
PREZENTĂRI DE CARTE

Ian Hodder (ed.), *Religion at work in a Neolithic society: vital matters*, Cambridge, 2014, Cambridge University Press, 382 p. and 47 figs., ISBN 978-1-107-67126-3.

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Alongside other publications (e.g. T. Insoll 2011a), the work edited by Ian Hodder, *Religion at work in a Neolithic society: vital matters*, confirms the scientific interest in religion shown by the Western archaeological environments. Seemingly paradoxical and in stark contrast with this interest manifested “within the ‘secular’ West” (T. Insoll 2011b, p. 1), within the archaeological field in Romania, a country in which religious practice (e.g. the Christian-Orthodox one) continues to be prominent, we do not encounter anything comparable as reflection and elaboration.

The main reason for which, out of the many titles regarding the material dimension of ritual and religion, I have chosen to write a few lines about this book is the particular interdisciplinary character of the approach that gathered archaeologists, anthropologists, sociologists and, most remarkably, specialists in theology. The project was aimed at understanding the role of religion in the Neolithic site at Çatalhöyük in Turkey, a subject also approached, from different perspectives though, in a previous publication, also edited by Ian Hodder – *Religion and the origin of complex societies: Çatalhöyük as a case study* (I. Hodder 2010). For three years, over the course of a seminar, the participants studied the role of religion at Çatalhöyük from the angle of their own discipline, but as directly related as possible to the archaeological data. Every year, the participants spent a week at Çatalhöyük and compiled their texts after fertile discussion with various specialists of the research team.

Starting from the premise that religion constituted an instrument for gaining power and property in the Neolithic society, the seminar was intended to answer some specific questions about the relationships between religion, power and property, but, at the end of this endeavor, the clear existence of such relationships could not be upheld. Furthermore, they reached the conclusion that, far from being an instrument, “religion is a vital aspect of being human” (I. Hodder, p. 2). At the same time, the research carried out by the members of the seminar contributed to detailing knowledge about the Neolithic society at Çatalhöyük, a complex world, perceived as vital and powerful, in which religion was integral to every aspect of life.

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The structure of the volume reflects the main research directions of the seminar. The first part has five chapters referring to the cognitive and evolutionary aspects of religion in relation to the Neolithic at Çatalhöyük and in other sites in the Near East, where religion is conceived of as a “a vital component of life” (I. Hodder, p. 22). The five chapters tackle a wide range of subjects: the mortuary practices in the Neolithic society of the Near East (Nigel Goring-Morris and Anna Belfer-Cohen), the origin of gods – reflections regarding the Neolithic and the present (F. LeRon Shults), religion as anthropomorphism (Stewart Elliott Guthrie), personhood, memory and religion (J. Wentzel van Huysteen), modes of religiosity and the evolution of social complexity (Harvey Whitehouse *et alii*). The second part of the volume refers to the vitality of various categories of materials at Çatalhöyük, to their spiritual or religious agency. The six chapters of the second part refer to topics such as: relational networks and religious sodalities (Barbara J. Mills), magic and materiality (Carolyn Nakamura and Peter Pels), a death in childbirth (Kimberley C. Patton and Lori D. Hager), the spirit of the house (Mary J. Weismantel), the role of buildings (Victor Buchli), the use of spatial order in Çatalhöyük material culture (Anke Kamerman). The third and final part of the volume contains a chapter of conclusions, signed by the editor and dedicated to the results of inter-disciplinary cooperation.

Besides the general consensus points, such as the vitality of the material culture in the Neolithic society at Çatalhöyük, there are fundamental differences between the authors’ approaches and interpretations. For example, in the case of the specialists in theology, F. LeRon Shults’ plea for an “iconoclastic trajectory of theology” (p. 82), whose purpose is “to disentangle the gods from the material and social dimensions of our proprietary production” (p. 83), contrasts strikingly with the Christian perspective underlying Alejandro Garcia-Rivera’s discussion of the concepts of “devotional imagination” and “devotional art” (p. 357-363), in the postscript of the volume. Equally important differences are encountered in the case of archaeologists/anthropologists. For example, the concept of “history houses” is used by many of the authors to refer to the complex structures, rebuilt several times, which often contained a lot of graves at a certain moment of their existence, whereas for Victor Buchli, “rather than being ‘history houses’ or ‘houses’ at all (at least not in any conventional sense), these structures serve to contain, harness, and curate powerful substances both sublime and prosaic for the benefit of corporate groups” (p. 281). Taken together, these authors’ divergent perspectives do nothing but outline more accurately the complexity of the debate.

After going through all the chapters of the volume, the reader will realize that all the goals that have been set at its publication have been achieved: indeed, the book is not only a major contribution to the debates in archaeology and social sciences regarding the material world and religion, but also an opportunity to come up with new interpretations related to the site at Çatalhöyük.

While the inter-disciplinary dialogue is far from new, the contribution of the specialists in theology to this volume is an element of absolute novelty, as it has already been emphasized. Personally, I have mostly resonated with the text written by Alejandro Garcia-Rivera, a professor of theology at the Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University, California. Unfortunately, this text was published as a postscript, as its author died before the ending of the seminar, without being able to fulfil the hope he confessed in the final lines: “I hope my observations may become more sophisticated as I learn more about the mysteries found here at Çatalhöyük” (A. Garcia-Rivera, p. 363). Nevertheless, Alejandro Garcia-Rivera’s text continues to testify to the potential that a perspective inspired by Christian theology may have for the understanding of materiality in general, including the Neolithic one.

Finally, coming back to the Romanian context, I express my belief that the interdisciplinary dialogue – whose fruitfulness has been proved by publications like the one presented in this text –, combined with thorough knowledge and lived experience of one's own Christian-Orthodox theological tradition, could contribute to enriching the debate on the materiality of the remote or the contemporary past. Furthermore, forthcoming is the attempt – as well as the challenge – to articulate an archaeological approach with new emphases, which, inspired by theologians like Christos Yannaras and Andrei (André) Scrima, I would term an *apophatic archaeology*.

References

- I. Hodder (ed.) 2010 *Religion in the emergence of civilization: Çatalhöyük as a case study*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- T. Insoll (ed.) 2011a *Oxford handbook of the archaeology of ritual and religion*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- T. Insoll 2011b Introduction: ritual and religion in archaeological perspective, in T. Insoll (ed.), *Oxford handbook of the archaeology of ritual and religion*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. 1-7.