

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF RITUAL AND MAGIC

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Report by John Spears

Ritual and magic have been part of the human condition from the time of early man until the present; eg. we still do not break the trinity by walking under a ladder. As opposed to nowadays, the Romans did not distinguish between the spiritual and material worlds. In the past archaeologists have tended to assume finds have ritual significance if they did not have any obvious purpose. Now we look for repeated patterns to indicate ritual meaning. Any gold coins which have been found must have been deliberately buried as an 'offering to the gods' as they were too valuable to be lost. Coins were considered to have magical properties and contained ritual symbols which we may not understand.

Material items had their own spirit; this had to be released before offering to the gods. Therefore, we find broken spears, bent swords and coins. Roman temples were dedicated to specific gods and this is reflected in the offerings found at different sites. At some locations there are what appear, at first sight, to be rubbish deposits but these were actually deliberate gifts to the gods. The positioning and alignment of offerings was important; this was structured and not random. Alignment to the east represented the rising sun and life, whereas to the west signified death (Stonehenge). At the Roman and pre-Roman settlement at Baldock the entrances to the round houses faced east.

Deep pits have been found at some iron age sites; these were used to connect the real world closer to the underworld. Hill forts (such as those in Northamptonshire) had spiritual as real as defensive significance; clusters of finds (especially coins) have been discovered at the entrance to forts although it is not clear whether these were designed to keep spirits in or out. At one hill fort, skulls were found drilled with three holes; the number three having special magical properties. Similarly, pots with three holes have been found.

Mark made reference to the Middle Stour Valley site; the Bures cursus had ritual meaning although this was not easy to understand. The Wormingford Mere was likely to have spiritual significance as well; it was probably seen as an entrance to the other world.

The importance of ritual and magic continued into medieval and later times; examples are witch bottles to protect against witches. Animals (particularly cats) were often bricked into new buildings for good luck and protection; it is not clear whether these were buried alive or dead. Even nowadays good luck charms are treated with respect. Throughout the lecture, Mark showed many slides illustrating a range of ritual finds; those which had been ceremonially broken to release spirits were particularly interesting.