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# The Significance of Sacred Places: The Contribution and Limits of Cognitive Approaches to Their Research

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## Abstract

This study is concerned with the theory of anthropological and archaeological research of sacred places in the cultural context of hunter-gatherers societies. The cognitive approach is suggested as principal however some limits of its possible application are considered, as shown on the example of ritual behavior and of possible meaning and significance of the sacred places themselves for the members of hunter-gatherers societies.

## Key words

Archaeology and Anthropology of Sacred Places, Hunter-gatherers Societies, Cognitive Approaches to the Study of Culture, Perception of the Environment

## Klíčová slova

archeologie a antropologie posvátných míst, lovecko sběračské společnosti, kognitivní přístup ke studiu kultury, vnímání prostředí

## Introduction

The main subject of this paper is the problem of theory of anthropological and archaeological research of places with explicit<sup>2</sup> symbolic-religious meaning (further PSRM) and their role in the religious systems of prehistoric and (sub)recent hunter-gatherer societies (later HGS) of Europe and of boreal zones of Eurasia. Although the primary goal is the explanation of the significance of the PSRM of prehistoric HGS, the prior ethnological research may be seen as a necessary one. This should be focused on a direct survey of how, in those recent cultures, the character of subsistence, relations to the environment and religion are connected and interwoven. Especially on a theoretical level is this survey essential; the potential imperfections of those later discussed cognitive theories may not be evident when considering the archaeological material only. Or more precisely, to do so may cause

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<sup>1</sup> This study was written with the support of the Grant fund of dean of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University.

<sup>2</sup> It is very important to emphasize that in the context of hunter-gatherers societies the whole land is sacred (e.g. under the protection of some superhuman agent). The places considered here are of exceptional "sacredness" and are almost exclusively appointed to ritual practices.

the complete omission of fundamental phenomena for those prehistoric cultures, as will be shown later.

### The importance of the research of the PSRM

From an *archaeological* perspective we may consider the PSRM as one of the most valuable sources for researching prehistoric religious systems, as well as one of the most neglected. Yet it seems that in these structures the relation between environment, character of subsistence and religious practices archaeologically is most evident. Why are such relations important for the understanding and explanation of the prehistoric religions and maybe for the religions in general? The answer is possible on two levels. The first is of an evolutionary kind and is represented by the fact that the first evidence of symbolic or possibly religious behavior comes from the early upper Paleolithic period as a side-effect of the middle-upper Paleolithic transition. It is more than evident that these very first forms of a behavior and thinking which we call “religious” were intimately related to hunting and other subsistence activities. Actually the oldest known representations of supernatural beings are the statuettes and paintings of anthropomorphic animals and zoomorphic humans respectively. We may infer to some kind of animistic thinking with ritual activates of “shamanistic” nature (e.g. Mithen 1996: 16–179). The significance of a particular place in landscape<sup>3</sup> designated to socio-ritual activities is apparent even in this period in the form of caves with paintings, but is more clearly apparent in oncoming period, i.e. in Mesolithic, where we can distinguish for example places of seasonal gatherings provided with rock engravings and paintings, peninsulas and islands dedicated to dead (Zvelebil 2008: 38–52), and maybe even hardly archaeologically discernible offering places well known from ethnography of north for later periods or from presence (e.g. Rydving – Kristoffersson 1993; Kharyuchi – Lipatova 1999; Bradley 2000; Jordan 2003; Bergman – Östlund – Zackrisson – Liedgren 2008).

The second level of answer to the question why research of the significance of the PSRM is important for the understanding of character of religious systems of HGS, is the ethnographic evidence. It is evident that those places do not serve as merely spaces for the transmission of religious ideas neither for the performance of autotelic religious rituals. This matter will be discussed later.

Now we may highlight some indicators of those relations between the character of subsistence, environment and religion as are those evident in the PSRM:<sup>4</sup>

- The place itself is bound to some unusual or striking features of landscape.
- The relational placement to the landscape refers to other particular features of wider landscape, including the elements, most distinct to the landscape.
- The orientation towards the points of the compass.
- Frequent orientation towards the planets and stars in definite phases.
- The location of the place is related to the seasonal movements of HG groups.
- Ritual manipulation with animal species most important for the society.

<sup>3</sup> For the emergence of “places” from “locales” in Paleolithic see Gamble 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Evidently do not every places “contain” all of this indicators.

- Cosmological symbolism of the place as a whole and of its artificial inner structure.
- Material representation of the superhuman agents.
- Archaeological evidence of ritual behavior or its observation in ethnology.

Here we see that the PSRM should not be overlooked in our scientific endeavor after the understanding of religions, nor are they just simple objects which offer themselves to easy interpretation and explanation; on the contrary, they are rather complex entities. It is obvious that for the scientific purposes it is necessary to follow this – or similar – logic of the deconstruction of the PSRM:

- The place itself in its landscape context as perceived by the participants.
- The features of the place itself (both natural and artificial).
- The superhuman agents (later SHA) as core of the religious concepts to which the acts performed in this place which refer.

### **Cognitive theories as a device for explanation of the PSRM**

Following this way of deconstruction we may choose, as initial body of theories for the research of the PSRM, concepts from the broad family of cognitive sciences mainly for the following reasons:

- Generally, they enable paradigmatically coherent research of particular aspects of the PSRM.
- Explanation of human perception of environment and the way of creation of the cognitive maps with significant locales and points of reference.
- Explanation of the emergence of the emotional place attachment.
- Explanation of the significance of material objects for data storage, cognitive anchoring, and social symbols construction.
- Explanation of the emergence of the religious ideas.
- Characteristic of the superhuman agents.
- Explanation of the way of the transmission of the religious ideas (including the significance of the PSRM).
- Description and explanation of diverse forms of ritual behavior and the connection of particular forms with particular type of society.
- Theories of cognitive science of religion (later CSR) formulate the causal connections between partial phenomena of religious kind, and through this they enable modeling of the whole – though bare – structure of the prehistoric systems of religion, even while based on a fragmentary body of archaeological data.

And besides this:

- They are based on experimentally falsifiable knowledge.
- They are open to future theoretical extension while new data are found.

Now let us describe particular cognitive approaches to the explanation of the PSRM a little closer and highlight some concrete advantages of their application.

First we must deal with a problem of the perception of the physical environment itself, because the PSRM are just a significant part of it. There is a possibility to do with the well developed phenomenological approach of the Post-processual archaeology (e.g. Tilley 1994; 1996; 2004; 2009). This approach is, despite of its esthetic beauty and impressive results, rather elitist, based on researcher's ability of "re-experiencing" the perception of the landscape as it was experienced by the concrete group of ancient people. And what more – from the archaeological perspective is this approach feasible only when working under very special conditions, when the considerable body prehistoric structures exist in rather well preserved "natural" landscape, where striking natural features are present.

The cognitive branch of human geography provides better explanation (rather than interpretation) of the phenomenon of perception of environment and of the creation of the cognitive maps. Generally said the geographical environment is perceived by moving through landscape in order to accomplish certain task and through the process of way finding. The geographical information is intentionally and more often unintentionally stored in working memory and partially in long-term memory and they are represented in a schematic way. This internal representation is called "cognitive map", though it is agreed that we do not store the spatial information in map-like way:

"What the term cognitive map does imply, however, is that there is deliberate and motivated encoding of environmental information so that it can be used to determine where one is at any particular moment, where other specific perceived or encoded objects are in surrounding space, how to get from one place to another, or how to communicate spatial knowledge with others." (Golledge 2003: 30).

From this perspective are the PSRM just one of the points of reference and concrete place in both natural and build environment and as such is represented in participant's mind in the web of relations to other places. The specificity of this kind of place may be seen 1) in its association with striking feature – both natural and artificial – in a landscape, which is in matter of fact very common case, or 2) in the personal or social emotional attachment to any arbitrary place based on some special event (Mazumdar – Mazumdar 2004). The choice of natural place to which the special religious meaning is ascribed is probably culturally conditioned and depends on the way and purpose of the movement in the landscape (Golledge 2003: 30) and in the form of subsistence activities respectively.<sup>5</sup>

Now we will turn briefly<sup>6</sup> to the cognitive account of the role of material objects (again both natural and artificial) and their significance for the 1) external storage of information, 2) social meanings construction and transmission, 3) and cognitive anchoring, in respect to the PSRM and their features.

The use of material object for mind-external storage of information is apparent since the beginning of upper Paleolithic or maybe even earlier. The most striking example are the "memory sticks" in the form of symmetrically notched ribs and other bones as well as stones (d'Errico 1998). Also to the Paleolithic cave paintings is the function of external symbolic memory storage ascribed (Mithen 1988). The

<sup>5</sup> See also e.g. Portugaly 1996; Golledge – Stimson 1997; Kitchin – Blades 2002; for spatial perspective on symbolic behavior in prehistory see Zubrow – Daly 1998.

<sup>6</sup> This topic I closely discussed before (Havelka 2008).

general notion about the significance of the external symbolic storage (later ESS) for the development of ever more complex forms of culture was made by psychologist Merlin Donald (1991; 1993; 1998). Donald's notion was extended by Colin Renfrew (1998). Renfrew emphasized that the material culture itself, in its everyday form, can be seen as very important kind of the ESS and that it can be assumed that the whole stage of culture(s) development, preceding the age of common usage of writing, can be seen from this angle as a the period of the "symbolic material culture" (1998: 3–4). This leads us to the question, which is discussed in archaeology (e.g. Dobres 2000) and cultural anthropology for long time, if is the material culture just merely the passive storage of human ideas or if does it posses an active agency as well. It is commonly agreed that the material objects to which is some meaning ascribed play an active role on the social level<sup>7</sup> (e.g. Mauss 1999; Appadurai 1986; Hodder 1982; Tilley 1999; Knappett 2005) – this is quite common sense. But we can go further: According to Renfrew the material symbols do precede the concepts (2001) in the sense that they enable the very possibility of construction of the institutional (or social) facts (Searle 1995). The classical examples quoted by Renfrew are the concepts of measure, value, commodity, exchange and religions (esp. the ritual behavior) which would be meaningless without the substantial object on which they are based (see also Renfrew 1994; 1998; 2003). So here we see that the material objects, including the PSRM, play *as* active agents in the society when some value is ascribed to them by people. But *are* they active agents by themselves? Do they actually *make* people to behave and thing in certain way? These questions, and the given positive answers proposed e.g. by Clark (2008) in philosophy and by Knappett (2005; 2008) and Malafouris (2008) in archaeology, are of twofold importance for the research of the PSRM.

First, the idea of active "material agency" and of in-the-world-extended cognition supports and provides the theoretical background for our claim, i.e. that the concrete environment and specific way of acting in it shape the cognitive processes and their outputs in the form of mental and public representations in general or the forms of "religious" thinking and behavior in particular. If we relate this statement to the research of the PSRM, we can see them as active participants in the interplay of *people (i.e. the mind-body totalities) acting in the environment* which results in specific forms of culture (including religion), and not as mere forms of "external symbolic storage" where are "stored" and represented the ideas emerged just in the heads and between heads of people.

Second, the emphasis laid to the significance of the active acting in the environment for human cognition may negotiate the apparent problem of the model of purely representative thinking (e.g. Shanon 1993), which stands also in the core of CSR as one of the cognitive sciences. This may also indicate the possible way to the interconnection between the CSR and the notions of the ecological perspective for the study of culture by Tim Ingold (2000) which are of significant importance for the study of the HGS, as will be shown later.

Finally, the Donald's theory of ESS, extended by Renfrew was related by Steven Mithen (1998) to the problem of representation of the superhuman agents (as characterized by Guthrie 1993; Boyer 1994; 2001) in prehistory. Mithen (1998) sees

<sup>7</sup> On this notion is based long time unfeasible understanding between processual and post-processual archeologies.

the “material anchoring” of religious ideas as substantial for the possibility of the transmission of religious ideas in general. We may consider Mithen’s hypothesis as applicable for the explanation of the role of the material representations of the superhuman agents for the transmission of the religious ideas in all societies without the literary tradition. In specific regard of the PSRM we see this possible “anchoring” function in two respects: The first is the simple presence of the representation of the SHA at the place in the form of statuette, or in the form of some natural object. The second is that that if the actual representation if not present, the “anchoring” function may rest upon the place itself, as it is understood as the abode of the SHA – other human-like attributes are then more easily to the SHA granted.

Now lets summarize in pointwise<sup>8</sup> the main advantages of some theories of the CSR applied to the research (in the first instance the archeological one) of the PSRM.

- The predictability of the basic attributes of the SHA based on the assumption of their existence as by-products of common cognitive domains. (Boyer 1994, 2001; Atran 2002; Pyysiäinen 2009)
- The “limited catalogue” of their contra intuitive aspects, based on the assumption of a constrained amount of possible interferences between the cognitive domains (Boyer 2001).
- Explicit stress laid on the contra intuitive aspects of the SHA may be expected in their material representations. (Mithen 1996)
- Predictable structure of ritual action and of various role of participants. (McCauley – Lawson 2002)
- The formulation of causal relations between the psychological and socio-political features of the divergent modes of religiosity → the possibility of rough reconstruction of the main features of concrete prehistoric systems of religion based only on archaeological evidence of only some of those features. (Whitehouse 2004)

These theories provide us with the terminology and background in the form of “blueprints” of the basic features of religious thinking and behavior which enable us to organize and describe the data acquired by the ethnographic research in the manner compatible with the other fields of cognitive science. The research of the PSRM is not exception (see the logic of deconstruction mention above). Their favourableness for the archeological inquiry is obvious, for they enable the modeling of past actions and to some respect even thinking of people in prehistory. This quality of predictability of the theories of the CSR is really apparent precisely when set against the “dumb” archeological data.

### **Insufficiency of the cognitive approaches**

Although the cognitive theories provide us with stimulating body of devices for explanation the PSRM including the ritual behavior which takes place there and the supernatural worlds which these behavior refers to, we should not stop our inquiry just by application of those theories. The main reason is, that by doing so

<sup>8</sup> For these are well known in the field of the study of religions.

we would just confirm the already made assumptions made by those theories and we would have omitted the whole level of importance of the “religion” of the HGS which consists in the actual *meaning* and *significance* of those for the people living in this specific way.

When considering the ethnological data, it appears that in the case of HGS it is hardly satisfactory to think about “religious systems” as about some auto-telic epiphenomenal domain. On the contrary, it relates to the basic spheres of life in these societies, not in a form of a constructed “counterintuitive world”, but as part of actual living-through world.

In advance, these so-called religious ideas make perfect sense and are closely related to the subsistence strategy of particular societies, when seen through the lens of a specific way of life in a specific environment. It is apparent that in the case of HGS, “religious” concepts do not emerge only in the head, or between the heads, of people (in the pure social context), nor do they reside there just in the forms of mental representations. They may as well emerge through everyday engagement with, and in, the environment. “Religious” ideas are also *bound* to the environment and can only be seen as meaningless when driven out of it.

From this perspective it is possible to understand the religious systems of HGS as an abstraction of known natural agents, relations between these agents, and as techniques of focusing awareness towards detection of those agents and the relations between those agents and people. Such abstractions are held in a variety of cultural forms – which we may see as religious – in the form of performances, narratives and solid objects, natural features and artifacts. And vice versa, it can be hardly imagined any better way, at least in the non-literary and out-of-Western-science societies, how to preserve and enable the generational transmission of such complex and extensive knowledge. Cognitive domains used for gathering partial knowledge are used in the same way for gathering complex, general knowledge about the environment preserved and “stored” in “religious” concepts and acts, which is enabled by the phenomenon of inference between the evolved cognitive domains, or by “cognitive fluidity” Mithen (1996) puts it.

These claims, if they prove (by the ethnological inquiry) to be right, may indicate some imperfections in the cognitive approach to the study of religion. Although this approach was developed by anthropologists with notable field experience with indigenous peoples, it seems, paradoxically, that at present the ethnological and archaeological data serve almost only to verify experimentally gained pieces of knowledge of the functions of the cognitive system. Or, in a somehow inappropriate case, is experimental research, which should verify the preliminary theories of cognitive scientists, executed on and among indigenous people without any interest in the *specific* way of life of those.

The importance of such complex research, of a culturally specific way of using the potential of the human cognitive system in a given environment, seems to withdraw from the focus of academic inquiry. Aphoristically said, we should not only study human cognition, but the embodied and distributed cognition of people dwelling in a particular environment. Below are sketched two examples, related to the research of the PSRM, on which we demonstrate the possible way of complementation of the scientific inquiry of the study of religions of HGS preliminary based on the CSR.



### ***The meaning of the PSRM***

Following the cognitive theories only, we might have stressed the PSRM serve merely as a) the peculiar form of the ESS of the religious ideas in the sense that they “are” the places in which the material representations of the SHA are present or where the SHA actually dwell or places, where the SHA left some apparent traces of their actions; b) the selected “sacred” places appointed for the performance of the religious rituals. Although the PSRM have probably both of those functions, in is not the whole story. When we left the purely scientific level of on general cognitive processes based common features of human perception and thinking, and take into account the on social level observed way of “making the world” (rather than “construction of environment” – Ingold 2000: 74–78) of the HGS, we might see that the character of the PSRM is rather more complex.

Our common idea of establishing the PSRM is based on the assumption that the way of perception of environment of the non-Western societies is culturally constructed (i.e. that the cultural representations are laid over the “nature”, which exists as opposite to the culture) and the environment, “as it really is” is accessible only by scientific enquiry. Ingold (2000: 42) opposes this view asserting that both of above mentioned statements are the result of:

“Western ontology whose point of departure is that of a mind detached from the world, and that has literally to formulate it – to build an intentional world in consciousness – prior to any attempt at engagement. The contrast [...] [between the Western and non-Western way of perceiving the environment] is not between alternative views of world; it is rather between two ways of apprehending it, only one of which (the Western) may be characterized as the construction of a view, that is, as a process of mental representation. As for the other, apprehending the world is not a matter of construction but of engagement, not building but of dwelling, not of making a view *of* the world but of taking up a view *in* it.”

The people of non-Western societies are drawing their knowledge about the world by “moving about in it, exploring it, attending to it, ever alert to the signs by which is it revealed” (Ibid: 55). The information, Ingold continues, “is not in the mind but in the world, and its significance lies in the relational context of the hunter’s engagement with the constituents of that world” (Ibid: 55). Due to limited length of this article we must rather vulgarly assumed, that the knowledge of the relations between the constituents of environment is acquired by participant’s distinct lived-through experience. This experience is gained through a participant’s direct, hardly representational, perception of those features of the environment and the through by immediate engagement with them. This perception is modified mainly by the subsistence strategy of that particular society.

Concerning the PSRM, the “focusing of attention” is one of the main characteristics of ritual places in general, as for example Renfrew (1994: 51) has shown, having apparently in mind the focusing of attention on the ritual practices, performed in such places. But we suppose, drawing from Ingold, that in the case of the PSRM we should not think only about the focusing of attention on something (like ritual), but predominantly about the focusing of attention *towards* something, towards the environment and the features in it. Thus the symbolic meaning of the PSRM is not

laid over or in some place or landscape, but is driven from it, through the everyday engagement with it (Ingold 2000: 54–56).

Even from this (unhappily brief) glimpse to the Ingold's writings, it is apparent that the sacred places of the HGS are not chosen randomly but on the background of intimate experiencing of the landscape and that those also refer to and direct the attention of a participant towards the broader environmental context, towards its particular features and relations between those features (e.g. the landscape and its inhabitants). In this places are those partial relations "connected" in a striking way – the place is kind of their "embodiment", as felt from the perspective of the participant.

This perspective of interpretation of the PSRM may lead us to change our understanding of the meaning and significance of ritual behavior, SHA and in the end the whole significance of religious systems of hunter-gatherers societies.

### ***The significance of ritual behavior***

As many ethnological sources show us, a considerable number of ritual behaviors in religious traditions of "iconic mode of religiosity", do not contain any verbally handled messages, or put in other words, there is not direct transmission of the public representations with "religious" content. The understanding of these rituals as religious activities consists only in their very vague reference to some SHA. Pascal Boyer (2005: 10–17), for example, quotes some of most striking examples of (oral) message non handling rituals (like violent initiatory rituals) and explains them as a socially shared forms of obsessive compulsive disorder, for they act against some unknown and unapparent danger. Such rituals (using little less violent and "obsessive" examples) are discussed also by Harvey Whitehouse and his colleagues (2004; Richert, R. A. – Whitehouse, H. – Stewart, E. 2005). Whitehouse sees their significance in the production of what he calls "spontaneous exegetical reflection", when the participant under given circumstances of emotional arousal gets the meaning of the ritual action by himself in the form or revelation. Such understanding of the meaning of the ritual is more long lasting than if the meaning was given orally.

It is possible that the rituals of the forms of religion with a prevailing "iconic mode of religiosity" are very closely related and referring to the types of high important activities performed in the context of HGS (e.g. hunting or local warfare). What, then, is the purpose of the pursuit of achieving the "spontaneous exegetical reflection"? These acts may suggest the emergence of an increased awareness towards the environment and its dynamics under the circumstances of mental sensitivity increased by the stirring ritual action; in other words, the ritual action may cause the increased openness to the very possibility of drawing knowledge *from* the environment, knowledge hardly graspable at the oral level. In this sense is possible to consider this kind of ritual action as rather extreme (yet such rituals are performed under extreme circumstances) form of "education of attention" when the experience of through ritual action achieved "spontaneous exegetical reflection" can be seen as "guided rediscovery" (Ingold 2001):

"My argument is that the differences between the activities of hunting and gathering, on the one hand, and singing, storytelling and the narration of myth [and performing rituals? – R.H.] on the other, cannot be accommodated

within the terms of a dichotomy between the material and the mental, between ecological interactions *in* nature and cultural constructions *of* nature. On the contrary, both activities are, in the first place, ways of dwelling. The later [...] amount not to a metaphorical representation of the world, but to a form of poetic involvement. But it is not different with the activities of hunting and gathering which entail the same attentive engagement with environment, and the same exploratory quest for knowledge. In hunting and gathering, as in singing and storytelling, the world ‘opens out’ to people. Hunter-gatherers, in their practices, do not seek to transform the world; **they seek revelation** [emphasis R.H.]” (Ingold 2000: 56)

## Concluding remarks

- The PSRM are important source for ethnological and archaeological study of relations between environment, religion and character of subsistent activities.
- The ethnological inquiry must precede the archeological one, for the imperfections of applied theories are not obvious when set against the archaeological body of data only.
- The PSRM materialize important indicators between above mentioned relations.
- The PSRM are complex entities and the deconstruction is necessary for the explanation of their significance.
- The explanation of the features of the PSRM can be based on the cognitive theories, esp. in the case of the archaeological research.
- The application of the cognitive theories only is insufficient, for it omit the singularity of way of life in particular environment under specific conditions.
- The endeavor for understanding of the meaning and significance of the PSRM and whole system of “religious” ideas and behaviors in concrete society must be included for complementation of research.
- In the case of the HGS the “religion” can be seen as a system of abstracted forms of known natural agents, relations between these agents, and techniques of focusing awareness towards perception of those agents and the relations between those agents and people.
- The PSRM do not serve as mere physical background for the transmission of religious concepts, but direct the attention towards the broader environment, its features and relations between these features; the symbolic meaning of PSRM is not “laid” over this place or the whole landscape, but is driven from it, through the everyday engagement with it.
- The ritual action of the HGS can be seen as referring to the elemental types of activities performed in a given environment; increasing by “guided rediscovery” the awareness towards the environment and its dynamics.

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