Editor’s Introduction: Surprising Stratigraphy: Religion, Archaeology and Folklore

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Focused on trenchant, tenuous and illuminating intersections between the subject areas of religion, archaeology and folklore, this Special Issue of the Journal for the Academic Study of Religion has been a joy to develop. It concerns a thematic I have been exploring in different modes for many years and one whose sheer complexity and richness I find near overwhelming. However, I am confident that readers will not be overwhelmed by the erudite articles contained herein. Each article investigates the interrelations—across a broad field of case studies—with robust and innovative scholarship.

The critical evaluation of the rich discursive and material relations between religion, archaeology and folklore has gained increasing prominence in the discipline of religious studies in the last few years. It is especially pleasing to note that many individuals centrally involved in this development are represented in this volume. In addition, the long and dynamic shadow cast by post-processural archaeology has resulted in a similar turn in archaeology. In particular the proposition of ‘Prehistoric Religion’ has gained currency in both disciplines. However, my own current research contends that much of the recent construction of ‘Prehistoric Religion’ is developed on the continued (if unrecognised) use of the modernist ‘world religions’ paradigm, including the legacy of Antiquarian concepts. Contemporary propositions have also been dominated by cognitive approaches that link the development of symbolic thought (especially artistic capacity and religious belief) to neurological evolution. A further issue of concern has been the tendency of current studies to build their argument upon the analysis of specific material objects isolated from the context in which they were found and/or the attendant broader community and environment. While in some cases
including, but in no way restricted to prehistoric cultures, many of the chapters presented here also challenge and debate such conceptual/historical foundations and limitations.

The negotiation of boundaries—conceptual, historical, state, political, disciplinary, religious, epistemological—is a shared focus herein. Kathryn Rountree acknowledges the continued legacy of the constructed epistemological divide between ‘religion’ and ‘science’ to explore the diverse and complex interactions between state and contemporary pagan groups and their use of sites designated as sacred in Greece, Ireland, England and Estonia. Robert J. Wallis takes up the contested space occupied by archaeologists and contemporary Pagans via a case study examining recent debates about reburial of ancient remains excavated from Stonehenge. Although these are heated debates Wallis argues for the enduring necessity for archaeologists and Pagans to continue the dialogue. Focused on elucidating the congruence between folktale and archaeological narrative as a methodological approach Fabio Silva considers the development and relevance of such narratives for interpreting Neolithic Iberian dolmens. The intersections and spaces between these different narratives provide a rich ground of innovative analysis. Nicholas Campion’s investigation of Avon Tyrrell House unfurls the more recent intersections of architectural, aesthetic and esoteric thought (the disciplinary boundary between ‘esotericism’ and ‘folklore’ studies is also another site of contention). This draws together traditions proposing the continuity of symbolic esoteric thought with the contemporary designation of vernacular religion. Vernacular religion is also a framework employed by Sarah Penicka-Smith in her consideration of the delightfully quixotic Kariong hieroglyphs. This case study examines the production of contemporary folklore, the valiance of concepts like authenticity and the enduring appeal of certain ancient cultures.

Presenting these erudite and fascinating debates would not have been possible without the many scholars, from around the world, who generously offered their time and expertise to provide anonymous peer reviews. I am extremely grateful for their substantial feedback and analysis.

As a term referring to the ‘order or arrangement’ of sediment and material remains below a landscape surface (Stern 2008: 365), stratigraphy references the layering of time as material residue. However, such layering is not immune from inchoate slippages, porous interweaving of layers and the dynamic fluctuations of the earth’s crust. Order of events, chronological passage, may be entirely clear, partially readable or confused.
The author’s herein examine the embodied construction of different knowledges pertaining to the past and present (and their interrelation). The confluences of the disciplines of archaeology, religion and folklore matter because embedded in such conceptual stratigraphies are the politics of disciplinary formation (and relation) and epistemological fashions. What counts as viable knowledge for the interpretation of belief, its lived and material formations, remains a site of vibrant debate. These debates open out new modes of knowing the past and present which although contentious can be very productive. The contributors to this Special Issue have my heartfelt thanks for their creative contributions to these debates.

References

Stern, Nicola
2008 Stratigraphy, Depositional Environments, and Palaeolandscape Reconstruction in Landscape Archaeology. In Handbook of Landscape Archaeology, edited by Bruno David and Julian Thomas, 365-78. Left Coast Press, Walnut Creek, CA.