Archaeological Approaches to Shamanism:

Mind-Body, Nature, and Culture

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Dragoş Gheorghiu, Emilia Pásztor,
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INTRODUCTION

THE EDITORS

This book discusses both ancient and modern shamanism, demonstrating the extension in time and space of the phenomenon, as well as its diversity. We have taken the unusual stance of dividing the book into three distinct rudiments: Mind-Body, Nature, and Culture (artefacts or their composite materials); all three have clear associations with the concept of shamanism. But, we ask at this juncture, what is shamanism and can tangible evidence be sought from the archaeological record? The various chapters in this volume will answer these questions, albeit in a specific themed way. In order to establish a set of reasonable parameters for a book like this, we turn to a concise definition. Shamanism, according to anthropologist Charlotte Seymour-Smith (1986: 256) is a:

> "[…] Siberian term for a complex of religious and ethnomedicinal beliefs and practices found in widely ranging ethnographic contexts in Asia, Africa and aboriginal America. The shaman is usually defined as a part-time religious specialist, whose abilities are based on direct personal experience. Shamans are usually male but in certain cultures it is possible for a woman to become a shaman. Shamanic experience is generally obtained by means of the use of different kinds of altered-states of consciousness [ASC] which may be related to the use of hallucinogens or to other types of exceptional sensory deprivation or stimulation."

This generic statement clearly defines shamanism as a ritually-symbolic tangible concept. Anthropological and ethnographic evidence in the form of a shamanic performance, along with accompanying artefacts, documentation, film and participant anthropological observation methods (among other tangible elements) point towards a social experience that embraces the whole community (Turner 2005). Shamanism also promotes the concept of a hierarchical society that is steeped in long-term tradition, ancestry and memory – tangible evidence.

Many elements of Siberian rock engravings are argued to be inherited from their Palaeolithic ancestors. It is probable that such engravings behaved as universal symbols which were recognized within certain status

strands of society. Tradition, especially in connection with hunting, must have had an extraordinarily important role in carving the rock pictures, itself an activity based on ritualized folklore semantics.

Fig. 0-1. The principal theme of rock carving is animals. Erdenemandal village, county Arhangai, Mongolia, (Image: E. Pásztor)

The rock drawings were probably used in the early myths and were the first visibly static narratives associated with a belief system (Fig. 0-1). Their creation demonstrates that artists had the notion of using the art with other performance-enhancing elements. It is from these pictographs that archaeologists get the first evidence of cognitive modelling. We regard this phenomenon though as not being specifically evidence of universal shamanic phenomena, but rather, a display for a more localized idiosyncratic shamanism.

The visualisation of shamanism in rock art of Siberia and Central Asia, the region where shamanism is considered the most significant belief system during later prehistory and historical times, is based on the fragmentary evidence (Price 2001).

The most evident shamanic images where a human figure is often depicted with the key shamanic attribute – the drum – are probably only a few centuries old. Some depictions are shown as single figures, whilst others appear in more complex compositions, probably involved in ritual ceremonial events. These truly shamanic-style petroglyphs are often small with some figure measuring just a few centimetres in height. Many such engravings can be found on the exposed rocks of the Sayan and Altai Mountains in southern Siberia and western Mongolia (Rozwadowski 2015).

Evidence of the proverbial shaman figure, as witnessed in the historic record, is notably absent on prehistoric rock art; neither drums nor human figures are represented. This problem is compounded by the fact that there are many engraved figures including astral bodies which clearly confirm the presence of a belief system. The problem here is probably one of different mindsets: one prehistoric, the other, a modern mindset, the two being completely divorced from each other. Our saviour in this problematic scenario is the role of shamanism during later historic times (Rozwadowski 2017).

However, intangible elements included within the shamanic event cannot largely be scientifically explained or quantified. At the centre of this socially-stratified institution is the *body* and the way it contorts, stretches, bends and behaves in the shamanic process. What is witnessed in the shamanic process is the antiphrasis of being mundane (Tolley 2007); here, the body becomes the focus of attention, an instrument of the supernatural. As we will see, throughout this book the [archaeological] body plays a pivotal role in both the actions of the living and the dead. However, the body is not separate from the mind. The Cartesian distinction between mind and body cannot be applied to shamanism. In the present book, this separation was utilized to underline some directions of the research. The dualism of mind/body or culture/nature cannot be applied to shamanism which, itself is a holistic concept, based on numerous symbolic relationships. Shamanism is therefore a relationship (in the sense of interaction, interconnectivity or just simply identity) between humans, objects, animals and supernatural beings (see Viveiros de Castro 1998; Qu, this volume). In this book, dualism and western separation of terms expressed within our title was considered only to emphasise some of the various approaches to shamanism.

Archaeoshamanism: Using Body, Fire, the Soul through Trance

The concept of a shamanic presence within the anthropological record has always been a contentious issue, especially within the field of ritual and religious experience (Anttonen 2007; Price 2011). Based on the authors' research, the tangible concept (rather than merely cultural theory) of shamanism probably has its roots firmly embedded in the early part of the Early Upper Palaeolithic (c. 40,000 cal BP), if not earlier, as the symbolic material culture suggests (see Henshilwood and d'Errico 2011). This period is marked by the emergence from Africa and colonization of the planet by modern humans (*Homo sapiens sapiens*). Tantalizingly, what we see within the anthropological record, in places such as Haiti, India or Siberia, should be occurring during early prehistoric times. We should assume that the mindsets of both ancient and modern systems are similar. This statement is based though on primary levels of social structure/complexity (i.e. loosely following the set of ethics set within the Decalogue [The Ten Commandments] and playing a fundamental role in Judaism, Christianity and Islam). Beneath this set of primary ethics are multiple layers of super-structure which are probably influenced by environment, landscape and sociology (among other fundamental principles). During the Upper Palaeolithic and succeeding Mesolithic period, portable and static art appear to have been the main instruments of the shamanic *toolkit* (Hamayon 1995; Clottes and Lewis-Williams 2001; Clottes 2011; Price 2011: 992; Otte 2016); with numerous examples being depicted on rock, antler, bone and amber.

Although examples of potential shamanic activity from this period of prehistory are limited, there are a number of high-profile discoveries in Europe (and beyond) that suggest possibly a form of shamanism that was influenced by totemic or animistic processes, for example, to cite only the Aurignacian anthropomorphic lion ivory figurine from Höhlenstein-Stadel. Archaeologists have postulated many different scenarios for the twenty-one male red deer frontlets that were found at the early Mesolithic encampment site of Star Carr (northern England); however, considered opinion is they were used as headdresses during some form of shamanic-type ceremony (Little *et al.* 2016; Porr 2004), its resemblance with the costume of the Tungus shaman drawn by Nicolas Witsen in 1705 being a potential analogy. Another piece of evidence from this early period of prehistory could be the Ryemarksgård axe (Fig. 0-2) (Clark 1975; Nash 1998, Nash 2001). Engraved onto this piece of wild aurochs (*Bos Primigenius*) bone from the south Scandinavian Maglemose were five

human figures that appear to be walking towards a set of three zigzag lines. Could one or more of these figures be moving from a mundane world into a trance state (ASC) (Nash 2001)? Evidence for the use of hallucinogens in prehistoric societies comes also from ceramic design; for example in the Starčevo-Criş tradition some globular vases painted in red had the foot and body shaped in the form of the red poppy seed (Gheorghiu 2008: 175).

Although these early prehistoric examples are considered rare, evidence for shamanic activity during later prehistory occurs more frequently, especially in the realm of the dead (Lewis-Williams 2009; Séfériades 2011; Reymann 2015).

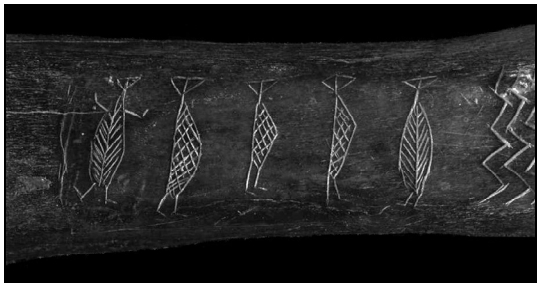

Fig. 0-2. The engraved figures on the Ryemarksgård axe (Zealand, Denmark). Courtesy of the National Museum of Denmark

Neoshamanism

Moving forward into the present, what of neoshamanism? Excavating beyond the modernity of the rave culture, one can trace elements of a ritualised mindset associated with pre- and post-performance within many rave/festival events. In terms of the material culture, many of the artefacts and potential intangible materiality present within the archaeological record also occur in the neoshamanic event: [bodily] stance, dance, dress-code, language, narcotics, sexual coding and repetitive music. The narcotic of choice for the neoshaman is MDMA. The ingestion of such a drug provides the raver with an exhilarating high rate of bodily stimulation. It can be argued that the rave-package that includes mainly loud repetitive music, narcotics and the body are accelerated into another world, what we would, in terms of sociological practice, refer to as Altered States of Consciousness (ASC). In many respects and an irony to this volume is the fact that observation on western rave culture should provide potential answers to what may have been practiced many thousands of years

previously. If we look carefully at the engraved narrative on the Ryemarksgård axe, are we witnessing a trance state that is induced by dance, music and hallucinogenic narcotics?

Methods of Research

Quite rightly so, papers presented in the book acknowledge the sometimes tentative links between the anthropological and ethnographic records and archaeology, what we would identify as *analogy*. And, not far from the minds of the editors, were the issues of drawing a clear-line between the three disciplines. In 1998, archaeologists Paul Taçon and Christopher Chippindale promoted the idea of *informed* methods and *formal* methods whereby exists tangible and intangible evidence. In anthropological terms, researchers rely on direct contact (visual or otherwise) with the performer(s) and the event/performance; this direct contact is referred to by Taçon and Chippindale as *informed methods* and has been used extensively by rock art researchers in Australia. *Formal* methods though are faced with indirect or severed links with the past. Here, archaeologists rely on a fragmentary archaeological resource; this resource (or tangible evidence) could be a single artefact such as a death mask or figurine (or fragments thereof). What can we meaningfully say about these artefacts? This form of intangible evidence is more problematic and can only be considered where the survival of the archaeological record is good.

Like a stage production, the body requires props; and in the case of a shamanic performance, the props would have included the paraphernalia associated with rank and status of the shaman, such as body adornment (dress, jewellery, intentional body disfigurement, body paint, body scaring, body tattooing - see Fig. 0-3), intangible repetitive actions such as chanting, poetry and singing, and the '*stage*' - a platform on which a shamanic event would take place.

The ambiance of the surroundings would have played a significant role in the success of a shamanic display/event. Ambiance in anthropological terms can include the soundscape (chanting, music etc.), the visuality of the event, including the use of body movement, shadows and the strategic use of light (fire). We ask here, were these ambient devices present in prehistory?

Fig. 0-3. The reconstruction of a prehistoric (shaman?) costume, Vienna Museum of Natural Sciences (Image: D. Gheorghiu)

Again, the editors of this book have been careful to draw on these ambient elements, but at the same time, considering the archaeoshamanic issues that haunt the physical limits of the archaeological record.

Shamanism has been associated with healing practices for a very long time (Price 2001), its specific states such as ASC and related symbolism have also been identified in different cultural zones.

During the healing ritual process the shaman would have had travelled frequently to the Upper Worlds. Ethnographical records show how complex the story of the "Heavenly journey" could be, with only most powerful and experienced shamans knowing how to reach the highest levels of Heaven. They would have made this journey either by transforming into a bird or with the help of their bird-shaped spirits. This moment of ASC may have been frozen into the archaeological record (Guba-Szeverény 2007). (Fig. 0-4)

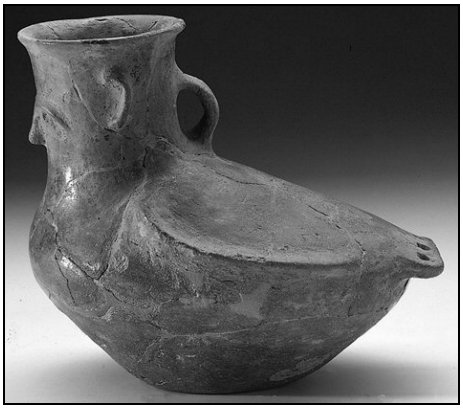

Fig. 0-4. Human–bird [hybrid] *askos* from the Middle Bronze Age cemetery of Tiszafüred-Majoroshalom, Courtesy of Hungarian National Museum.

During the earlier part of the Bronze Age bird-shaped objects were produced in a variety of bird types; however, during the Late Bronze Age their representation becomes more standardized and waterfowl becomes the dominant design. This difference clearly indicates a process of change, probably the result of a change in the belief system. This change appears to occur during the Late Bronze Age when bird figurines, regardless of the species and their individual characteristics, play an important role within the ritual world. The leading role appears to have been given to aquatic birds. Ethnographical records seem to support the notion that such birds were capable to move between each of the cosmological spheres, such as water, land and air. Arguably, these mythical birds became the symbolical essence of the late prehistoric cosmology.

The well-known and dominant Late Bronze Age sun-bird-barge (’Vogelbarke’) motif of Central Europe representing aquatic birds that accompany or guide the sun, clearly demonstrate how the bird, the sun (Pásztor 2017) and indirectly, the shamans, constitute the basic elements of late prehistoric cosmology. The sun, moon and other heavenly symbols were therefore common topics of shamanic beliefs and stories (Pásztor 2011). The solar-headed beings of the Tamgaly Valley in south-eastern Kazakhstan or of Saimaly-Tash, a high mountain pass in the Fergana Mountains (part of the Tien Shan), demonstrate possible shamanic contexts with their relationship with other petroglyph sites. Also in ancient Indian sacred text of the Rig Veda, the sun appears to be a metaphor for ecstatic experience, which was a privilege of priests who achieved the ritual ecstasy through drinking sacred hallucinating drink soma. Therefore,

the sun-headed figures in Saimaly-Tash created within the context of the Indo-Iranian culture could be graphic metaphors of ritual ecstasy (Rozwadowski 2017).

The significance of the sun and the bird in the belief systems of the eastern region of later prehistoric Europe and later in the contemporary Middle East shows a stronger attachment to nature than a world inhabited by divine beings. This also confirms the argument that shamanism should also be taken into consideration in studying the diverse European Bronze Age/prehistoric belief system.

The metal and clay artefacts with celestial symbolism and endowed with magical powers were all conceived in fire. Not only gold but also the new bronze objects represented the celestial fire; both their function and creation may have a relationship with shamanism. The fire as the earthly manifestation of the sun also claimed a special role in shamanistic ceremonies. Smiths had magical powers and were also frequently the shamans of the community.

A new area of research in the relationship with shamanism, which is approached in the present book, is the phenomena known as pyrotechnics (Pyne 2001: 119 *ff.*) or *pyrotechnologies*. The technology of fire implies a standardized approach which is determined by the principles of physics. When correctly observed, it can induce a relationship of agency (and consequently, kinaesthetic and visual ergonomics) on the performer which, due to its intensity and duration, may lead to states of ASC.

Use of fire in various operations was and is also an attribute of shamanic practices. Being simultaneously both material and phenomenal, fire can also influence both the body and mind of the operator. Fire produces alchemical changes of materials, provokes trances and voyages of the soul. The physical and technological aspects of fire could produce ritual states akin to standardized stages of the pyrotechnologies employed in ceramic and metal production (Fig. 0-5).

Fig. 0-5. A furnace for iron ore melting. Experiment coordinated by Dragoş Gheorghiu in Ţaga, Romania (Image: D. Gheorghiu)

The transformation during later prehistory of metal production in furnaces and ceramics in kilns appeared to be a mystery. However, as observed in diverse Indo-European mythologies, the technologists-shamans lost their magical prestige over time, although some populations still consider smiths to be related to the shaman (Childe and Killick 1993: 237). To understand the shamanic experience of pyrotechnologies, experiential archaeologies could be an efficient instrument when examining the relationship between the experience and senses of a modern performer; in comparison with the processes that generate ASC: generating a repetitive rhythm, intensive concentration and a plethora of sounds (see Gheorghiu 2011).

Native American people believed in an animate universe with no separation between human beings and nature, a spirit-filled realm based on an animistic and phenomenological 'sense' of the natural world, and their position within it. Within this universe, people acknowledged a special relationship with animals, in particular the [spiritual] way they communicated with certain species (Debelius 1992, Olsen 1998). Permission to hunt, seeking healing methods and transformation would have been a prerequisite before any hunt, seeking a cure or travel. This process would have been initiated through shamanistic practices where direct contacts between the shaman and the animal would have occurred. Individual shamanic power was gained through a spirit animal that was revealed in a dream or vision (Grim 1983). Transformation of the shaman into another form whilst in a deep trance could last for days with little or no evidence of hallucinogenic drugs ever being used or needed (Conway 1990).

The anthropological and ethnographic evidence for this is widespread. Stories of bears that included body and species transformation are found across much of North America. All have deep and ancient roots, likely to be part of the ancient circumpolar bear cult traditions that filtered in from the Old World (see also Pentikäinen 2006). Surviving traditions indicate that, through transformation, the bear cult practitioners, many of them women, obtained healing abilities by metaphysically becoming bears. Transformation was immediate upon donning a bear skin or mask.

The c. 2500 year-old bear shaman figurine discovered at the giant earthworks in Newark, Ohio, sometimes called the *Shaman of Newark*, is one of the most graphic examples of this transformation process. The figurine depicts a person becoming the bear by donning the bear skin. Because of what some interpret as breasts on the figurine, some scholars consider the figure to be a woman who is being transformed into the bear. Of interest, the giant earthwork at Newark where the figurine was discovered is aligned to the lunar maximum moonrise.

Mimicking she-bear behaviour, the metaphysical transformation into a bear could be benevolent or feared depending on the person or need for shape-shifting. Mainly therianthropic, it seldom, if ever, represented the 'classic' shamanistic model of ASC associated with soul travel to the upper or lower worlds. Often, a more symbolic connection to the moon and the 'bear stars' was incorporated by indicating the realm of the bear in both the lower and upper worlds, each a reflection of the other. Classic Midé or Grand Lodge ghost scrolls depicted the mirror image of a crescent moon with a crescent-shaped bear entering into its den, the constellation is known as Corona Borealis (Dewdney 1975). The den where the she bear gives birth to its cubs is another of the feminine attributes of the bear.

One such place where this association can be observed is at a bear effigy mound located in southern Wisconsin (Bender, this volume). The bear effigy mound proper is aligned to face the southernmost lunar maximum moonset and, together with other rock alignments, visually cues where to observe the northernmost lunar maximum moonset overlooking the bear effigy mound. The lunar maximum occurs every 18.61 years and was last observed in December, 2006. If the daytime sky could be 'switched off' to show the stars at night overlooking the bear effigy mound, the setting moon would be seen to enter into the constellation of Corona Borealis above it, i.e. the Bear's den. Transformation of the observed shape of the moon disk and surrounding landscape during the moonset event would have assisted in completing this example of the American Indian perspective of the universe (Fig. 0-6).

Fig. 0-6. Leola One Feather with friend Michelle Salvatore standing by what is likely a bear effigy mound located in south-eastern Wisconsin. Both women live on the (Lakota) Pine Ridge Reservation, South Dakota. Leola's ancestors were noted Bear women and midwives, a hereditary tradition she carries on (Image: H. Bender).

What the Papers Say

In the first section of the book (*the* MIND), shamanism is presented as a mental attitude, a producer of semiotic codes made up of signs and symbols (Hoppál) that can be approached through the animist ontological theory (Qu). At the same time, shamanism can be identified beside ritual actions that are related to healing and also in the cognitive aspects of ancient technologies (Gheorghiu).

Shaman-like mental experience could also be detected in contemporary societies (Nash) - today rave events could conceivably repeat the collective experience of ancient Scythian populations described by Herodotus, in bringing large groups of [young] people together to form a collective experience. The motives of such a gathering can be considered contradictory in that the 'self', the body, is an individualistic device that should control *its* own destiny. Arguably though, the gathering has a collective aim, to practise the rites of passage, from the mundane to the supernatural (usually over the weekend!)

The out-of-this-world mental voyages reveal a dual mind that is embodied and dis-embodied (metaphorically speaking). In the second part (*the* BODY), the human or animal body goes through a mental process that is heavily influenced by symbolization, creating bonds between the body and the Cosmos, as well as via the acknowledgement and fusing onto various media anthropomorphic and therianthropic imagery (Bender, Kaixi, Pásztor). This mental virtual transformation may be represented by the half animal-half human figurines that are found within a European prehistoric context, among them are birds that are hybridized with other animal species; this form of visual display is considered unique (Pásztor).

The human body is not separated from the rest of creation/nature; moreover, it is in a relationship with animals and the heavenly constellations (Bender).

The representation of the gendered human body together with animal bodies that have an animistic role and could therefore also have a shamanic character as well (Kaixi, Pásztor).

The repertoire of prehistoric figures combining human-bird and bird-animal themes may have intended to express the concept of mythical beasts. Similarly, the Eurasian shamans put on special animal clothing to activate the powers of another body or entity. The Bronze Age bird *askos* with two breast-like ornaments is unique; however, with its numerous Neolithic antecedents it emphasizes the significance of femaleness through mental transformation.

Shamanism represents a state of deep integration of humans in Nature (*the* NATURE). The shaman is a mediator between Earth and Sky (Anders, Pásztor) through rites and the use of certain paraphernalia that would have had a deep association with Nature.

Transforming into the form of a bird or half-bird, the shaman would have made contact with the inhabitants of the various celestial spheres. The bird-shaped vessels or figures participating in rituals may have symbolized the journey from earth to the sky. Also, the bird-shaped Bronze Age pendants hanging on the ritual clothing of the religious mediators, similar to those on the historic shamanic garments, represented the *helping* spirits.

Such a strong dialectical relationship between Nature and Culture (Séfériades) could be archaeologically observed in the material culture; however, we hasten to add that context is paramount in the way artefacts were deposited.

The ARTEFACT (or MATERIAL) is the final stage of the analysis of the shamanic experience, representing the main subject for the research of the archaeologist. Although the archaeological material within a prehistoric context cannot fully identify a shamanic belief system, there is theoretical discourse that can do so, along with understood ideologies that exist within the anthropological and ethnographic records. Despite the controversial debate concerning the use of anthropological and ethnographic data, the presence or influence of ideologies associated with ancient religions are also rendered problematic. Therefore, if the role of the shaman in a historic or contemporary context appears to replicate the evidence of shamans of the Bronze Age, we may consider, albeit in a rather tentative way, parallel ideologies. Artefacts could be symbolic objects suggesting for instance the trance-flight under a bird form (Pásztor).

The materiality of some bronze objects could suggest solar light or the colours perceived during a trance state. Artefacts made from shiny materials such as bronze or copper could function as shamanic paraphernalia or specific ritual instruments (Hasanov).

All these objects with symbolic value serve the individual during his/her lifetime, but also in the afterlife, being included in the funerary inventory and symbolical architecture (Hasanov).

Many funerary customs of the nomadic populations reveal shamanic traits (e.g. Hasanov, Yatsenko) and a famous example is the Pazyryk Necropolis (Yatsenko). Each of the contributors has tentatively and skilfully argued the case for archaeoshamanic practices to be present

within the archaeological record, albeit based using limited evidence and through analogy.

As a conclusion and pertinent to this volume, the shamanic relationship Mind-Body-Nature-Culture reveals the existence of a special mental experience that transcends time and space, constituting an inseparable unity.

The main goal of this volume has been to present a multi-vocal discourse of a way of life that has left only a fragmentary record of its past. Clearly there is an enormous gap between shamanic practices of later prehistory and the present. On a more primary level though, one can see distinct similarities with examples within the anthropological and ethnographic records.

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