6. Ritual and Archaeology in Early Latium

by Christopher Smith

Introduction

In a recent collection of papers on ritual and archaeology (Garwood et al. 1991), the editors highlight the absence of a theoretical discussion of ritual in the context of historical archaeology and of the epistemological and methodological qualities that distinguish prehistory and history with regard to ritual and religion. They go on to say 'it is the problem of symbolism and meaning which seems, above all, to distinguish prehistoric and historic approaches to ritual in archaeology. In the latter it appears to be possible to come to complex understandings of the particular referents in symbolism and the particular beliefs which ritual expressed, offering a far richer field for the detailed contextual analysis of relationships between beliefs and human actions than is imaginable for prehistory' (ibid: ix).

In this paper I would like to offer some thoughts on this issue, and to raise some questions about the difficulties, often underplayed, of studying ritual in a historic period. The particular example which I will be using is that of Rome and its hinterland Latium from around 1000 BC across the appearance of literacy and relatively reliable written accounts into the Republic (this period is the subject of my forthcoming book on early Rome and Latium). I would like to begin by discussing some recent theoretical approaches to the study of ritual.

Theoretical Approaches

Ritual has been interpreted in various ways over the past decades. In previous times, a functionalist approach was favoured, implying that the ritual was intended to promote the solidarity of the group (described in Turner & Maryanski: 1979, as an 'illegitimate teleology'). It is difficult to see how this causation worked in practice — solidarity may be an effect but it is not therefore a cause — and such accounts tend to be reductionist. Similar objections are raised to interpretations that identify the symbolic contents of a ritual and link them in some kind of quasi-theological discourse. The ambiguity and complexity of symbols are denied by such intellectualising approaches, and even subtle accounts such as those of Turner (1967; 1969) and Geertz (1973: chapter 3) tend to imply that symbols and rituals have some kind of existence of their own (See for instance Turner 1967: 20: 'the ritual symbol becomes a factor in social action, a positive force in an activity field. The symbol becomes associated with human interests, purposes, ends, and means, whether these are explicitly formulated or have to be inferred from the observed behavior. The structure and properties of a symbol become those of a dynamic entity, at least within its appropriate context of action').

This approach was criticised in an important article by Asad, which examined Geertz's attempt to find a universal definition of religion (Asad 1983). Asad contrasted the view of symbols as 'meaning-carrying objects external to social conditions and mental states', with his own conception of them as focused on 'the relations between socially signifying and psychologically organising principles'.

Asad could not find in Geertz's account anything that ensured that the participants in a ritual take the symbolic forms in the way that leads to faith (Asad is writing in the context of Medieval Christianity, so for our pagan purposes, we might replace 'faith' with 'belief'). 'The connection between religious theory and practice,' writes Asad, 'is fundamentally a matter of power — of disciplines *creating* religion, interpreting true meanings, forbidding certain utterances and practices and authorising others' (Asad 1983: 246).

Ritual symbols and ritual experiences are not separate from social realities, and ritual does not of itself create belief; rather the disposition must be present in the participants. Such dispositions are created by knowledge and instruction; authoritative religious practices and utterances are 'products of historically distinctive disciplines and forces' (Asad 1983: 251).

Bloch has gone some way towards identifying the historical conditions behind certain religious practices in his account of the circumcision ritual of the Merina of Madagascar, by taking over two centuries of development of the ritual, through a number of changing political situations (Bloch 1986). The practice of the ritual through these two hundred years remains remarkably static, but the use of the ritual changes dramatically; it began as a ritual performed by the elders of localised descent groups, was taken over by the king as a royal ritual when a powerful state arose, and the descent group was forbidden, and then returned to the descent groups after the French conquest as a symbol of resistance to colonialism.

In an extremely suggestive article, Harrison has used this case, together, with among others, the *evocatio* ritual in Rome as an indication of the way in which rituals can be seen as a form of intellectual property (Harrison 1992). They are, he suggests, rather like luxuries in that their uses are rhetorical and social; they can be owned, and the ownership of them is a part of the social inequality of a society. Rituals are forms of knowledge that have no existence outside their practice, but this practice can be controlled and manipulated through social and psychological relations between the actors.

Asad and Bloch present ritual in a way that is significantly different from the presentation given in the functionalist writers, and the symbolist/intellectualist accounts we have briefly touched on. Their focus is on historical conditions, and on authorising discourses and the way in which power creates religion.

This leads me directly to Barrett's accounts of ritual, which have similar concerns (Barrett 1988; 1991; 1994). Barrett wishes to see material remains as the 'fields of discourse' in which ritual, among many other things, takes place. Together with social relations they form the conditions within which certain forms of knowledge become possible.

The approach is consonant with Giddens' focus on the way in which the structured and knowledgeable actions of human agents can be observed reproducing the institutionalised form of the social system. The social world is constructed through action, but action is constrained by this created world. The process is thus essentially recursive (Giddens 1984).

If the subject for study is taken then to be structure, what is this structure, and how is it manifested? Rather like ritual, it does not have an existence independent of action; it is in fact contained within memory and certain repeated actions, and also, as Bourdieu stressed, in material locales (Bourdieu 1977: 89). Material space is the place where social practices are performed by agents who refer constantly to their locale; this sphere is acculturated; it is drawn upon for meaning and invested with meaning by human action.

So what the archaeologist finds, be it standing stones, sanctuaries or votive deposits must be interpreted as the locale for knowledgeable action. Moreover, agents move from one area of

time and space into another, and take with them their preconceptions and understandings, which are modified and changed by the new locale, as well as contributing towards the knowledge of that locale and the action which takes place there. Although this might seem evident, it is in fact quite the opposite from an approach where ritual is seen as something of a quite different self-standing identity to the rest of the world and life. Ritual and religious knowledges are built out of the same conditions, material and social, as the rest of life, even if they appear to refer to a different kind of reality.

Ritual is often described as a form of communication (see Lewis 1980: 6–38, for a careful analysis of this analogy). Communication rests on a communality of expectations, which emerge from shared cultural conditions. Speaker and listener share certain experiences, and bring others to the moment of communication in order to be able to understand and be understood. Part of this shared experience is described by Bourdieu as 'habitus'. Habitus is defined as a set of dispositions; it is learnt as a child, neither unconsciously nor by rote, but by observing a systematic application of principles which are coherent in practice, for instance the gift exchange. Once attained these habitus give a repertoire for dealing with the world, which reproduces the world in which the child has been brought up (Lewis 1980: 72). Asad gives a similar kind of account when he uses Vygotsky's work, which indicated that the development of children's intellect is dependent on the internalisation of social speech, within which the symbols that are in recursive use in society are central (Asad 1983: 240).

Ritual must be seen as part of this world of knowledgeable action and culturally derived expectations. One consequence of this is that it forces us to question the idea that rituals are used to present a falsehood about the world masked as a truth, which sustains the dominant ideology; that people are duped. Rather we need to identify the knowledges which reproduce social asymmetries like inequality. These knowledges are precisely part of the authorising discourse which Asad sought to identify, and they are reflected in and partly constituted by the material world within which they are acted out.

There is something special about ritual however, and Bloch's account of the way a certain set of actions can remain largely (though not entirely) static whilst the context changes radically is an important indication of this. Although ritual participates in the discourse of the real world, in that those who are involved bring their knowledge of that world to the ritual, and the ritual draws on the material world around, it has a sense of timelessness.

This is really what lies behind the truism that Roman religion is conservative. The ritual may be conservative, but the context changes over time, and thus the meanings which the ritual has for the participants change; their perception of what is happening in the ritual alters. In fact, it is possible that the static nature of Roman ritual may itself have been overplayed.

One of Barrett's ideas is to draw a distinction between 'talk', which involves immediate contact, and 'text', which introduces the idea of distanciation, that is the existence of a higher or at least an absent authority which has produced the object to be read (Barrett 1991: 4; 1993: 78). Ritual refers to a different reality, and individuals measure their experience of the world against this other reality. They have to submit to the discipline of a traditional discourse which involves everyday values but presents them as emanating from another source.

One problem here is that both the idea of timeless rituals and of 'text' tend to underplay the degree to which ritual is open to processes of change and transformation in and of themselves. This is an unfortunate though I think unintended consequence of Barrett's use of text as a metaphor for understanding ritual; one would have to say that the 'text' is recreated

and transformed by each performance; that although it involves the concept of distanciation, the text is not necessarily unchanging (I owe this point to comments made at the conference).

Ritual or religious symbols cannot do all the work, as Geertz and Turner seem to imply; they must work in the context of agents who have disciplined themselves to submit to the experience and who recreate the experience by their participation.

That the disposition to obedience, wherever its distant origins may lie, comes to be a part of the observable behaviour of people in all periods, prehistoric and historic, attests the centrality of habitus, and it is the presence of authorizing discourses as the mode of perpetuating religion that gives ritual its strength. As Harrison and Bloch show, ritual, or the specific knowledge that is ritual, can be passed from person to person; it is, as Bloch said, essentially recoverable for all dominant leaders.

Let us move into historical period and consider the spread of literacy. A recent exhaustive account (Harris 1989; see also Cornell 1991) suggests that literacy beyond the ability to write one's own name may not have extended beyond 15% of the population at any time during antiquity, and was almost certainly even less common in the early Republic. The major implication of literacy in this period must have been the widening of social distance; it is another acquisition, like a luxury good, whose uses are rhetorical, social and divisive.

At some stage, some prayers may have been written down; we know this for instance from the archaic prayer of the Arval Brethren, which survives in inscriptions several centuries later than its first use (see Sheid 1991; Beard 1985). It was written down when it was practically incomprehensible, but its continued use is part of the discourse, particularly prevalent in the early Empire, by which the Romans rooted their social practices in the authoritative past. This also made it the subject of antiquarian investigation, and this has broader implications.

Paganism did not fade away to leave a gap for mystery religions and Christianity to fill; it remained a coherent system of belief long after Constantine's conversion (for the continuation of paganism see, for instance, Cameron 1993: 77ff). It did become the object of an intellectualist discourse, though, and this changed it. When one reads Ovid's *Fasti*, we see the kinds of interpretation which were being applied; aetiological stories, false etymologies, and syncretism (see Porte 1985).

Take for instance the Robigalia festival, which was intended to ward off mildew from the crops (on the Robigalia, see Ovid *Fasti* 4. 905ff; Scullard 1981: 108ff. I hope to expand on this subject elsewhere). In his account of this, Ovid is remarkably inaccurate. He says that Sirius was rising on 25th April, when in fact it was setting. He is confusing about where the festival takes place. He explains the sacrifice of a dog, an unusual sacrifice in the Roman world, as simply connected with the description of Sirius as the Dog Star. The origins of this description may be Greek rather than Roman, and it is interesting that Ovid fails to point out that dogs have a number of connotations with protection and with the Underworld. Ovid reports a prayer made by the priest at the festival, and in it equates the rust on the crops with the rust on weapons; let weapons rust rather than the crops, for this is an age of peace, is the gist. This is clearly connected with Augustan imagery of the cessation of war. Instances like this could be mutiplied from Ovid and others (*Res Gestae Divi Augusti* 13; Virgil *Georgics*; Fraenkel 1957: 239f; Chisholm & Freguson 1981: 50–89; Ovid *Fasti* 1. 67–68). I do not wish to suggest that all of these interpretations are untrue, but rather that they betray kinds of thinking about religion which are worryingly reductionist.

One could also cite Cicero for similarly 'modern' comments on Roman religion; for instance his functionalist statement that 'gods are needed for the maintenance of the social

system; without them, society would be a chaos; faith, justice and community would all go to pieces'; or, 'private worship may not be satisfactorily performed without the assistance of those in charge of public rites; for the people's constant need for the advice and authority of the elite helps to hold the State together' (Cicero, *Nat. Deor.* 1.3, 2.30).

Unlike Christianity, there was no correct doctrinal paganism, but there was an attempt to explain the rituals. It is remarkable that functionalism and intellectualism are in essence the modes of interpretation which ancient writers applied to their own religion, but the experience of Roman religion remained manifold, and the concept of heresy inappropriate. So the study of ritual in the historical period is in some sense made more difficult by the way in which ancient writers sought univocal explanations for complex rituals (The unchanging nature of Roman ritual may have been overstated by Roman writers, which adds to the problem).

Fields of Discourse in Latin Ritual

I wish to turn now to some specific characteristics of Roman religion, and to analyse them across the boundary of prehistory and history using as a heuristic device the four analytical components identified by Barrett as parts of the 'field of discourse'. Barrett has subsequently made his analysis more subtle, in particular stressing individual experience, for instance the memories which each person will bring to a particular ritual event. I accept the relevance of this change, but the earlier formulation suits my purpose better here. (Barrett 1988: 9–12; on Roman religion see Dumézil 1970; North 1989; Beard 1990). The four components are the temporal frequency with which the field of discourse was routinely occupied; the spatial extent or the geographical space occupied by the actors; the cultural resources which are drawn upon to define and instigate authoritative discourse, and those used to recognise it; and the transformations in cultural resources over time.

Temporal frequency

The rhythm of ritual in early Latium seems to have been rooted in the agricultural year; the festivals which we believe to have been early have connotations of protecting the harvest and purifying the fields (for agriculture in Roman religion see North 1989 and the works of Dumézil cited there). With the increase in votive deposition, this may have been complemented by the rhythms of an individual's life, and moments of stress like birth or illness, and by the rhythms of political conflict, since more elaborate votives and the building of monumental temples are part of the political 'reallocation of attention' (see Colonna 1984 on temples and Bauman 1992: 200, for the phrase). This is not to say that the agricultural rhythm became irrelevant, but that it was overlaid with other interests.

Spatial extent

Tne consequence of Rome's expansion in the late regal and early Republican periods was the growth of Roman territory. It is interesting to see the way in which ceremonies like the Ambarvalia follow this growth. This festival was a kind of beating of the bounds, and took as a canonical boundary the circuit five miles outside the city, which was won, it seems, in the 6th century BC. Thus the ritual comes to be as much a part of the discourse about Rome's military power as it is an agricultural festival, and since military expeditions in early Rome were led by the elite, it is part of the acknowledgement of their power (Cornell 1989: 243ff).

Cultural resources

There are some important continuities in the cultural resources which are drawn upon to define authoritative demands of discourse. Most Roman ritual is always led by a man. The control of religion is an aspect of patriarchy, but it is also the preserve of an elite group. Patrician control of religion lasts significantly longer than patrician control of politics; it may be that this control is actually a defining characteristic of what it is to be a patrician (Mitchell 1990 attempts this identification; see also Palmer 1970).

In the 6th century, votive deposits are transformed into stone temples across Latium. A votive deposit, like a burial, previously took place in the open; it could be seen from all sides. Temples, however, are axial; they direct vision, and have a clearly defined inside and outside. Their decoration increasingly becomes a reflection of hierarchies within the cosmological scheme.

What characterised the attitude of the participants at a sacrifice was silence, to avoid anyone saying the wrong thing. In other words, the people are silent whilst the experts act and speak. Silence is a potent acknowldegement of the knowledge of others. In all these ways the distinction between those with knowledge and those without is enacted and reaffirmed.

Transformations

I wish to pick out only two major transformations. The first is material. Votives became wealthier over time, from clay vessels to silver and gold, from 'silent' objects to 'speaking' objects which bear an inscription (on votive deposits see Bartoloni 1987 and 1989–90. On inscribed objects see Cristofani 1990: 16–25; Cornell 1991). The locales in which ritual experience takes place also change; the new temples were built with the resources of the elite, and were thus a visual reminder of the elite power.

The second is an issue of knowledge. Some rituals never left the control of the elite; if anything they became more entangled in practical politics. The Ambarvalia is one instance; the *evocatio* of a deity from a conquered town or country is another — it is as Harrison pointed out a transfer of ritual knowledge (Harrison. 1992: 229f) As settlements grow in size, the number of priestly experts declines as a proportion of the population, and the control of knowledge becomes centred in a smaller and more powerful group.

When baldly stated, these comments may appear to tend themselves towards a functionalist reading of the rituals, in that the rituals express the dominance of the elite, and are intended so to do. To avoid this, we need to think about the authorising discourses and knowledges which reproduce such social asymmetries, and these may perhaps be identified in the concept of mediation which Beard has put at the heart of the priestly activity (Beard 1990: 29–34) and which itself reproduces structures such as patriarchy and authority. Moreover, we must not discount important aspects of religious life which may exist outside of this control (though not entirley untouched by it), for instance the private rituals to which Cicero referred in the passage quoted above which itself attests the insecurity of the elite in the face of personal expressions of religious knowledge. The votive deposits may be central here, in that it is not clear that the monumentalisation of them removed the possibility for private acts outside priestly authority. The supposedly plebeian temple of Ceres Liber Liberaque as a symbol of political opposition may also be cited here (North 1989: 620), and in the third century, as patrician control diminishes, there are a number of Greek and eastern cults which could be regarded as having a subversive element (North 1989: 616)

Conclusions

In conclusion, I should like to return to the problems identified by Garwood and his colleagues at the beginning of this paper. There are differences between the study of ritual in prehistoric and historical contexts; the significance of literacy is the most obvious. However it is not necessarily the case that historical studies have the edge. To assume this would be to argue for the validity of ancient written sources as interpretations, whereas they are in fact part of the historical conditions, part of the power, which creates religion.

My second point is that if it is changes in social conditions which transform religion and ritual, then perhaps the issue which is most relevant is urbanism. It is the appearance or the evolution of complex social structures which we awkwardly define as urban that is central to the development of Roman religion in the late regal and early Republican periods as something quite different for those participating in it than the religion of the early Iron Age.

Chronology

Latial Period	Date (B.C.)	Events
I	1000–900	Beginning of Latial civilisation
IIA	900–830	Major necropoleis begin
IIB	830–770	
III	770–730	Orientalising period; arrival of Greeks in Central Italy
IVA	730–630	Wealthiest burials; beginning of votive deposits
IVB	630–580	Cessation of burials
	580–500	Beginning of monumental architecture including temples; period of Etruscan kings and formation of patriciate; expansion of Roman territory; foundation of Roman Republic (509 BC)

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