

Introduction

The biggest obstacle concerning religion, ritual, and magic encountered by archaeologists or other professionals involved in excavation, survey, or historical renovation or preservation projects is the lack of comprehensive knowledge about the material signatures of ritualistic, religious, or magical practices. The *Field Manual for the Archaeology of Ritual, Religion, and Magic* provides not only specific examples of the material culture associated with a wide range of ritualistic, religious, and magical practices, but it also includes instructions and models for recording at all sites to include data that may, with further analysis, indicate such practices.

The information presented in this book is meant to be both a resource for particular ritualistic, religious, and magical forms of material culture as well as a springboard for understanding and recognizing the ubiquitous and often embedded nature of people's beliefs in the material culture of their daily lives. The format is designed for users to find information quickly from lists, charts, tables, guides, and forms rather than from long sections of narrative text. It is also designed so that relevant sections can be easily cross-referenced to accommodate research of particular artifact and site types, attributes, or ethnic associations that can then be extended into ethnological comparative studies. While primarily designed for archaeologists, it is also a valuable resource for other professionals and avocational workers such as building renovators, historic preservationists, and construction workers who often encounter intentionally concealed objects (ICOs) and markings that constitute ritualistic or magical material culture. This book aids anyone discovering ICOs or other ritual and magic indicators in the identification of such finds and provides a mechanism for their documentation.

Skimming through the Table of Contents one can quickly see the range of topics covered in this manual. Each chapter is divided into specific categories of ritualistic, religious, or magical material culture, sites, associations, and references. Each chapter begins with a brief summary of the particular topic and important points for the researcher to consider. Additionally, extensive resource and reference listings provide directions for researchers to find further information on any given aspect of ritual, religion, and magic relevant to archaeological investigation and interpretation. Chapter 9 "Forms and Templates" provides archaeologists with a variety of recordation forms that may be used as is or modified for their particular sites and/or projects.

The manual, while not professing to contain every instance, material, or form of ritualistic, religious, or magical practice, should provide researchers with a broad and detailed understanding of the manifestation of these practices in order to more confidently recognize, record, and interpret such elements in the archaeological record.

THE BASICS: WHAT EVERYONE SHOULD KNOW

Before delving into greater details and specific categories, this brief primer highlights the basic concepts one should know about the material culture of ritual, religion, and magic. It is followed by the top eleven “Most Common Ritualistic, Religious, and Magical Tropes” used in expressions of these beliefs and practices and “Common Attributes of Ritualistic, Religious, and Magical Material Culture.”

- All cultural/ethnic groups use material culture to express their beliefs.
- In contexts of culture contact through trade, migration, conquest, colonialization, or religious conversion, expressions of belief may be appropriated or hybridized from one of the groups by individuals or communities of the other group.
- Not all unknown, enigmatic, or supposedly anomalous objects are ritualistic.
- Not all rituals contain religious, spiritual, or supernatural association or meaning.
- There are several types of ritual: religious, magical, political, judicial, military, social, personal, educational, entertainment, etc.
- An object’s ritualistic, sacred, or magical power or designation is often context specific.
- For many cultures, ritualistic, religious, and/or magical belief and praxis is inseparably interwoven with everyday thoughts, tasks, and behavior.
- While there are distinct separations between sacred and profane or secular spaces in some situations, this is not always the case.
- The objects and symbols used in ritual, religion, and magic are usually part of larger systems of associated meanings rather than existing as isolated items.
- Ritualistic or magical objects are often found in groups of associated items.
- Evidence of religious or magical belief may manifest as an absence of material culture or through apparently mundane everyday lifestyles and choices.
- Magical objects can be virtually anything.
- The key sacred or powerful aspect of a religious, ritualistic, or magical object may not be the form or subject of the object itself but rather some particular attribute (e.g., its color, material, shine, etc.) of the object.

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- Sensory experience is an important aspect of religious, ritualistic, and magical practice and is often intentionally materially created or manipulated for maximum effect.
- Ritual is performative, which means that beyond utilized objects, there may also be archaeological signatures of performance spaces and activities.
- Objects, fossils, and structures from ancient eras are often reinterpreted by more recent people and incorporated into their religious, ritualistic, or magical practices.
- Evidence of magical belief and practice may lie outside the assumed boundaries of an archaeological site (e.g., culturally modified trees or rocks in the woods or mirror shards in a stream beyond a village boundary).
- All religious practice has some material element(s): objects, structures, or spaces.
- Religious belief or notions of the sacred often include entire landscapes of interrelated sites, features, and sensory elements.
- In many cases it is difficult or impossible to identify or confirm sacred sites based on archaeological evidence alone; context and additional strands of information are required for corroboration.
- Anthropomorphism is a key aspect of most ritual, magical, or spiritual beliefs and is expressed through material objects.
- Some religious, ritualistic, or magical practices have gendered aspects that must be understood in their respective cultural contexts.
- Some objects may be simultaneously or alternately magical and quotidian.
- Plants are likely the most varied and widely used materials in ritual, religion, and magic.

MOST COMMON RITUALISTIC, RELIGIOUS, AND MAGICAL TROPES

If time and resources do not allow for a thorough consideration of any potential ritualistic, religious, or magical material signatures at the site under excavation, but you want to at least be cognizant of the most likely objects, spaces, or practices that may occur at any site regardless of time period, geographic place, or culture, then these are what you should be on the lookout for.

1. Foundation and Abandonment Sacrifices

The practice of offering sacrifices at the time of a building's construction or renovation stretches across the world and through the millennia. Foundation sacrifices were common in religious, political, and residential buildings. The purpose of these offerings was manifold: to appease the spirits of the place and

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propitiate their goodwill; to ensure the structure's future integrity; and to protect the inhabitants from evil and misfortune. These objects could be embedded in the fabric of the structure's walls or foundation stones: placed in cellars or subfloor spaces; situated under the floorboards; buried under door sills or threshold stones; entombed under hearth stones; or placed in post holes. The earliest foundation sacrifices involved human and/or animal victims. Later, representative substitutions sufficed in the form of figurines, coins, images, horns, skulls, eggs, written measurements of a person's shadow (or the rod or tape used in the measuring), clothing items, books, and written inscriptions. Other common foundation sacrifices consisted of sharp objects (often metal) like weapons, agricultural tools, scissors, or knives. At the time of abandonment, similar offerings were made and included in the fill matrices. Related to abandonment sacrifices is the practice of termination ritual wherein buildings, features, or burials are intentionally destroyed, defaced, overbuilt, or desecrated by an incoming conquering society.

2. Threshold and Boundary Treatments

The most common placement for magical or religious objects or elements is at some threshold space or along boundaries of designated areas. These treatments can be for protection; to demarcate sacred zones or designate the portals between human and spirit realms; to define tribal or cultural boundaries; to elicit divine blessings for fertility of crops/livestock or people; or to indicate areas of spiritual danger. Thresholds and boundaries can be human-made features (e.g., doorways, windows, gates, chimney holes and hearths, roofs, corners, fences, field perimeters, etc.) or natural features (e.g., caves, springs, rivers, mountains and buttes, gaps and divides, forests, etc.).

3. Eggs

Eggs, natural or made from alternative materials, are probably the most ubiquitous and universal of all ritualistic, religious, and/or magical objects. They are used in virtually every context and for every ritualistic, religious, and/or magical purpose. They incorporate the three most often associated ritual colors (white, red, and black), and they often have related divine or magical numeration (e.g., three, six, nine). Eggs are used in rites and practices of protection, maleficium, divination, offering, sacrifice, fertility, and cosmological representation. They are often placed under thresholds, over doors and windows, in walls and under floors, hanging from rafters or ceilings, buried in fields, placed in trees, placed in or on graves. The color of the eggs or the hens who lay them is significant. The most frequently expressed egg colors are white, red, black, green, or mul-

ticolored designs. It is often dictated that ritually or magically used eggs have to come from black or white hens. Eggs are found in many contexts, including: mortuary features, religious structures, agricultural fields, livestock shelters, domiciles, water sites, and ceremonial sites. Eggs used ritualistically can occur as natural eggs, fashioned from wood, wax, glass, porcelain, clay, stone, jade, or papier mâché, or depicted as images in paintings, carvings, and needlework.

4. Elementals (*Air, Water, Earth, Fire*)

The four primary components of the natural world play important roles in all belief systems. Some systems emphasize particular elementals (e.g., Zoroastrianism is characterized by its focus on fire and water). Others integrate all the elementals throughout their rituals and practices. The elementals often are believed to function as vehicles of fertility, purification, or communication with the spirit world. They can be incorporated into ritualistic, religious, and magical practice in their natural forms or they can be represented through symbols or symbolic materials. Ritual or sacred space is often situated near water sources and/or where other elemental forces are accentuated. (See Chapter 6 “Ritualistic, Sacred, and Magical Landscapes” for specific examples).

5. Spatiality

Virtually all religious, ritual, and magical beliefs and applications have some spatial association. This spatial construct may include definite boundaries: a demarcation of sacred and profane spaces and/or areas of perceived danger or spiritual power. The space may be small and confined or extend over a vast landscape (e.g., pilgrimage routes). The spatial construct can be highly complex and incorporate ideas of right/left, up/down; front/back; in/out; above/under; and male/female with other notions of accessibility, authority, and space. The space may represent a miniaturized version of the cosmos and contain measurements, orientations, and structural arrangements mimicking or auspiciously aligning with the structure and power of the spiritual world. Some archaeological evidence of this special spatiality may be nothing more than the pounded ground or tracts left from activities like circumambulations or pilgrimage routes or traces of moveable features used to delineate spaces used for particular ritualistic, religious, or magical practices. Spatiality is also an important aspect of proximity, arrangement, and orientation of associated objects. In some instances, the spatiality component manifests through the non-endemic occurrence of natural materials like stone, fossils, shells, and plants. These objects, referred to as manuports, have been intentionally transported by humans from their naturally occurring location as talismans, amulets, or spiritually

powerful objects that retain a connection with their original location, often over vast distances.

6. Intentionally Concealed Objects (ICOs)

In both religious and magical practices, powerful or sacred objects are intentionally hidden within the structural fabric of a building, buried, or submerged in water. These objects may be votive offerings, sacrifices, or magically protective agents. In the case of the latter, they usually occur in and around hearths and chimneys, door and window thresholds, walls and floors, roofs and rafters, and cellar spaces, but may also be found in tree crevices, under stones, or buried under paths and crossroads. Building renovators and other workmen are the most likely to encounter ICOs, but archaeological excavation can also reveal these hidden magical objects. Both religious and magical markings can occur in places dimly lit or visually inaccessible (e.g., high above the line of vision or underneath areas not normally viewed); while not technically hidden, they are intentionally concealed due to their obscured placement. ICOs can manifest in a variety of forms: sharp objects (often metal) like weapons, agricultural tools, scissors, or knives; desiccated/mummified animals (cats, rats and mice, chickens, frogs, etc.); animal skulls and skeletons; worn out footwear and clothing; perforated or broken objects like coins and swords; curse tablets; and precious objects like coins and jewelry. Additionally, they can be symbols and markings incised, painted, or burned into a hidden or visually inaccessible area.

7. Binding

The notion that tying up or binding by some means (bands, chains, cords, knots, ribbons, rope, shackles, stakes, string, strips of cloth, tape, etc.) has a direct spiritual or metaphysical power is seen in many cultures. The binding may be literal with materials used to physically restrain or tie an object, individual, or animal or a part thereof (e.g., knots tied in horses' manes or tails) or it may be expressed through sympathetic associations such as tying knots in a cord to render someone sterile or creating intricate patterns in needlework to trap malign forces. This binding may also be represented or enacted through weaving, braiding, lacing, or twisting. Moreover, binding applies to the encircling of objects, features, or buildings with chalk, chains, cords, rope, etc. This encircling is related to ideas of a spiritually or magically protective circle that both protects the encompassed element from preternatural forces and designates it as under the control and influence of those doing the circling/binding. Binding elements are found in a wide range of rituals including those associated with love, marriage, sexuality, fertility, birth, death, healing, sacrifice, cursing,

blessing, divination, discovery of witches, trapping evil, and fear of revenants, among many others.

8. Repetition

Ritual practices are virtually never a “one-off” affair. Their efficacy is often dependent on numerous iterations, and those iterations are frequently patterned repetitions. Commonly, the patterns are based on numerology with repetitions occurring according to particular ascribed numbers such as three, seven, or nine. The repetition patterns can manifest in several ways: the ritual may be enacted a specific number of times; key objects or symbols may occur in repeated numbers or patterns; the ritual may need to be repeated over a series of days or at different times during the day; a series of individuals may repeat the ritual; or particular symbols may be repeated across a range of surfaces, objects, and contexts.

9. Bodily Fluids

The fluids contained in or secreted from the human or animal body frequently play important roles in religious, ritualistic, and magical practices. The different fluids (e.g., blood, menstrual blood, milk, phlegm, saliva, semen, tears, urine) are attributed particular properties and symbolic meanings related to their colors, odors, functions, or means of production. These substances can be used in both beneficent and maleficent rituals. Because they are all aspects of living bodies, they represent life or the life force in various ways; this powerful connection to the well-being of individuals makes these elements preferred and potent components in sympathetic magic and other rituals.

10. Reversal

Many cultural traditions perceive the spirit-world to be a reversed or mirror image of the earthly world of the living. Objects intended for the spirit-world or accompanying the dead to this realm may be indicated by their backward, upside-down, or reversed positioning. This is demonstrated by backwards writing on votive and curse tablets, torcs worn in reverse direction on corpses, and pots placed upside-down in burials or offering sites, or weapons and tools placed or depicted on the opposite side of their usual use.

11. Masking

Virtually all cultural groups at some point in their histories have utilized masks in various ritual enactments including religious, healing, initiation, military/

battle, mortuary, political, trance, seasonal/agricultural, hunting/fishing, and storytelling, among others. Masks were not always meant to be worn, but were also carried in processions, displayed on walls, buried in graves, sacrificed as votives and offerings, made in miniature to be carried or worn as pendants, and attached to statuary, buildings, poles, or furniture. Masks worn on the head/face could be partial, covering only a section of the face; frontal to cover the whole face; helmet-like covering the entire head; or hat-like sitting on top of the head and leaving the wearer's face exposed. They depict humans, deities, demons, animals, and spirits. The materials used to construct masks include metal (gold, silver, copper, bronze, iron), clay, wood, linen, plant fiber, cartonnage, turtle shell, jade, animal hides, skulls, leather, feathers, antlers/horns, shells, plaster, ivory, wax, and stone.

COMMON ATTRIBUTES OF RITUALISTIC, RELIGIOUS, AND MAGICAL MATERIAL CULTURE

The key sacred or powerful aspect of a religious, ritualistic, or magical object may not be the form or subject of the object itself, but rather some particular attribute (e.g., its color, material, shine, etc.) of the object. It is possible for multiple and various objects to be used as offerings, sacrifices, amulets, or other religious, ritualistic, or magical purposes. To understand their uses in these contexts requires a more detailed analysis of their shared attributes.

Colors, whether applied or as natural attributes, are either symbolically or inherently agents of spiritual or magical power. Some colors (like red and blue) are virtually universal in their association with protection against malign forces.

Hollow, concave, rounded, sickle-shaped objects generally represent female creative power, whereas **long, tapered** objects generally represent phallic, male creative power.

Intentionally “killed” objects are those items bent, burnt, perforated, torn, broken, cut, dented, melted, or smashed intentionally at the time of deposition or inclusion in a ritualistic context. By their “death,” these objects enter the spiritual realm to accompany the dead to the afterlife or to work their power in the world of the spirits.

Iron and other metals (like brass, copper, silver, and gold) are commonly believed to inherently possess the power to repel evil.

Loud sounds are understood in many cultures to scare away evil spirits. To this end, many ritual practices include creating loud sounds through beating on drums, gongs, or other noise producing materials or through other means like fireworks, explosions, and gunfire.

Numbers, in many belief systems, possess inherent powers. Association with a particular number may be the defining element of spiritual or magical force attributed to an object. Three is the most common ritualistic, religious, or magical number, which is expressed in various triplicate representations or as multiples (six, nine, twelve, etc.) Other numbers also have particular meanings and associations; for example, the five-point star on the base of a rowan berry is what marks the rowan tree as apotropaic as the star is seen as a representation of the Pentangle of Solomon.

Objects comprised of multiple spiritual attributes are believed to be particularly effective or powerful as each element contributes its essence to combine with the potent essences of the other attributes.

Sharp objects (knives, weapons, agricultural tools, thorns, pins/needles, glass shards, etc.) pierce the veil between spiritual and mundane planes as well as act metaphysically to injure/destroy negative spiritual entities.

Shimmer and all its related aspects (shine, glare, glimmer, sheen, flash, sparkle, glitter, glaze, luster, flicker, iridescence, etc.) characterize the substances that absorb, emit, reflect, or refract light. This shiny quality manifests through a wide range of materials and objects: mirrors, sequins, glass, pearls, polished metal, shells, stone, tinfoil, water, textiles (silk, velvet, and satin), fire, metallic thread, gemstones, mercury, phosphorus, peacock and other feathers, butterfly and insect wings, etc.). Shimmer may symbolize or embody spiritual forces, but it may also be used to channel, control, diffract, trap, or deflect them.

Spotted (and all its variations: speckled, mottled, brindled, dappled, piebald, etc.) animals, feathers, and clothing often represented or referenced spirit-world beings. This may be related to how these coloration patterns are types of camouflage that, under different lighting conditions, can make animals and objects seem to shape shift, disappear and reappear, or waver, implying an instability or transparency of form.