



Identifying residences of ritual practitioners in the archaeological record as a proxy for social complexity



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ABSTRACT

Dedicated ritual specialists often had indispensable roles in ancient religions and significant impacts on political histories. Few studies have developed methodologies for recovering direct evidence for ritual practitioners in the archaeological record. I argue that the study of religious practitioners must take a holistic micro-scale approach, documenting not only the places where ritual paraphernalia (sacra) were stored, but places where priests and their assistants lived and practiced intimate and communal rituals. I begin with a discussion of ethnohistoric and ethnographic data to model what priests did in ancient societies, and what the material correlates of their dwellings and activities might look like. I then present archaeological data from two late prehistoric house sites identified as priest dwellings from East Polynesian. Utilizing multiple lines of evidence, including portable artifacts, botanical specimens, site architecture, and site distribution patterns, I argue that there is close complementarity between the ethnohistoric–ethnographic model and the archaeological remains. That priests' houses are often situated within corporate ritual centers speaks to the import of such sites and their associated ceremonial activities in the strategic use ideology to institutionalize social hierarchies and political status, a pattern seen in many other ranked societies in Polynesia and other case studies world-wide.

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1. Introduction

Religions worldwide have been used as a source of power for rulers of complex societies and states, oftentimes in conjunction with political and economic institutions (Earle, 1989; Emerson, 1997). Religious change can have broad ramifications, not only in the ideological realm, but in socio-economic and political structures (Shaw, 2013). The development of dedicated religious specialists (i.e., priests) is an important factor leading to increased social complexity in chiefdoms, states, and empires (Steadman, 2009). Indeed, the advent of full-time ritual specialists can be considered as a proxy for social complexity, as more complex ritual ceremonies necessitated more complex ritual specialist hierarchies (Redmond and Spencer, 2008). In a similar manner, the level of social complexity found within religious cults or priesthoods can be associated with the level of complexity of the larger society itself (Blenkinsopp, 1995; Hayden, 2003). Formalization of hierarchies within the ritual specialist class, in turn, enhanced the prestige of the office, making ritual specialists indispensable (Blenkinsopp, 1995), and highlighting the important role that religious practitioners played in the political histories of polities.

While some studies have modeled ways in which ritual practitioners can be identified in the archaeological record, most notably through contexts where they led rituals and used objects emblematic of their posts (sacra), few studies have developed methodologies for recovering direct evidence for ritual practitioners in the archaeological record, such as the dwellings where they lived, the topic of the present paper. In part, this reflects the relative youth of sustained archaeological interest in studying religion and identifying ritual practices in the material record. Yet, for many, ritual is a topic well suited to archaeology, for if we define ritual as regularized, patterned performance (Bell, 2009: 94) linked to collective beliefs (Insoll, 2004), such activities often leave patterned traces that can preserve in the archaeological record (Fogelin, 2008). Yet, many studies have focused on ritual as the event to be studied (Fogelin, 2007; McCoy, 1999, 2008; see Insoll, 2004 for a critique), rather than investigating the role of the ritual practitioner which, I argue, is another fruitful avenue for archaeological research.

Perhaps the most common material correlates of ancient religion which archaeologists examine include integrated settlement pattern data, construction sequences of religious monuments, and evidence for associated ritual activities at such sites, including animal or human sacrifices, offerings to the gods, or feasting (Demarrais et al., 1996; Flannery and Marcus, 1993; Kolb, 1992,

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1994, 2011; Marcus, 1978; McCoy et al., 2011; Rakita, 2009; Redmond and Spencer, 2008). These can be considered top-down approaches, as they derive from political economy models, whereby political elites support or control the construction of large monuments as a means of reinforcing the social order. In contrast, there has been little archaeological discussion of ritual specialists and what particular roles they might have played in religion, despite ethnohistoric accounts suggesting the importance of full-time ritual specialists world-wide. While past studies have focused on the ways in which the material record can inform on past experiences of ritual participants (Fogelin, 2007), be they elite leaders or commoners, many have ignored the primary role that ritual specialists played in leading individualistic and communal rituals (Fogelin, 2003; Kahn, in press; Rakita, 2009) and their linkage to larger socio-economic and political processes.

Full-time priests emerged in many sedentary complex societies and performed standardized ceremonial rites mediating between the supernatural and the sacred. They form one end of the shaman–priest continuum (Fogelin, 2007; Rakita, 2009); however, priests represent more formalized, often ascribed full-time positions, whereas shamans, most commonly found in less-integrated hunter–gatherer societies, were part-time specialists who commonly sought altered states of consciousness in achieved positions. While some complex societies retain elements of shaman–priest rulers (Hayden, 2003), it is often full-time occupational specialists such as priests who emerge as important socio-ritual elites. Examining full-time ritual occupational specialization is then key to understanding socio-political transformations in complex societies.

Identifying specialized religious facilities such as priests' houses is one avenue for determining whether a particular society had ritual specialists (Emerson, 1997). I argue that a study of religious practitioners must take a holistic micro-scale approach, documenting not only the places where ritual paraphernalia (sacra) were stored, but places where priests and their assistants lived and practiced intimate and communal rituals. For some time, archaeologists have discussed the material correlates of ritual, including ritual objects used by specific cults or ritual practitioners and ceremonial features, such as altars (Blenkinsopp, 1995; Dozier, 1965; Emerson, 1997; Flannery, 1976; Mills, 2004; VanPool, 2009). While heads of priesthoods or cults often owned masks, paraphernalia, ceremonial costumes, and other specialized objects (Knight, 1986; Mills, 2004), examining the context of where such objects are stored gives us little idea of the role of ritual specialists (Blenkinsopp, 1995).

Some have argued that archaeological materials relating to religion and ritual are fragmentary (Fogelin, 2007); I contend that the houses of ritual practitioners might be less so and should be identifiable in the archaeological record. As both the dwellings of priests and as places where they conducted religious rituals and organized social events such as feasts, ritual specialists' houses inform us of the lives and roles of priests on a daily basis in contrast to archaeological remains found at monumental religious sites. After modeling what priests did in ancient societies, and what the material correlates of their dwellings and activities might look like, I present archaeological data from two late prehistoric house sites identified as priest dwellings from East Polynesian contexts. The first derives from household archaeology excavations in the 'Opunohu Valley, island of Mo'orea, Society Island archipelago. The second derives from household archaeology excavations in the Kahikinui region, island of Maui, Hawaiian archipelago. Drawing from multiple lines of evidence, including portable artifacts, botanical specimens, site architecture, and site distribution patterns, I argue that there is close complementarity between the ethnohistoric–ethnographic model and the archaeological remains. Finally, I argue that in-depth knowledge of the specific lifestyles of ritual

practitioners allows archaeologists to tackle other important questions related to the advent of occupational specialization and political hierarchies. For example, what was the degree of priests' day to day involvement in ritual, economic, and political spheres and to what degree did ritual occupational specialists differ in social status from political rulers? In turn, these data can be used to assess the role that ritual elaboration and the formalization of religious practices had in relation to the elaboration of social complexity.

2. Household archaeology and defining social variability

With the advent of micro-scale household archaeology, greater variability in ancient house sites has been detected than expected from the ethnographic and ethnohistoric record and archaeological models (Allison, 2001; Carballo, 2011; Carpenter et al., 2012; De Lucia and Overholtzer, 2014; Guengerich, 2014; Kahn, 2005; Levine, 2011; Nash, 2009; Pluckhahn, 2010; Robin, 2003). This is, in part, linked to social variability, such as gradations in status and rank, including lesser ranked chiefs or lineages, gender, or occupational specialization, that is not noted in historic accounts and ethnographies. In addition, historic accounts sometimes present “ideals” or normative views of ancient dwellings and social relations that lack subtle distinctions seen in every-day life, where rigid dichotomies of social class and access to resources were negotiated on a daily basis. Current archaeological analyses of status roles have moved away from simple dichotomies (elite versus commoner) that can mask social identities (Casella and Fowler, 2005; Voss, 2005) to highlight variability found both within and among classes and how class is socially negotiated in a dynamic fashion (Dobres and Robb, 2005; Levine, 2011).

Priests' houses serve as one aspect of the architecture of ideology (Emerson, 1997), providing a window into both prehistoric religious systems and variability in social status. Many complex societies, especially those with formalized religious systems which included differentially ranked priests, afforded ritual specialists with some form of high social status, yet this differed by culture and regional context. Given their special social status, and the unique activities that they carried out on a daily and annual basis, residences of full-time priests should be identifiable with the large scale horizontal excavations that characterize household archaeology. In developing a more rigorous methodology for studying ritual, Marcus (2007) argued for a focus on “meaningful contexts” and completion of large scale horizontal exposures to recover caches of ritual objects and activity areas (for a hunter–gatherer perspective see Hrynick and Betts, 2014). Such a bottom-up perspective draws on the strengths of household archaeology while allowing for a contextualized approach to identifying ritual practitioners in the archaeological record.

3. Research goals

My goal is to develop a structured middle-range approach that connects archaeological data with formalized ritual practitioners. The aim is to increase the rigor of studies into ancient religions by clearly defining connections between data and priests' activities. Drawing from ethnohistoric and archaeological data world-wide, I begin by outlining the significant roles that priests played in ancient religion. I develop a cross-cultural model for what priests did and what particular roles they played. I then discuss the activities that priests carried out with sacra and the relationships of these activities and priests' dwellings to formalized religious centers. The model illustrates how, in many ancient societies, priests' houses can be expected to be incorporated into, or nearby, ritual centers. But how can we specifically identify the houses of full time ritual specialists in the archaeological record

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