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Artifacts to Invoke, Direct, and Deflect

ABSTRACT

This article provides a guest editor and discussant's overview of the articles in this thematic issue, points to elements of continuity and contrast across these case studies, and highlights potential avenues for future research and analysis.

Writing in the 18th century, the philosopher Giambattista Vico (1948) observed that systems of religious beliefs result from an audacious circumstance. Social actors, not understanding the vagaries of the world around them, work mightily to define and influence a perplexing array of contingencies. To paraphrase Vico (1948), humankind, understanding nothing, makes everything. M. Chris Manning and the other authors in this thematic collection deserve high praise. Their studies illuminate the myriad forms of individual creativity by past social agents who sought to shape material culture in attempts to control their destinies and bewilder their enemies.

As Manning's introductory article inquires, if religions represent attempts at all-encompassing accounts, what then are instances of magic, superstition, and folk belief? A general answer is that they represent the personal observances of a religion that was once dominant, but was later subjugated by another belief system in a past social competition. These personal observances were once part of a full-spectrum religion, but the public and sodality-oriented components of that belief system were suppressed and pushed from the public stage by another religion promoted by a new, socially dominant group (Yoder 1965; Long 1995; Fennell 2007).

A number of the articles in this thematic collection discuss the work of Keith Thomas (1971). He provided an insightful elaboration of Max Weber's theory of ideological movements. Thomas argued persuasively against social

evolutionary views of the ascendancy of Christianity as part of the rise of complex society and "civilization." Yet, he remained mistaken in a number of his empirical observations. Contrary to Thomas's thesis, neither the development of Enlightenment philosophy nor the Protestant Reformation eliminated folk-religion beliefs and practices in Europe. His influential study of European history in *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971) nonetheless created an intellectual basis for a tendency among researchers to assume that Europeans, European Americans, and African Americans impacted by Protestant Christianity would not have continued to practice aspects of folk-religion, conjuration, and divination (Fennell 2007).

Thomas (1971:223) found that "pagan" forms of supplication, pre-Reformation Christianity, and folk-religion practices all shared the same attributes:

The universe was peopled by a hierarchy of spirits, and thought to manifest all kinds of occult influences and sympathies. The cosmos was an organic unity in which every part bore a sympathetic relationship to the rest. Even colours, letters and numbers were endowed with magical properties.

Historian Gerald Strauss provides a detailed description of such beliefs and practices as recorded by an administrative official in the district of Wiesbaden, Germany, in 1594:

All the people hereabouts engage in superstitious practices with familiar and unfamiliar words, names, and rhymes, especially with the name of God, the Holy Trinity, certain angels, the Virgin Mary, the twelve Apostles, the Three Kings, numerous saints, the wounds of Christ, his seven words on the Cross, verses from the New Testament. ... These are spoken secretly or openly, they are written on scraps of paper, swallowed ... or worn as charms. They also make strange signs, crosses, gestures; they do things with herbs, roots, branches of special trees; they have their particular days, hours, and places for everything, and in all their deeds and words they make much use of the number three. And all this is done to work harm on others or to do good, to make things better or worse, or bring good or bad luck to their fellow men. (Strauss 1975:62–63)

Thomas (1971) contended, however, that the impacts of Enlightenment philosophy and the Protestant Reformation thoroughly displaced those earlier folk-religion practices. The Reformation emphasized a cosmology of separated spiritual and physical realms, and it declared illusory a spectrum of intercessionary saints and intermediate spirits. Enlightenment philosophies developed in a close parallel to the Reformation in both time and place. The secular, Enlightenment system of thought similarly emphasized a separation of spirit and imagination from the realm of nature, causes, and effects (Thomas 1971:641–668; Fennell 2007; Fleming 2013). Studies in this issue by Meredith Linn and Sara Rivers Cofield provide an excellent examination of how these ideological developments played out and impacted Anglo-American and Irish American communities.

Like other studies in this thematic collection, the research by Linn and Rivers Cofield points to the primary flaw in Thomas's thesis. Ample evidence exists in the historical and archaeological records that many Europeans and European Americans continued to practice folk religions during and after the Enlightenment and Reformation (Parry et al. 1998; Fleming 2013). Both Enlightenment humanism and the Protestant Reformation were based on the precept that the divine is separate from the natural, physical world. Paradoxically, the internal logic of both the Reformation and Enlightenment facilitated the persistence of beliefs in so-called folk magic, rather than precipitating the demise of such folk-religion practices (Fennell 2007).

Enlightenment humanism drew a sharp line between the phenomenal realm of nature and human physiologies as distinct from the dynamics of mind and spirit. Invisible forces, such as gravity and forces of nonpersonified spiritual power—expressed in the concepts of grace and the Holy Ghost—would be articulated in parallel developments by Enlightenment and Reformation advocates. This parallel resulted because divine power was reconceptualized in 15th-century Catholicism and in the 16th-century Reformation as something that existed separate from the personified presence of God or Christ. One could access divine power without invoking the physical presence of a creator or messiah (Fennell 2007). Roy Wagner's (1986) analysis of "symbolic obviation" provides excellent insights into these historical dynamics.

Rather than eliminate customs of folk magic, the trajectories of the Reformation and Enlightenment simply drove those beliefs and practices underground. The Enlightenment and Reformation had the effect of facilitating folk-religion formulations by articulating the existence of nonpersonified forces that could be accessed by any person (Fennell 2007). Albert Raboteau (1980:287–288), an historian of such religious developments, contends further that "Christianity, especially on the popular level, has a certain tendency to appropriate and baptize magical lore from other traditions. In an important sense, conjure and Christianity were not so much antithetical as complementary." Timothy Easton's (this issue) discussion of double *V* marks that invoke the benevolence of the Virgin Mary as protective expressions in vernacular architecture provides a fascinating example of this interaction.

As Chris Manning emphasizes in her article, archaeology has shown that, over the past few centuries, folk magic has remained alive and well in Europe and the landscapes encompassed by European colonies. It is vitally important that we historical archaeologists view each artifact of folk belief as opening a view onto a past of competing belief systems and enduring and evolving practices within the privacy of personal spaces. We should place artifacts of apotropics in the context of the likely facets of these competing belief systems relevant to each site and time period.

A highly intriguing interpretative question is whether the practitioner viewed the object as holding spiritual power manifest within it, or whether the object was viewed as a material component of a supplication of spiritual forces believed to reside elsewhere. If these artifacts were material components of supplications, analysts can work with parallel frameworks addressing stylistic expression as a communicative domain. If they were believed to be vessels of a manifest spirit, one has other interpretative challenges (Gell 1998; Fennell 2007).

The studies and analyses by Timothy Easton and Brian Hoggard raise potentially competing perspectives and interpretations. Hoggard has proposed that numerous shoes and other objects placed into walls, eaves, and structural cavities served to deflect a drone-like emission of spiritual forces. Easton's concept of "spiritual

middens” similarly involves a bewildering array of objects placed into surrounding spaces to distract and seize spiritual force propelled by assailants. An alternative is that creators of apotropaic assemblages thought the malevolent forces were strongly imprinted with the consciousness and characteristics of the malefactor who channeled those forces against the house and occupants. Apotropaics in this view do not distract a drone force into a dead end; they distract the malefactor’s consciousness imprinted on the spiritual forces. Such a belief would parallel the connections expressed in witch-bottle compositions that inflict pain upon the perpetrator (Manning, this issue).

Why would malefactors be viewed as so easily distracted from their purposes? Their consciousness-imprinted assaults are captured in so many shoes and objects, and deflected from the target individuals. Similarly recorded are many beliefs about grains of salt or sand and the thistles of brooms protecting a house by compelling an invader to count every grain or strand before being able to proceed into the space. Captured by a time-consuming, compulsive task, the malevolent force is defeated and fails to find its target. What accounts for a belief in such an ability to bewilder and distract malevolence?

A belief often called “scrupulosity” provides an answer. Variations on this belief can be found in Greco-Roman, early Christian, medieval, and early modern Christian records (Rapaport 1989; Warshowsky 2006; Cefalu 2010). A psychologist today would label it as “obsessive compulsive” syndrome. Scrupulousness was conceived as the burden of either too much virtue or too much vice. By the medieval period, scrupulosity was primarily viewed to be the anomalous conduct of individuals burdened by the weight of their sins and vice, compelling them to nonsensical, repetitive behavior. Symptoms include compulsive counting and checking one’s surroundings. Think of Shakespeare’s character, Lady Macbeth, as a literary example. During the European witch craze, it would also be viewed as a symptom of “diabolical,” satanic influences (Rapaport 1989; Parry et al. 1998; Warshowsky 2006; Cefalu 2010).

Costello (this issue) examines concealed shoes in Quincy, Massachusetts. She raises questions of whether trade traditions account for some of

these practices. Costello emphasizes the meanings that might flow from the metonymic connections of the shoe and its former wearer. In examining the concealment of children’s shoes within structures, her study raises the question of particular facets of related beliefs. Was a deceased child’s shoe believed to hold a manifestation of the child’s soul close to home? Was the placement of such a shoe meant to represent a material, continual supplication for the protection and well-being of the deceased’s soul in its spiritual journey? A number of cross-cultural examples present the use of shoes in burials and funerary ceremonies as metaphoric representations of the expeditious and benevolent passage of the deceased’s soul. Researchers should attend equally to both the possible metaphoric possibilities and the likely metonymic connotations in each case study.

Building from insights presented by Costello and other researchers, four scenarios can be outlined for such concealments of shoes in houses: (1) a deposit by tradespeople who constructed the buildings, concealing such items as a secular practice; (2) placement by occupants of the house to invoke a metonymic connection with a deceased person; (3) placement by occupants to invoke a metonymic connection with a deceased person and a metaphoric supplication for an expeditious journey of that soul in the spiritual realm; and (4) positioned as a decoy to distract malevolent forces from living occupants. Manning (this issue) presents studies of similar, potential combinations of metaphoric and metonymic expressions in the form of witch bottles and cat cadavers at Anglo-American house sites.

Rivers Cofield (this issue) provides an excellent example of the ways in which mundane objects, such as coins, are converted by physical manipulation from a profane role as currency into the function of charms. A bent sixpence on a Jesuit plantation in Maryland attracted such an examination of alternative purposes over time. Rivers Cofield pointedly observes that such “magical practices” by Europeans actually increased after the Protestant Reformation. Her analysis underscores the importance of realizing the complementary character of Christian beliefs and apotropaic practices. Christian concepts of grace and the Holy Spirit facilitated personal invocations of free-floating elements of spiritual power believed to have been created by the

sacrifices of the Messiah. Many cross-cultural examples exist of similar beliefs of intermediary levels of spiritual forces accessible to individuals without having to make direct supplication to a supreme god for personal purposes.

Studies by Patrick Donmoyer (this issue) and C. Riley Augé (this issue) examine an array of practices that employed a perceived power in numbers, geometric configurations, and related ideographic marks. These practices often utilized the Trinity and the accessibility of grace and the Holy Spirit represented in those patterned geometries. Owen Davies' (2009) recent study of *grimoires*—texts filled with prescriptions for written and material charm compositions—provides numerous examples to amplify the studies presented here.

Michael Lucas (this issue) presents an analysis of a 17th-century plantation site in Maryland that illustrates the challenges raised by the often prosaic and abbreviated character of instrumental symbolism. Symbols rendered by material culture for personal purposes often have notably abbreviated motifs, such as crossed lines to represent a benediction or simply to signify an invocation (Fennell 2007). The same graphic rendering could have multiple uses and divergent meanings among Europeans, Native Americans, and African Americans, all of whom were interacting in such colonial and antebellum plantations. Megan Springate (this issue) provides a study of facets of “double consciousness” in the material expressions of African Americans, which raise parallel challenges for interpretation. All of the studies presented in this thematic collection are reminders of the great importance of compiling multiple lines of evidence and as much contextual information as possible in order to interpret the likely functions and meanings of particular material expressions. Rigorous data collection, including detailed mapping and photography, will facilitate peer-review examinations of the evidence.

These studies make clear the vital contribution archaeology provides in examining folk-religion practices. As conduct suppressed from public observances in the past, evidence of those practices is found principally in the material culture of private spaces and surreptitious deposits within the built environment. Past suppressions similarly constrained the production of direct, documentary evidence of folk-religion beliefs

and performances. Episodes of witch crazes in Europe and America involved power struggles and the characterization of behavior that transformed it far from the actual conduct of folk-religion beliefs. Thus, the extensive documentary record of witch trials provides much hyperbole of diabolism with less focus on folk-religion practices that actually occurred. Researchers will find rich evidence, instead, in oral-history accounts, which often discuss European folk-religion practices continuing through modern times.

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