

= The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic =

The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic is an archaeological study of the material evidence for ritual and magical practices in Europe , containing a particular emphasis on London and South East England . It was written by the English archaeologist Ralph Merrifield , the former deputy director of the Museum of London , and first published by B.T. Batsford in 1987 .

Merrifield opens The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic by discussing how archaeologists have understood magic and ritual practices in past societies , opining that on the whole it had been a neglected area of study . Looking at the archaeological evidence for ritual activity in the pre @-@ Roman Iron Age and the Roman Iron Age of Britain , he discusses animal and human sacrifice , as well as the offering of votive deposits in rivers and other bodies of water . He moves on to explore the rituals surrounding death and burial , suggesting areas where this ritual activity is visible in the burial record of multiple societies . Merrifield goes on to discuss the archaeological evidence for ritual practices in Christian Europe , highlighting areas of ritual continuance from earlier pagan periods , in particular the deposition of metal goods in water . Looking at the evidence for foundation deposits in European buildings that likely had magico @-@ religious purposes , he then looks at several examples of written charms and spells which have survived in the archaeological record .

Upon publication , The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic received predominantly positive reviews in academic peer @-@ reviewed journals such as Folklore and The Antiquaries Journal . In ensuing years , the book has been widely cited by scholars as an influential and pioneering text in the study of the archaeology of ritual and magic .

= = Background = =

Ralph Merrifield (1913 ? 1995) was born and raised in Brighton , and , following an education at Varndean Grammar School , he worked at Brighton Museum . Gaining a London External Degree in anthropology in 1935 , he developed a lifelong interest in the religious and magical beliefs of England . After serving in the Royal Air Force during the Second World War , he returned to working at Brighton Museum , but in 1950 was appointed Assistant Keeper of the Guildhall Museum in the City of London . Over a six @-@ month period in 1956 and 1957 , he was stationed in Accra , Ghana , where he worked at the National Museum of Ghana , organising the collection in preparation for the country 's independence from the British Empire in March 1957 . Returning to the Guildhall Museum , Merrifield compiled the first detailed study of Roman London for 35 years , which was published as The Roman City of London (1965) . Following the creation of the Museum of London in 1975 , he became its Deputy Director , a post which he held until his retirement in 1978 .

In the preface of The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic , Merrifield noted that the book 's bias was to the archaeology of London , and that this was particularly evident in its use of illustrations . He dedicated the book to the memory of H.S. Toms , the former Curator of Brighton Museum and a one @-@ time assistant to the archaeologist Augustus Pitt Rivers ; in his dedication , Merrifield noted that Toms had been his " first mentor in archaeology and folk studies " .

= = Synopsis = =

In his preface , Merrifield noted that while archaeologists studying prehistoric periods have paid increasing attention to the evidence for ritual and magic in the archaeological record , their counterparts working in later historical periods have failed to follow their lead . Presenting this book as a rectifier , he outlines his intentions and the study 's limitations .

Chapter one , " Ritual and the archaeologist " , begins by describing the ritual deposits from the pre @-@ Roman Iron Age sites of Cadbury Castle and Danebury , hillforts in southern Britain . Merrifield laments the fact that the majority of archaeologists , particularly those studying literate , historical periods , have avoided ritual explanations for unusual phenomenon in the archaeological record ; he believes that they exhibit a " ritual phobia " . He contrasts this view with that of those archaeologists studying the Neolithic and Bronze Age Britain , who have widely accepted the ritual uses of

chambered tombs and stone circles . He specifies particular definitions for words such as " ritual " , " religion " and " superstition " , arguing that such terms must be used with precision by archaeologists . Offering a case study , he describes how Neolithic stone axes were adopted as amulets or talismans in the later Roman Iron Age onward in Britain , and that as such archaeologists should expect to find them in non @-@ prehistoric contexts .

In the second chapter , " Offerings to earth and water in Pre @-@ Roman and Roman Times " , Merrifield explores the various forms of archaeological evidence for ritual deposits in the pre @-@ Roman Iron Age and the Roman Iron Age of Britain . He provides an overview of the evidence for animal and human sacrifice , as well as that in support of ritual offerings in bodies of water such as the River Thames . Merrifield deals with votive deposits on land , in particular looking at the evidence for deposition in ditches , shafts and wells . He rounds off the chapter by examining evidence for Iron Age rituals that took place at the commencement and termination of building constructions . Chapter three , " Rituals of Death " , deals with the religious rituals accompanying death and burial , and their visibility in the archaeological record . It explains the three main ways which human communities have dealt with the corpses of the dead : through exposing them to elements and scavengers , through inhumation and through cremation . Looking at beliefs surrounding the afterlife , Merrifield discusses ways in which these beliefs might be visible in the archaeological record , such as through the deposition of grave goods . Discussing evidence for rituals of separation through which the deceased is separated from the world of the living , including those that deal with the decapitation of the body , Merrifield then looks at the effect of Christianity on burials in Europe , arguing that it brought a new intimacy with the dead through the collection of relics , which was in contrast to the pagan beliefs of the Roman Empire , which portrayed the deceased as unclean .

The fourth chapter , " From Paganism to Christianity " , explores the continuing practice of ritual in Christian Europe . Discussing the early Roman Catholic Church 's demonisation of pagan deities , Merrifield states that the Church continued propagating a form of polytheism through the " cult of the blessed dead " , the veneration of saints and martyrs , throughout the Middle Ages . Discussing the ritual use of Christian relics , he also looks at votive offerings that were presented in a Christian context at shrines and churches , paying particular reference to the tradition of offering bent coins to shrines in Late Medieval England . Examining the construction of churches on earlier pagan ritual sites , he deals with evidence for the destruction of pagan statues by the early Christians .

Chapter five , " Survivals , revivals and reinterpretations " , continues Merrifield 's exploration of ritual practices in Christian Europe . He examines Late- and Post @-@ Medieval items that have been deposited in rivers , including swords and pilgrimage souvenirs , speculating that their deposition might represent a survival from the pagan tradition of casting votive offerings into water . He speculates that the contemporary practice of throwing a coin into a fountain for good luck is a further survival of the custom . He then discusses the evidence for ritual foundation deposits under buildings , noting the widespread Medieval deposition of an animal 's head or jaw in a construction 's foundations , presumably for protective magical purposes . Proceeding to deal with the Late- and Post @-@ Medieval deposition of pots under foundations , he looks at their place in churches , where it was believed that they aided the acoustics . Continuing with this theme , he discusses the British folk custom of burying a horse 's head under the floor to improve a building 's acoustics , speculating as to whether this was a survival of the pagan foundation deposit custom . Rounding off the chapter , Merrifield examines magical items that have been intentionally placed in the walls , chimneys and roofs of buildings in Britain , in particular the widespread use of dead cats and old shoes .

In the sixth chapter , " Written spells and charms " , Merrifield discusses the use of the written word in magical contexts . Highlighting archaeological examples from the ancient Graeco @-@ Roman world , he looks at inscriptions on lead tablets that were buried in cemeteries and amphitheatres , both places associated with the dead . Moving on to the use of magic squares , Merrifield highlights various examples of the Sator square in archaeological contexts , before also discussing squares that contained numerical data with astrological significance . He rounds off the chapter with an examination of Post @-@ Medieval curses and charms containing the written word , citing examples

that have been found by archaeologists across Britain , hidden inside various parts of buildings . In the seventh chapter , " Charms against witchcraft " , he deals with archaeological evidence for a variety of Early Modern and Modern British spells designed to ward off malevolent witchcraft . After briefly discussing the role of holed stone charms , he looks at the evidence for witch bottles , making reference to their relation to beliefs about witches ' familiars . Proceeding to focus on 19th- and 20th @-@ century examples , Merrifield discusses the case of James Murrell , an English cunning man , and his involvement with the witch bottle tradition . Merrifield 's final chapter , " The ritual of superstition : recognition and potential for study " , provides an overview of the entire book , highlighting the evidence of ritual continuity from pre @-@ Christian periods to the present day . Pointing out what he sees as areas of further exploration for archaeologists , he calls for " systematic investigation " of the subject .

= = Reception and recognition = =

= = = Academic reviews = = =

The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic was reviewed by John Hutchings for the Folklore journal , the published arm of The Folklore Society . He highlighted how the work would be of benefit to folklorists , by putting various charms then in museum exhibits ? such as dead cats , buried shoes and witch bottles ? into the wider context of ritual activity . He opined that it was " a little disappointing " that the examples were almost all from London and the Home Counties , but described the book as " lucidly written , carefully argued , and well illustrated . "

In a short review for The Antiquaries Journal , the historian of religion Hilda Ellis Davidson praised the " cautious and balanced arguments " of Merrifield 's work . She opined that it should be read by every archaeologist as a corrective to what she thought was their widespread ignorance of folklore , noting that the wide array of evidence for ritual behaviour in the archaeological record would surprise " many readers " .

= = = Wider recognition = = =

Writing Merrifield 's obituary for The Independent newspaper , the Museum of London archaeologist Peter Marsden described The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic as " a masterly study of an unusual subject . " The importance of Merrifield 's book was discussed by the Englishman Brian Hoggard , an independent researcher who authored a 2004 academic paper entitled " The archaeology of counter @-@ witchcraft and popular magic " . Being published in the Beyond the Witch Trials anthology , edited by the historians Owen Davies and Willem de Blécourt , Hoggard recounted that The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic was the " notable exception " to a trend in which archaeological studies of magic were restricted to small journals , magazines and newspaper articles .

The influential nature of Merrifield 's work was also recognised by the Medieval archaeologist Roberta Gilchrist of the University of Reading . In an academic paper published in a 2008 edition of the Medieval Archaeology journal , Gilchrist referenced Merrifield 's study , noting that it offered a " rare contribution " to the archaeology of ritual and magic in Britain . In particular she highlighted his belief that many archaeologists dealing with literate cultures exhibited a " ritual phobia " as accurate .