

## **ARCHAEOLOGY OF HOLINESS: SESSION HELD AT THE 12TH NORDIC TAG CONFERENCE IN OULU, FINLAND, APRIL 26–27, 2012**

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This special issue of the journal is dedicated to the archaeology of religion. It is based on papers presented at the session *Archaeology of Holiness* at the 12th Nordic Theoretical Archaeology Group meeting in Oulu in 2012.

The session was initiated by the research project *The Materiality of Religion: Religious Artefacts in Estonian Archaeological Collections*, financed by the Estonian Research Foundation (ETF 8956) in 2010–2013. The main results and general conclusions of our project are discussed in this volume (see Jonuks et al. pp. 151–176). One of the aims of the project was to discuss the theoretical and methodological issues of the archaeology of religion. This led to a more general discussion about the terminology, including the meaning of this particular notion, which resulted in discussing the concept of ‘holiness’ in the archaeology of religion. Why namely holiness? Archaeology of religion is tightly connected with the concept of ritual. Our aim was to push the discussion further from and beyond this main focus and change the debate from religion and ritual to the numinous part of past religions. There are also other similar attempts made for using such alternative concepts (see, e.g., Rountree 2012). It is true that the further we step from the actual sources and physical remains of rituals in particular, the more speculative the interpretations will be. Nevertheless, we believe that it is important to bear in mind the mental background of religious practices and to speculate about those parts of religion that do not leave direct traces for archaeology. This led us to organising the session at the 12th Nordic TAG Conference, which resulted in seven interesting papers on the relationships between the concept of holiness and the archaeology of religion in the Baltic Sea area, five of which are published in this volume.



*A selection of different pendants (AI 1977) found in Cēsis (Võnnu), Latvia, in 1888.  
Photo by Tõnno Jonuks 2013.*

During the session the question of terminology appeared as a key-feature in several papers. These discussions also gain a significant position in the following articles. In fact, definitions and explanations of terms and concepts should be central in our studies. However, we have witnessed numerous cases, in which a loose usage of terminology ends with problems in final conclusions. Such an outstanding position of terminology in relation to religious studies led us to the next session, *Archaeology of Religion: Thinking about Terminology*, at the 34th Annual Conference of the Theoretical Archaeology Group, Central TAG, in Liverpool, in the same year.

This volume is organised from concrete topics and case studies to more general discussions. The first two articles, by Maria Petersson and Anne Carlie, are dedicated to the topics of rituals and ritualisation in archaeology. They both concentrate on the Swedish archaeological material from around the first half of the first millennium AD, providing very interesting case studies of deposits

of simple and mundane objects relating to various Iron Age ritual activities. Both of these articles open up questions related to interpreting various private and communal rituals and their relation to contemporary social developments.

The following three articles discuss in addition to religion, also terms and concepts. Tõnno Jonuks and Tuuli Kurisoo focus on the concepts of Christianity in Iron Age and Early Medieval Estonia. They discuss both theoretical and practical issues of what constitutes Christianity and the idea of conversion in the prehistory, presenting examples from Estonian material. Sonja Hukantaival analyses terminology-related issues in relation to folk religion and magic. She emphasises the multifaceted development of the widely used but underanalysed idea of folk religion and its relation to contemporaneous official religious systems, and possibilities for studying folk religion, with case studies from Finnish historical material. The last paper in this volume by Ester Oras focuses on the specific terms of 'sacrifice' and 'offering'. The definitions and use of those concepts in anthropology and religious studies are introduced, and the problems of applying those ideas to archaeological material, especially on the example of intentional artefact deposits, are discussed. The section of articles ends with an overview paper about a three-year project that was dedicated to the materiality of religion and to the discussion about terminology in the archaeology of religion. The first preliminary results will be presented about the mapping of religion-related objects in Estonian archaeology collections, which will be followed by a short discussion about terminology.

We hope that the readers will benefit from the papers in this volume in their contributions to wider theoretical and terminology-related issues in the archaeology of religion and in tracing holiness in archaeological material, but also in the interesting case studies that they provide. We hope to provide a small section of some of the topical issues in this field around the Baltic Sea area in the early 2010s.

Finally, we are very grateful to all the presenters who were kindly willing to participate in our session and, furthermore, found some time to write an article for this special issue of *Folklore*. Unfortunately, not all of the presentations evolved into an article. However, we hope that these valuable thoughts will be used in some other forms. We would also like to thank our audience for their fruitful ideas and contributions to further discussions. As clearly exemplified in this session, further formal and informal debates, but also in the current volume of articles, the discussions are lively and waiting to be developed further. We are convinced that the archaeological material and theoretical debates deriving from these topics will provide plenty of food for thoughts in the decades to come.

## **REFERENCE**

Rountree, Kathryn 2012. Introduction: Exploring New Approaches to the Archaeology of Spiritualities. In: K. Rountree & C. Morris & A. Peatfield (eds.) *Archaeology of Spiritualities*. Springer, pp. V–XII.