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Archaeology and Pre-Christian Religion in Scandinavia

Kristina Jennbert

Archaeological research on pre-Christian religion has increased greatly during the last two decades. Studies of ritual and religion appear frequently in scholarly, popular and antiquarian publications of the 1990s. Selected publications in Scandinavian archaeology are presented in order to characterise and discuss different approaches. Central theoretical and methodological questions are discussed, as well as the co-operation with other humanistic disciplines.

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INTRODUCTION

In the beginning of the 1970s students of archaeology laughed at everything that was called "cultic", a term that could be used when one had no suggestions for any other interpretation. Ritual and religion were subjects of low scientific value on the archaeological agenda. Today the situation is quite different.

The focus on ritual and religion has never been so intense within archaeology as during the last two decades, both internationally and within the Nordic countries, in particular in Sweden and Norway and lately also in Denmark. The interest in religion is notable in scholarly studies as well as in several public events. The exhibitions *Viking og Hvidekrist* in Copenhagen, Paris and Berlin (Roesdahl 1993), and *Kult, Kraft och Kosmos* (Knape 1996) and the exhibition at the rock-art museum in Tanum on the Swedish west coast are just a few examples. Exclusive publications have been presented especially concerning the *mentalité* in the Viking Age (Steinsland & Meulengracht Sørensen 1994) and the Bronze Age (Kaliff & Skjöldebrand 1995). Research on religion and ritual of the past is today a scholarly phenomenon but also a subject of public interest, like the actual situation in earlier archaeological works (e.g. Hildebrand 1880:32ff; Müller 1897; Brøndsted 1938-40; Stenberger 1969).

In our time, at the very end of the second millennium, a kind of nostalgia for past belief in the future is evident. A remembrance of the past and of all former transformations in all levels of society is perceptible in magazines and newspapers, broadcasting and television. Unfortunately also sectarian activities, either with nationalistic goals or in connection with New Age movements, engage and use the past. Prehistoric symbols and artefacts are employed for ideological, political or religious purposes.

At the same time, the European modernity is analysed from an architectural, sociological or political perspective. The Norwegian anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen emphasises comprehension and significance of the past (Eriksen 1996). Somehow the past is present, and it seems like archaeology and a long-term perspective are relevant in social

communication. Archaeology becomes significant in evaluating the use and misuse of the past (Hedeager & Schousboe 1989).

Following that, the attitude of the Ministry of Education and the Swedish government to the state of research in the Humanities is highly questionable. The government made a publication on the Holocaust (Bruchfeld & Levine 1998), which had a wide circulation among people in Sweden. The policy towards the Humanities is, however, intimidating. Likewise are the priorities at the universities in Sweden.

This article is an outline of a very broad field of research in pre-Christian religion and sets out from the archaeology in Scandinavia. Therefore, selected publications on ritual and religion within archaeology of the late twentieth century will be presented, in order to characterise and discuss different approaches and angles. After several centuries without any interest in religion, research on pre-Christian religion is once again established in archaeology in the 1990s.

ARCHAEOLOGY AND RELIGION

All disciplines undergo changes, of course. In earlier archaeological research the interest in prehistoric religion was a natural component of the archaeological interpretative framework (e.g. especially Almgren 1927).

In retrospect the evolutionist paradigm, but also diffusionism, and functionalism have been and still are frameworks in archaeology as well as in other disciplines. They are also fundamental in earlier as well as ongoing studies associated with religion in prehistory. Within these theoretical points of departure the material culture more often illustrates the cultural history, rather than being analytical in itself. Christopher Hawkes explicitly formulated the archaeological limitations of studying past religions in his famous knowledge of the ladder (Hawkes 1954). And in the 1960s and 1970s in connection with an explicit scientific archaeology, religion was more or less regarded as impossible to study. Religion was difficult to interpret and catch in the generalised and neo-evolutionist paradigm with methods of quantitative analysis in a deductive manner.

Many of the premises for investigating the past have changed during the last three decades in the field of archaeology. In the early 1980s it became evident that material culture could have various meanings. Material expressions were interpreted not as passive objects but rather as very actively used and with a role in the social process. The publication *Symbols in Action* (Hodder 1982) had an enormous impact on archaeology. Instead of being just expressions of great economic importance, artefacts also could have metaphorical meaning, for example the iron slag (Burström 1990) and grinding tools (Lidström Holmberg 1998). New perspectives and potentials of the material culture opened up for critical archaeology, but also the interpretative challenge of solving the code of remains.

Both research within the tradition of post-processual archaeology (e.g. Hodder 1982; Shanks & Tilley 1987) and later within the tradition of cognitive archaeology (Renfrew & Zubrow 1994) opened up for questions also about ritual and religion in other ways than before. But it is also intriguing that within the earlier post-processual works, studies of religion appear very seldom. Instead the focus is on symbols in power relations and ideological structures, and religion is hidden within these concepts.

The Nordic religion had of course been studied before. It was, however, mainly a research field in connection with the history of religion and literary studies and the analyses of written sources. Results were published both internationally and within the Nordic countries (e.g. de Vries 1956-57; Ström, 1961; Dumezil 1973). A wider range of sources could, however, be integrated into the study of pre-Christian religion. In short, the Nordic material consists of literature as well as settlement finds, grave finds, votive

offerings, picture stones, rock art, that is, the ordinary archaeological material culture.

Until about two decades ago religion was, however, of low scientific value in archaeology as were the unspoken premises of material culture. The communication among the disciplines that used different sources and methods to research Nordic religion, could be described as low. And one postulation is that, until a few years ago, archaeologists did not question enough the various theories on Nordic religion. This was probably a result of nearly no collaboration between archaeology and the history of religion or literary studies. Presumably, the apprehension towards the possibilities inherent in written sources and material culture originated from constructive-minded dialogues.

But the communication has been enhanced during the last two decades. In the 1980s and 1990s the historians of religion arranged several conferences for unlimited dialogues among the academic disciplines (Steinsland 1986; Steinsland *et al.* 1991b; Schjødt 1994). These conferences have had a great impact on archaeology. From the archaeological side, conferences also appeared around ten years ago (Andrén 1989; Larsson & Wyszomirska 1989; Lagerlöf 1991; Lidén 1995; Engdahl & Kaliff 1996; Bredholt Christensen & Sveen 1998; Andersson *et al.* 1998). The archaeologists themselves were forced to find ways to use the archaeological material in order to trace religion in prehistoric societies.

From an archaeological point of view, the interpretation of rituals as inspired by sociology, anthropology, and the history of religion (e.g. Bell 1992, 1997) is very fruitful (e.g. the work on Saami mortuary practices, Schanche 1997) but still rather unusual. Religious rituals can be understood as being performed in confirmation with mythology and cosmology within an ideologically structured society and cultural identity. Hence, rituals are powerful in the structuration of society. Thus, embedded in material culture, rituals relate to mythology and cosmology as people act according to their conception of the cosmos and their understanding of reality.

However, difficulties in grasping the constitution of ritual and religion are discernible in the archaeological debate. The main questions are related to the possibilities of studying pre-Christian religions on the basis of texts or material culture. But also the character and role of religion in connection to political power and ideological preferences are fundamental controversies (e.g. Finnestad 1986; Nordbladh 1986; Schjødt 1986; Dommasnes 1991; Notelid 1996; Nordström 1997; Bredholt Christensen 1998; Damm 1998; Sveen 1998).

The unquestionable separation into the sacred and the profane in Western society has to be considered in the study of prehistoric societies. The concepts of religion and ritual are linked to the Western world of ideas, too, and there is an extensive debate in connection with the concepts (Asad 1993). Therefore, the later, more theoretical, discussions of the concepts of religion and ritual within the fields of history of religion and anthropology are very important for further application to archaeological projects. The same is true of different kinds of sources. The relation between material culture and literary sources is a significant methodological question (Andrén 1998). On the whole, there are theoretical, methodological and empirical problems in studying past religions. And no doubt there is an abundance of questions to be asked.

One question of interest is, how should religion be designated before Christianity? As regards language, there are several names for religion before Christianity, for example Nordic heathenism, pagan religion, paganism, old Scandinavian cult, and fertility cult. The terms have slightly different meanings and are used in different kinds of associations. The term "heathenism" in particular is loaded with subjective judgements (Hultgård 1991).

Is it possible to discern separate "religions" or cosmologies during the thousands of years before Christianity? How is the Norse religion related to earlier and later cosmologies? Whose religion or cosmology is being investigated? What constituted ritual and religion in the material record, and what kind of representations do we find in the archaeological material? Was religion transformed during the past millennia, and how far back in time is Norse religion discernible?

For a start, what characterised the pre-Christian religion a few hundred years before Christianity? Many aspects of rituals, myths and the cosmos in connection to the ideological structure but also in relation to areas south of Scandinavia have been debated. The following examples represent a few, important topics in the field of research. The structure of cosmology has been debated (e.g. Schjødt 1988). Several scholars have stated that paganism was a shamanistic religion (Hedeager 1997, 1998; Solli 1998), but also that the pre-Christian rulership was sacral (Steinsland 1991a). Potentials in the archaeological material for analysing the Christanization have been emphasised (Roesdahl 1987; Gräslund 1985; Solli 1995, 1996), and Viking Age crosses and crucifix pendants, for example, have been seen as expressions of the Christian mission (Staecker 1999). Kings, power, churches and the parish formation are well-known topics central to the research of the Christianization (e.g. Brink 1990; Anglert 1995).

To understand the Christianization and thereby the disagreements over the state of conversion is a complex matter (Schjødt 1989). An interdisciplinary project, *The Christianization in Sweden,* started in the 1980s. Different perspectives from some of the provinces in Sweden were considered and the Christianization was regarded as a lengthy process without any collective conversion (Nilsson 1996) and in a sense very peaceful. Another interpretation emphasises a dramatic confrontation between different ideologies, in which the pre-Christian societies were forced by social and political choices (Steinsland 1989, 1991b, 1995). One suggestion in the later direction is that the presence of riding equipment and horses in Viking Age burials might express an ideological and religious reaction from land-owners (Nielsen 1991).

Of significance in a Nordic perspective and the problematic designation of religions is the Saami culture. The interest in the pre-Christian religion of the Saami goes back to the nineteenth century and foremost studies in ethnography and the history of religion (Johnson 1983; Ahlbäck 1987; Rydving 1993). Also from an archaeological point of view, the Saami religion and rituals have been in focus (e.g. Zachrisson 1987; Schanche 1997). According to Juha Pentikäinen, there was no word for "religion" in the Saami language as in the modern Western world. He mentions a problem tangent to the opinion that religion is a historical category that emerged in the Western society (Asad 1993). Pentikäinen means that the concept of an ethnic religion is more suitable, as the concept of Saami religion is something constituted by the Christians in the seventeenth century. The ethnic religion embodies much more: the landscape of the souls, the arctic human, nature, way of life, philosophy and the conception of the world (Pentikäinen 1997). These statements could very well apply to the northern pre-Christian religion as well.

Chronologically, the Bronze Age and the Late Iron Age are the periods that have been most frequently analysed in terms of religion. The image of the Bronze Age as very pastoral and cultic with beautiful bronze objects, rock art, and conspicuous mortuary practices and deposition traditions is widespread. A rich archaeological material with a wide range of marvellous variation such as artefacts, picture stones, runes, the literary sources of Norse mythology together with a great public interest, are important components of the attraction of the Late Iron Age and the

Christianization. And the attraction goes back to the nineteenth century, to the national romantic era.

As will be shown, however, other prehistoric periods have also tempted studies of religion. The number of articles and publications that focus on ritual and religion has increased remarkably during the last ten years. As a consequence, a wide range of material culture and themes has been discussed. The following selection illustrates the heterogeneity of approaches in studies of rituals and religion within the field of archaeology. A reflection on analyses in relation to burials and votive offerings is followed by a discussion of the newly applied interest in farmsteads and the structuration of the landscape.

DEATH, CULT AND CEREMONIAL PLACES

Death and the cult are the most salient features studied by archaeologists in terms of ritual and religion. In terms of archaeological remains such as burials, rock art, hoards, booty sacrifices, etc., ceremonial places have been the point of departure for studying ritual and religion. And with regard to the long-term perspective, several different kinds of archaeological remains, in particular the burials, could be relevant, as there is evidence from the Stone Age up to modern time (Jennbert 1988). Changing mortuary customs reflect changing traditions, that is the mental norms, which were important to the reproduction of society. Graves and mortuary practices are projections of mentality and the social world, which bind individuals together as a consequence of social fellowship.

Agneta Bennett (1987) was the first to propose that burials were religious and social symbols in her study of Iron Age burials in the Mälar Valley in central Sweden, and since then several other studies have followed (e.g. Kaliff 1992, 1997; Artelius 1996). Research on Stone Age burial rites can be represented by the analyses of the Late Mesolithic burials at Skateholm in southern Sweden (Larsson 1988, 1990), and studies of megaliths in southern Scandinavia (Holten 1997).

The use of rock art in burial rites is explicitly shown in a study of an area in the north-eastern part of the province of Småland (Widholm 1998), but also in an analysis of a Bronze Age grave with rock carvings south of Vättern in the district of Småland (Goldhahn 1999). Another famous Bronze Age cairn with rock art is Kivik in south-eastern Scania. Analyses of iconography, contexts and analogies have led Klavs Randsborg to the assumption that the Kivik cairn may represent an almost shamanistic Bronze Age cosmos (Randsborg 1993). At the same time Lars Larsson's contextual analysis of the surroundings of the cairn has concluded that the local chief buried in the cairn served in a long-term perspective as the link between the profane and the sacred (Larsson 1993).

Looking at graves as memorials gives an opportunity to trace tradition backwards and form some ideas about the underlying forces in the changing conceptions of death; for example, inhumation graves with pagan features and Christian influences (Wagnkilde & Pind 1991) but also a realisation of regional variations in mortuary tradition (Svanberg 1999). Death as one of life's *rites of passage* and the societal conditions together with other ritual practices give possibilities to form a picture of mentality and social norms. Audhild Schanche's doctoral dissertation of 1997 on Saami mortuary practices in a long-term perspective is one of few archaeological analyses of Saami rituals and with inspiration from anthropological theories on religion (Schanche 1997).

Rock art is a kind of material culture central to studies of religion. The reason is perhaps that the rock art, isolated in its expression, is easy to assign to the sacred sphere. In other words, a narrow view of grasping religion in a very modern Western way is comprehended. The significance of

rock art in ritual activities and religion has been studied since the later part of the nineteenth century (Hultkrantz 1989). Still today, the impact of the classical interpretation of rock art as rituals of the regeneration of fertility (Almgren 1927) is considerable. The idea of rock art as representations of the divine (Almgren 1962) is also still popular.

In the later years rock art has been interpreted in many different ways and claimed to represent vital moments in religious mythology (Malmer 1989). Rock art is also interpreted as cosmological and ritual representations (Nordbladh 1980; Helskog 1988; Kaul 1998), as part of a Celtic religion (Görman 1987), or as symbols of female divinities (Mandt 1986). But rock art could also be representations of totemism and shamanism (Tilley 1991). In later works, inspiration from phenomenology, post-structuralism, and hermeneutics is frequently applied. But more important in the later studies is that rock art is apprehended contextually together with other forms of material culture (e.g. Damm 1998; Kaul 1998; Widholm 1998).

Since the last century, the cult and traditions with votive offerings has also attracted great interest in archaeology. Over the past decades an increasing body of studies has focused on the nature and character of ritual sites dating from the Stone Age up to the Late Iron Age. They appear in wetlands as well as on dry land, within the settlement area or nearby. At several places, finds from the Late Stone Age up to the Iron Age are deposited in one and the same location, as if the area has had special meaning through time. Other places are more limited in their spatial dimensions and temporal duration. Several meanings can surely be applied to the ceremonial places depending on the nature of the context and with consideration to the temporal situation.

Hoards and single finds from the Stone Age have been recorded and interpreted in terms of ritual tradition that changed over time (e.g. Karsten 1994). Famous archaeological sites like Skedemosse on Öland (Hagberg 1967), Röekillorna in southern Scania (Stjernquist 1997), and Käringsjön in Halland (Arbman 1945; Carlie 1998) are important examples of sacrificial sites. But more recently excavated areas and less-known archaeological remains show the very close spatial relation between a settlement site and votive deposits (e.g. Hallgren *et al.* 1997).

Several of the classical sites of booty sacrifices and other sacrificial places in the Iron Age in southern Scandinavia have been discussed. Changes in the character and location of sacrificial places during the Iron Age are interpreted in the light of a changed social organisation and economy, and the power of an elite (e.g. Fabech 1991), but also in the light of warfare (Randsborg 1995).

The Sarup enclosures from the Early and Middle Neolithic (Andersen 1997), features like burnt axes in the Middle Neolithic (Larsson 2000), and destruction in terms of fire in connection with the Funnel-beaker settlement area (Apel *et al.* 1997) indicate the many perceptible structures in relation to religious rituals. The focus on hill-forts and fortified farms as ceremonial enclosures in the Late Bronze Age in the province of Uppland in central Sweden resulted in new conceptions of these kinds of ancient monuments (Olausson 1995).

Following the theme of cult, the focus on places of central importance and ceremonial centres is essential to the research on the Iron Age. Due to new excavations, an abundance of such places has been recorded. They play a vital role in questions of ideology and state formation, and are situated from Lofoten in the North to Bornholm in the South (Stamsø Munch 1991; Watt 1991; Åqvist 1996; Nielsen 1996; Näsström 1996; Larsson & Hårdh 1998; Thrane 1998).

One consequence of the recent studies is that the time-space relation has become essential. The significance of the material culture is also important for understanding

the mentality of past epochs. Ritual practices as a force of power in the structuration of society and in foreign relations is explicitly shown in a study that discusses the Late Neolithic ritual hoard from Gallemose in Jutland (Vandkilde 1998). The re-use of space and the importance of space are indicated in contexts with barrows overlying houses (Baudou 1991) or the farmsteads and early church buildings (Jeppesen & Madsen 1991). Such circumstances raise the question of whether the structure of a ritual space is a representation of specific cosmological concepts. The time-space relations in connection with burials, sacrificial places and farmsteads are fundamental in cosmological terms.

As political and ideological power is moulded, legitimised and transformed, it is a challenge for future research to go deeper into those questions since ritual performances *per se* are active in the structuration of society.

DAILY LIFE AND THE LANDSCAPE

A decade ago, studies of ritual and religion in the relevant daily life and nearby surroundings were seldom carried out. This was probably due to a narrow view of the sacred in relation to the profane in Western ways of thinking. The economic life was understood as a functional matter that was not affected by rituals or faith and therefore not involved in the sacred places. With a broader view to relations between the sacred and the profane, remains of past farms, villages and the landscape are integrated into studies of religion.

During the 1990s and after the more functional and economical approach, the mental dimensions of the settlement area, the farmsteads and the landscape *per se* appeared in archaeological research. Nowadays, many archaeologists are more or less convinced that the landscape is saturated with cultural messages. And so far, *la longue durée*, is a perspective that is extremely important in several of these studies. The examples presented in this article cover several prehistoric periods. The earliest is the Mesolithic settlement site of Tågerup in Scania in southernmost Sweden. Houses, graves, and extraordinary find contexts of both stone and organic material make the place central to a discussion of rituals (Karsten & Knarrström 1998).

The deposit of material in the interior of houses, cooking places and middens at the Bronze Age settlement of Apalle in central Sweden is interpreted in terms of symbolism (Ullén 1994) and the attitudes to horse and dog in the course of the Bronze Age (Ullén 1996). In a similar way, changes in diet could correspond to changes in the Late Bronze Age cosmology (Skoglund 1999). The localisation of rock art in the coastal area of Trøndelag is interpreted as the physical manifestation of hunter-gatherers' and farmers' control and ritualisation of the landscape (Sognnes 1994).

At the same time, ritual space as a representation of specific cosmological concepts is an interesting issue. Consequently, the concept that landscape is not only functional but also societal, mythical, and cosmological is inherent in several archaeological studies from different provinces in Sweden. And the farm as a cosmological model (Gurevich 1985; Hastrup 1985) has inspired archaeological implications in relation to the Late Iron Age (e.g. Johansen 1997; Cassel 1998).

Shifting mental processes behind the organisation of social practice from the Late Iron Age up to about 1700AD have been studied in a parish in the province of Dalarna (Ersgård 1997). Another study focuses on changes of farms and stone enclosures during the Roman Iron Age on Gotland, interpreting them as changes in society and in people's way of perceiving their world (Cassel 1998). In a contextual analysis of silver and gold deposits from the Viking Age and the Early Middle Ages in the province of Uppland, the archaeological remains are interpreted in

terms of landmarks related to religious rituals (Zachrisson 1998).

The landscape is not only understood in connection with the economic functions. The landscape has also a "social structure" and a "social ecology", based on economy, society, myth, and cosmology. Thus people of different ages and genders and all manner of social standing have left their mark individually or collectively on the landscape, which in turn has left its mark on them.

ARCHAEOLOGY AND PRE-CHRISTIAN RELIGION

Archaeology of course, like other disciplines, follows the ideas of our time. A hesitation and an ambivalence towards the study of prehistoric religion have been recognisable both in the fields of archaeology and the history of religion. Due to the credence of sources and methods, the earlier periods without any written sources at all, induce more doubt as to the study of religion. But due to the changing attitudes to material culture within the discipline, there are potentials within archaeology. Today several studies deal with the rituals and religion of time periods as far back as the Palaeolithic. And perhaps the attitudes and ideas of archaeologists are not stamped with the earlier paradigm of scientific work, but transformed into a more open-minded and interpretative mind in a post-modern sense. Archaeologists of today perhaps also have a kind of friendship with the archaeologists of several decades ago. As a reaction to the very scientific approach, archaeologists of today uphold a kind of poetic and artistic liberty, as archaeologists in the nineteenth century exposed (fig. 1). One challenge in the future is, however, to interpret and bind together different kinds of sources, whether material culture or texts, and to synthesise.

The selected publications mentioned in this article show the state of the Humanities, especially archaeology and the history of religion. It is obvious that post-processual archaeology has had greatest impact in

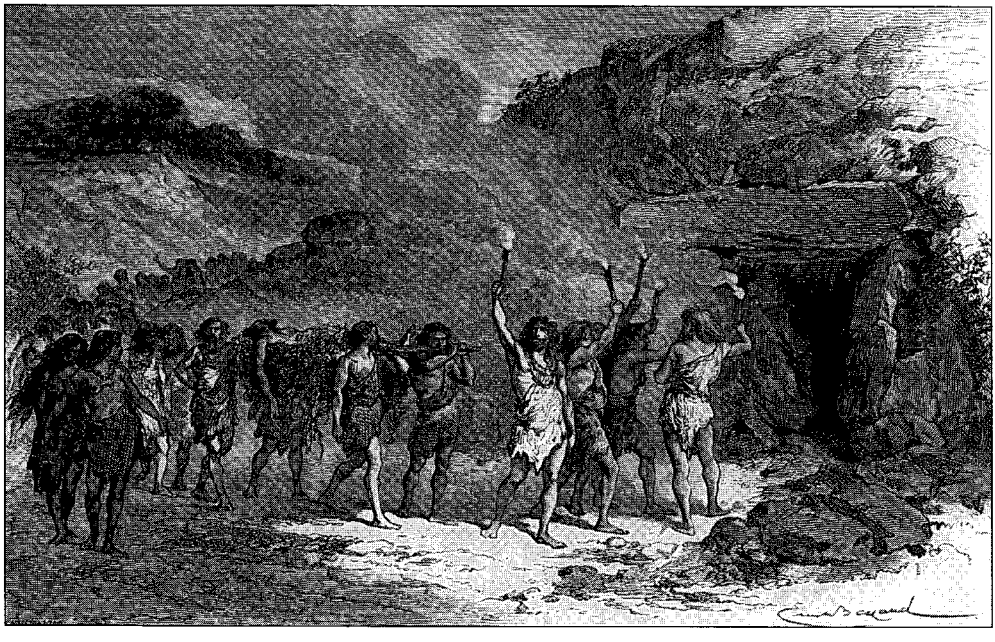

Fig. 1. Stone Age funeral (Figuier 1870:143)

Sweden and Norway. The entrance to the study of ritual and religion is the traditions of post-processual and cognitive archaeology. The framework of a critical archaeology but also the study of ritual and religion are grounded in an apprehension of material culture as a social force. The archaeological evidence of burials, deposit finds, cult centres, rock art, farmsteads and the landscape are undoubtedly topics of importance in the study of religion.

The research on ritual and religion is firmly established in archaeology. One impression is that the Bronze Age and the Iron Age are still those periods that have generated the greatest interest with regard to religion. Yet, there are numerous changes within the utilised sources, methods and theoretical perspectives. Frameworks of a more traditional cultural-historical approach to phenomenology are found. Noteworthy is Jens Peter Schjødt's critical comments on the use of the phenomenology of religion. In short he maintains that it is far too simplified to use universal analogies without attention to the ideological structures (Schjødt 1986). It is thereby questionable whether one can study, for example, eschatological beliefs in pre-Christian religions. At the same time there are unsolved problems among archaeologists, as to how to grasp the relations between the sacred and the profane, perhaps depending on an altogether uncritical attitude. There is, however, a tendency towards a broader understanding of the concept of religion that also involves both ideological and social aspects (e.g. Olausson 1999).

The central question in archaeology is the temporal and spatial relation between form and content. This relation is not constant, but rather changeable, and the transformation of meaning depends on social struggles and cultural conditions.

Several archaeologists have had intentions to grasp and synthesise religious symbols over vast areas (e.g. Larsson 1997), and religion in a time perspective of a few hundreds years or about a thousand years. More seldom has anyone speculated on a more expanded long-term perspective, from modern times to the Stone Age or in the opposite direction. One of the few archaeologists that have tackled the question of transformed religions is Mats P. Malmer. In his dissertation Malmer discusses changes within religion as interpreted from changes within the material culture but also in response to economic changes. Six great transformations are noted from the Early Neolithic up to the twentieth century (Malmer 1962:810ff).

In connection with studies of different kinds of material culture, however, several suggestions for the transformation of religion have been postulated. The potentials of mortuary practices to signify a transformation are notable, for example in the Migration Period (Bennett 1987) and the Christianization (Nielsen 1991). Other sources like deposit finds and sacrifices have been interpreted in terms of a shift in religion and ritual practices, for instance changes in the Neolithic (Karsten 1994), Late Neolithic (Vandkilde 1998) and the Migration Period (Fabech 1991).

Another example concerning the question of transformation and the relation between form and content is the focus on phenomena, objects and pictorial representations. An excellent example is the ship, which is discussed in a long-term perspective as a cosmological symbol but also as a sign of transition and transcendence (e.g. Artelius 1996; Andrén 1993; Crumlin-Pedersen & Munch Thye 1995; Kaul 1998). The Scandinavian animal art is another example of interpretations in a post-processual framework, viewed as active and communicative for individuals as well as for groups of people (Hedeager 1998). Also the gold bracteates have been interpreted as ingredients in a religious and political struggle, for example the iconography in the light of mythology (Kolstrup 1991; Gaimster 1998) or in political

and religious conditions (Axboe 1991) and their original context and ideological function (Andrén 1991).

*

Research on religion and ritual is established in archaeology. The interest in ritual and religion in archaeology possibly also reflects a kind of nostalgia. Perhaps archaeologists, too, are looking for other values in a search for affinity in a society that is more segregated and more dependent on market conditions and commercial activities than ever before. These include unfortunately also the New Age movements, where archaeology plays a crucial part. Whatever the reasons, at the end of the 20th century studies of ritual and religion in the field of archaeology appear frequently in scholarly and popular as well as in antiquarian publications. The significance of ritual and religion in the archaeology of the past could be essential to modern people in other ways, too. The Western society can be criticised for a narrow outlook with respect to comprehending cultural and separate historical contexts. The long-term perspective offers alternatives and alterations. Or, is the contribution from archaeologists to society a sense of cultural pluralism in the past as well as in the present (Burström 1999)? In a time when digitilised mortuary monuments and guided tours of churchyards have appeared, archaeologists are tempted to critically scrutinise our own age.

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