Archaeology and Belief in the Roman World: an Iconoclast's Approach

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Historical archaeology is an highly interpretive discipline and there exists a tendency to fill in our ignorance of the past with modern preconceptions. An assessment of ancient belief in terms of interpretation, social custom and multi-function of objects illustrates the point. If critical analysis of these issues fades, modern conceptions of religion flourish, giving rise to the application of crude and simplistic parameters for ancient belief. If we apply a more rigorous methodology, it is more apparent that belief in the ancient world is conflated in understanding, imagery and iconography.

Archaeology was once the science of collecting and cataloguing the material evidence of the past. Known as Antiquities, it was the junior sibling to Classics and the two disciplines were expected to function in much the same way as a modern archivist prepares the ground for an historian: the former assembles the text, the latter analyses it. A century of intellectual development has seen archaeology emerge as an interpretive discipline in its own right. Yet herein lies a problem. Whereas much interpretation is sophisticated, there is wide scope to interpret objects in ways which have little bearing on past reality. Bricks and mortar do not speak; material culture and the written word look past each other. Archaeology demands constant awareness of both its own fundamental limitations and our tendency to impose pre-existing bias. It is not to be summoned in order to embellish history with quaint anecdotal vignettes or to vindicate racism, nationalism, gender politics or sheer invention.

The object of this essay is iconoclasm, to break up false images which, if we do not analyse archaeological material critically, flood our minds and construct for us a simple and misrepresentative picture of religion in the ancient world. I shall discuss three aspects of archaeological method — interpretation, social custom and multi-function — before concluding that the material evidence we do have suggests a conflation of ancient belief systems.

In regard to the problem of interpretation, I cite the performer Madonna. Assess a photograph of the early Madonna as you would an artefact on a museum shelf. What do we learn of religious belief? The crucifix is a symbol of piety known from other contexts and the inscription 'Madonna' seals the identification: she is christian. But what is the ritual she practices which does not adhere to any known christian rite? Is it a primeval pagan rite, a fertility goddess invoking Mother Earth? The point is far-fetched, I realise, but imagine the debate raging in the scholarly journals of the future when the only 'evidence' for 'religion' in the twentieth century is a page from *TV Week*. There is a fundamental rule about the archaeology of religion: objects do not have religious beliefs, people do. Religious iconography is not a determiner for absolute belief. There is no way of knowing, on the basis of spoons found among grave goods and inscribed with 'Saulos' and 'Paulos', whether the person buried at Sutton Hoo was a christian. Does the burial of a person with a crucifix today represent the piety of the deceased or the piety of the grieving relative who placed it there?

Social custom is just as relative as interpretation. Much of our physical evidence for the spread of christianity in the ancient world comes from burial practice. Yet does change in burial practice indicate the diffusion of a new belief system, or evolving social custom? People follow certain behavioural patterns because it is expected of them. A daughter may get married in a church, not because she is a believer, but because it is expected of her, because she seeks to please her family, because the tradition and ambience of a church service appeal to her. Although the context of this example is christian, a place of christian worship, the individual herself is not. A church marriage is as much a social custom as a statement of personal piety. Where religion and social custom are blurred, we must not privilege one over the other and construct a superficial picture for the impact and spread of belief.

General trends are observed in the development of burial customs in the Roman world. In the first and second centuries bodies were cremated, but in the third and fourth centuries inhumation became the prevailing rite. It is maintained that inhumation is the method of burial favoured by christians, recalling the supposed 'christian' belief that a person's body had to be buried whole in order to be resurrected whole.[1] However, the change in burial practice happened too early and was too widespread for christianity to have been a direct cause. It is also argued that the general change in orientation within inhumations themselves in the late Roman empire, where burials tend (roughly) to be laid out west-east, reflects the burial wishes of 'christians'. The argument runs that the deceased wanted to face the east in order to sit up and answer the call when the day of judgement is nigh.[2] The thesis is seductive, but we cannot assume that every person who was buried west-east was a christian (the deceased after all would have little say), and when we examine evidence cited for west-east burial in Roman Britain, we find bodies laid out facing the other way, the west, which suggests that the concept of dawn and the Last Day had no bearing on the body's orientation. When we investigate the evidence more closely, we find a number of seemingly 'pagan' features, like decapitated burials, stones placed on the corpses in order to stop them from rising.[3] When we think more deeply, we understand the very belief that the body had to face east in anticipation of the resurrection is late Medieval, and even if we allow the germination of a Medieval idea in the late Roman empire, we cannot be certain that the wider population was aware of it and practiced it as a christian rite.[4] The arguments for the trend from cremation to inhumation and for the west-east orientation of graves as 'christian rites' are general and ill-considered. Why does orientation of the grave not have as much debt to social custom (or topography of burial ground) as to religious belief?

Other trends are cited as 'proof' of the presence of christians. Watts would presume that the burial of infants is the prime criterion to indicate a christian rite in Roman Britain, the result of Christ's teachings and the christian concern for children.[5] Not only is this a questionable proposition (it implies that pagans were not concerned for their children!), it is also a suspiciously simple equation — where there are infant burials there are christians. Watts would contend, on the basis of a passage in Vergil, that the *absence* of hobnail boots from a cemetery indicates the *presence* of a christian identity.[6] Variable factors are glossed over: local dress custom, regional variation, select excavation at select sites, mutating social mores, the probability that distant provincials were not familiar with *Aeneid* Book 6. Arguments from silence (or absence) are always suspect and arguments which canvass religious reasons as the sole explanation for change are mischievous.[7] To state that the above practices are 'christian rites', is to state that the presence of gnomes in one's garden is an 'exotic religious rite' designed to placate garden spirits haunting everyday life in the twentieth century.

When scholars like Watts attempt to delimit belief, that is to use material culture to argue X is christian, Y is pagan, they fall into a methodological trench. They work by the premise that ancient belief systems use certain types of objects, practice certain types of rites to the exclusion of other influences.[8] This assumes that objects are mono-functional and that we isolate the believers if we can only find the object. While this might be true in some cases, it is not true in the majority of cases. A large number of Vikings were buried in Scandinavia with church plate and associated religious objects: were they pious christians or were they itinerant cutthroats who purloined treasure during the Age of Viking attacks on Britain and Europe?[9] A second fundamental rule of archaeology is that objects are more likely to be multi-functional than mono-functional: material is constantly re-used and re-contextualised. Even where a sarcophagus is suggestive of 'christian' sensitivity in its iconography and context, we cannot ascribe categorical belief to it. The sixth-century bishop of Tours, Gregory, records that at a time of persecution pagans enclosed the body of the 'Apostle' Bartholomew in a sarcophagus and flung it into the sea. On its re-discovery, this 'pagan' sarcophagus became an object of 'christian' veneration.[10] Amphorae, the vessel we associate with wine in Antiquity, have been found at Pompeii to contain anchovies, dates and wall plaster.

Space too can be multi-functional and even the holiest sites can be reused and their meanings blurred. Is the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem jewish, christian or islamic? The visitor can admire the Haci Bayram Camii mosque at Ankara in Turkey as the city's most revered place of muslim worship. Yet adjacent to the mosque is a former Byzantine church built on the site of the former Temple of Augustus and Rome, originally dedicated to Cybele, the Anatolian goddess of fecundity. One wall of the pagan temple has the best surviving inscription of 'The Achievements of the Divine Augustus' (*Res Gestae Divi Augusti*). If only the marble block with its public inscription had survived, would we have known that it was a sacred site at all?

The remarkable clarity which distinguishes who is christian and who is pagan in modern archaeological–based scholarship is the result of the modern scholar's detachment from the past. This problem usually arises when questions are framed purely from an historical perspective and archaeology summoned to fill in the gaps without adequate thought or methodology. Moreover, while sloppy methodology is a problem in all periods of historical archaeology, we must also be alive to our own cultural preconceptions. We are heirs to a christian tradition which stressed conversion and the rejection of the Old for the New, whether it be Saul on the road to Damascus or Martin Luther in a thunderstorm. It is a small step for us to delimit religious identities in these terms and then approach

material evidence to seek confirmation. I call this 'looking for Noah's Ark'. It is more foreign for us, yet more meaningful if we want to understand the ancient world, to exorcise from our minds 'conversion' as transformation (literally 'turning away from') and embrace belief as conflation (ie. syncretism).[11]

Burial custom is difficult to interpret for reasons set out earlier, and it is germane to remember that pagan cults continue at the same time as the expansion of christianity. In ancient Britain, for instance, religions do not just arrive and take over from the ones already there. Belief in the native Celtic deities did not cease with the Roman conquest of Britain in AD 43. They often merged as in the case of the temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath, an amalgam of Sulis, a local Celtic water deity in charge of the hot-water spring, and the imported Roman goddess Minerva.[12] As Celtic deities were not replaced by Roman deities, so too pagans were not replaced by christians. Numerous artefacts survive from the Mediterranean world with mixed iconography suggestive of the point: the iconography of Madonna and child filched from Isis and Horus;[13] the appearance of solar imagery on Constantine's coinage long after his conversion;[14] a mosaic found under Saint Peter's which depicts Christ as a Sun-God driving a two-horsed chariot across the sky.[15] Numerous artefacts survive from the northern world with mixed iconography suggestive of the point: the Niederdollendorf grave-stone in the Rhineland which displays serpents on one side and christ on the other;[16] the Franks Casket in the British Museum with scenes portraying Weland the Smith and the Adoration of the Magi;[17] Scandinavian rune stones with crosses in the centre bounded by fettered serpents.[18]

We cannot draw concrete conclusions on the existence of 'christians', 'christian cemeteries' and 'churches'. Not only is the evidence lacking, but it assumes there is a strict dichotomy between pagan and christian. It is more probable that no such dichotomy existed (especially outside the educated priesthood) and that christ was merely added to the existing panoply of pagan deities. The acceptance of christ does not entail the rejection of the pagan gods.

Far from causing the abandonment of paganism, christianity grew out of paganism. Our festival Christmas comes from the pagan festival, 'the Day of the Birth of the Unconquered Sun' (*Dies Solis Invicti Nati*), inaugurated by the Roman emperor Aurelian in 274 and celebrated on 25 December in order to mark the 'nativity' (*natalis*) of the Sun. Worship of *Sol Invictus* was itself a mixture of the Roman imperial cult and Sun-gods imported from the east. Mithras, the Persian god of light, was assimilated with the sun and hence shared the same birthday. *Sol Invictus* gained primacy as the official, universal worship of the late empire, but it gradually gave way to another mystery cult derived from the east. At a time of competition with the solar Mithras, christianity usurped his birthday in order to give definition to the nativity of its own founder, Christos.[19] Christianity rose to prominence on the shoulders of pagan practices and social custom, it was a slow cumulative process rather than a sudden rejection of the Old for the New.[20]

Belief in the Roman world, even belief which tended to be socially exclusive in initiation, is not always exclusive in imagery, iconography, or understanding. We must expect, in particular on the remote periphery of Mediterranean civilisation, a blurring of beliefs within paganism itself between various local and imported deities, and between paganism and mystery religions like christianity. We cannot come to our evidence with preconceptions of what it pagan and what is christian and state blithely 'archaeology proves' X or Y is the case. The hindsight of the twentieth century too often renders something which does not look christian as 'paganism', when in fact, it equally indicates a complex ritual and custom. Christian dogma itself was only formulated (at an intellectual level) in its recognisable catholic form in the late fourth century, and it is anachronistic to project convictions framed from a modern perspective, from the clarity of modern

christian metaphysics and iconography, into the past in order to isolate an exclusive belief system. We must be aware of the constraints of our evidence when much of it is drawn from the relative and inconclusive archaeological record. The emperor Alexander Severus thought of enrolling Christ among the gods, and his private chapel contained a number of statues ranging from his household Lares, to Orpheus, to Christ. Redwald, king of the east Angles, also hedged his bets on the supernatural and worshipped at a temple which contained *both* heathen and christian altars.[21] I suggest Severus and Redwald are typical of Roman world and it is only the dominant discourse of a thousand years of Medieval catholicism, the generic homogeneity of scholarship bereft of methodology, which make us think otherwise.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

NOTES

1. Watts 1991:52

2. Watts 1991: 53-54, 58. Despite the qualification buried on p.238 (n.21), west-east burial is given maximum ranking on the christian identification scale (p.53).

3. This evidence is discussed by Watts 1991: 58-59, 73. She concludes that such inconsistencies are the absorption of pagan practices into 'Christian burials' and the intrusion of pagan elements into 'presumed Christian cemeteries' (pp. 189, 196). The utility of the 'weighting' system employed by Watts, where artefacts and burial rites are given a numerical value on the christian scale, lies in its ability to devalue inconsistent and contradictory evidence. Watts herself has trouble reconciling the inconsistencies: four definitive 'Christian cemeteries' on p. 89 (Cannington, Butt Road II, Colchester and Poundbury 3) become 'presumed Christian cemeteries' on pp. 195-96. The alternative conclusion is that they were neither 'Christian cemeteries' nor 'presumed christian cemeteries' in the first place. The methodology of the weighting system is borrowed from Thomas (1981), who employs it with greater acumen and caution (there is a limit to inferences based on archaeology, p. 23). For a considered introduction to the (slight) evidence of christianity in Roman Britain see Salway 1993:512-29.

4. There could be many factors behind the west-east burial phenomenon, Young 1977:16-24; Rahtz 1978:1-14. We cannot privilege christianity as the sole reason.

5. Watts 1991:38-51. The christian-pagan polarity thus becomes christo-centric and pagans are reduced to the barbaric 'Other', cold-blooded infanticides (p. 49).

6. Watts, 1991:71. The thesis runs that the pagan, forecasting the need for adequate footwear when wandering in the netherworld, was buried in his boots (Watts 1991:70, citing Vergil, *Aeneid* 6. 326-330). Unfortunately, Watts does not cite line 325: *haec omnis, quam cernis, inops inhumataque turba est* (Austin [ed.]1977:11). The reason the crowd of souls wandered the netherworld was because they were poor *and unburied.*

7. The book *Christians and Pagans in Roman Britain* itself is full of howlers: demand for lead tanks booms after the conversion of Constantine, but slows to a trickle in the mid-fourth century when there was no-one left to convert (p. 172); a woman buried with a Y-shaped lump of metal could be either a 'Christian with neo-Pythagorean leanings, or neo-Pythagorean with Christian inclinations' (p. 178); a Roman Catholic canon law of 1917 is 'presumed to go back to the early Church' (p. 50 -the *longue durée* in history?). Reviews of the book have been mixed: contrast the *levitas* of Furlonger (1992) and the *gravitas* of Henig (1992).

8. E.g. 'it is quite likely, too, that *only* baptised Christians or catechumens were interred in Christian cemeteries' (p. 50 [my emphasis]); 'a site may be identified with a reasonable degree of certainty as either Christian or pagan' (p. 38, a list of cemeteries proposed as 'christian' is given on p. 89); or, citing the catacombs in Rome and two sites in North Africa, Watts generalises 'a tradition of separate Christian cemeteries had thus been well established' (p. 64 [it has been established only for the catacombs in Rome and two sites in North Africa!]).

9. Wormald 1982:133, 139-40.

10. Van Dam 1988:34.

11. This is not a new argument (e.g. Ferguson 1970: ch. 12), but its one that has to be restated continually.

12. The bronze head of Minerva found at the site is classical in inspiration and contrasts with the gorgon's head (male with moustache and knotted brow) originally on the pediment of the temple. See further Toynbee 1963:135-36, 163-64 and plates 20 and 96.

13. Ferguson 1970:237.

14. Ferguson 1970:55 and plate 25.

15. Ferguson 1970:237 and plate 86.

16. Ament 1980:54.

17. Fell 1980:30-31.

18. Prof. E. Sharpe pers. comm.

19. Cumont 1956:xvii; Ferguson 1970:239.

20. Cumont, in a traditional yet remarkably fresh book (1909, trans.1956), saw the triumph of christianity as evolution of belief, with Oriental religions central in re-aligning mental horizons. On a different tack, Sharpe lends thought to the cumulative traditions in a northern context which turned salvation in an increasingly christian direction, 1973:246-47.

21. Magie [ed.] 1924:'Severus Alexander' 29.2; King [ed.] 1930:Bede 2.15.

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