culture itself. Doing this is not replacing our "western" subjective perspective with an "objective truth". It is replacing our "western" subjective perspective with "their" "non-western" subjective perspective, "enriched" with possible misunderstandings, misinterpretations and lost-in-translations. Trying to understand "their" categories and the differences between them and "our" categories is of course commendable, if not necessary, however replacing one with the other seems to be a bit rash. Distinguishing as "ritual" only what the people in question distinguish as "ritual" doesn't get us any closer to understanding what "rituals" are and why are they at all.

So, what other options do archaeologists have? Being a "fan" of E. O. Wilson's concept of consilience, I would suggest, instead of redefining old archaeological and anthropological concepts, it might be worthwhile to look at how ritual conceived is in fields "closer" to natural sciences, namely ethology and CSR, and try to search for a way how to meaningfully implement them into archaeology. CSR already has two models of ritual or "ritualized behaviour", those of E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley (Lawson – McCauley 1990; 2002) and of Pascal Boyer and Pierre Liénard (Boyer – Liénard 2006a; 2006b), which seem to be mutually compatible and can be thus be "merged" into a more complex probabilistic model of ritual behaviour (Lawson – Liénard 2008), albeit preliminary and not yet fully tested. This model postulates that ritualized actions follow the same basic structure as "ordinary" actions, they are however "tweaked" in a way, that makes them more attention-grabbing and compelling by activating the Hazard Precaution System (HPS), goal-demotion (through repetition, redundancy and scriptedness) and, in case of religious rituals, references to counter-intuitive agency. Here, ritualized behaviour is seen as opposite to routinised behaviour, i.e. people do not act without thinking about what they are doing, but instead have to fully concentrate on the scripted performance. This "swamps" their memory and blocks access to any intrusive thoughts (connected with the Hazard Precaution System) that would cause anxiety. Ritual acts are then "anxiety relievers" and in many cases autotelic, since many of them are designed to activate the HPS and thus evoke the anxiety-causing intrusive thoughts, which are then blocked through the goal-demoted prescribed performance.

How can this model be useful to archaeologists? Firstly, the fact that it draws a distinction between "ritualized behaviour" and "rituals" or "ceremonies", which, in some of their parts, incorporate ritualized behaviour, but are seldom entirely ritualized, and that there is a distinction between "religious" and "non-religious" rituals is by itself quite an improvement compared to assumptions many archaeologists have been working with so far. Secondly, if this model is to at least some measure correct, there would be no need to create culture-specific categories for at least

a rough description and understanding of supposed ritual acts indicated by archaeological record. Thirdly, the connection between ritualized behaviour and HPS means, that potential danger clues, which may be manifest in archaeological and archaeo-ecological record, can help indicate ritualized behaviour and specify the context in which it occurred. Fourthly, the ritual form hypothesis (Lawson – McCauley 1990) predicts that over time cultural selection would channel ritual forms towards a limited set of preferred stable forms (more arousing and less frequently performed special agent rituals and less arousing but more frequently performed special patient or instrument rituals). This prediction can be then brought into play, whenever archaeological data suggest a highly arousing performance, or, on the other hand, frequent repetition. Fifthly, Lawson and Liénard (2008, 167-170) predict the emergence of "priestly clique" only in more "advanced" cultures with enough resources to support them, and point out differences in their social standing and that of individual "soothsayers" in less wealthy cultures. This should be taken into account when interpreting graves or various other finds connected to supposed "religious specialists". Sixthly, the role of ritualized behaviour in demonstrating commitment (Boyer – Liénard 2006a, 818) along with the concept of "costly behaviour" fit well with observations already made by some archaeologists (Lotte Hedeager for example) about the various ways of channelling and consumption of wealth in some prehistoric cultures (see Hedeager 1992).

These are just some of the possible implications of introducing the CSR model of ritual into archaeology, many more could likely be thought over, given time. What this model does *not* change is that archaeologists will still have to look for the same "ritual indicators" as they have so far: repetition, redundancy, scriptedness (including seperation from the "ordinary"), goal-demotion, attention-grabbing and arousing features, etc., with a few newly added ones: potential danger clues, indications of costly behaviour, and overall resource surplus that would allow the emergence of "priestly clique" with their appeal to special external agents.

I have also mentioned ethology, which is, for obvious reasons, quite remote to archaeology (unless it's lower palaeolithic archaeology). It may however provide some insights on how ritualized behaviour emerged and what role it played not just in animal but also in human populations. Leaving the question of phylogenetical relations between ritualized behaviour in animals and humans and the question whether it is an adaptation or by-product aside, there is one point not mentioned in any of the literature above (or at least I didn't notice it) that might be shared by both animal and human rituals. While I'm not that familiar with ethological theories of ritual, according to Konrad Lorenz (Lorenz 1992) animal rituals are forms of behaviour that lost their original meaning and were channelled or re-directed towards new, mostly communicative purposes. Interesting is, that some of these "rituals" were originally displays of aggression or direct assaults against an intruder (often of the same species), that were gradually transformed into greeting rituals.

The original behaviour was then a response to a threat, in this case a threat of intrusion, which is similar to one of the typical themes of human HPS, though it is a more direct than potential threat in this case. It is then possible that animal rituals have a similar anxiety-relief effect that human rituals have, as Lorenz demonstrated on the, rather funny, case of his pet goose Martina (see Lorenz 1992, 65-67). Of course, this notions is harder to apply in archaeology, it might however point towards some more parallels between human and animal cognition and improve our understanding of what rituals are, where did they come from and what should we do with them.

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